This book adds to our understanding of leadership as a social phenomenon taking place at work and contributes to developing a vocabulary for talking about it. In fact, although leadership is deemed to matter, scholars seldom pay attention to the phenomenon itself, as it is happening. Hence, definitions abound, but there is a lack of vocabulary for expressing what leadership is about without ending up talking of individual leaders and/or descriptions of abstract “goodness.”

Reading the empirical material more and more closely, the initial research question, “How is leadership shared in practice?” is subsequently modified and different strands of theories are applied: shared leadership, postheroic leadership and a radical, processual, view of leadership. As a result, the theoretical concepts of organizational becoming, relational leadership and work practices are combined in an alternative approach. Such an analysis leads to an alternative way of understanding leadership: clearing for action, an emergent bounded aggregate of actions and talks that become possible, making others impossible or less probable. Actors and their worlds are constructed in certain ways that expand or contract the space of possible action. The result is, thus, a specific reading of leadership as an ordinary, repeated, social achievement at work in which possibilities for action and talk are constructed in constrained terms.
Clearing for Action
Leadership
as a Relational Phenomenon

BY LUCIA CREVANI
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Introduction</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Leadership:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Problematic Construct, a Challenged Construct</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Setting the Study:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Methodological Considerations and an Introduction to the Empirical Cases</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 In Search of Shared Leadership</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 In Search of the Production of Direction</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 In Search of the Production of Direction – Going Further</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 A Processual View:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational Becoming, Practice and Relational Leadership</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Practices of Leadership</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Leadership as Clearing for Action</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Discussion</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

I will try to keep it short. That was the ambition. Having failed when it comes to the text, the preface will at least be decently short. And I want to use this space in order to acknowledge that not only this book, but also I, as a person, am the ongoing product of a number of interactions taking place over the years. While it is not possible to treat such interactions in a discrete fashion and to make explicit the consequences of each one of them, since the world is more messy than that, I want nevertheless to pinpoint some interactions that I do believe have had particular significance for me and for my work.

Starting with the academic side, it is mainly in the inspiring dialogue and cooperation with my supervisors Monica Lindgren and Johann Packendorff that the ideas presented in this thesis have developed, thanks to intellectual stimulation, moral support and enthusiasm for this work. I had the privilege to be included in a challenging project five years ago and this thesis is one product of it. Not only that, but also the construction of Lucia the academic is indebted to the conversations on everything from how to tackle a review to “who is who” in this peculiar world.

Other important conversations have been those taking place at seminars dedicated to discussing this text. In particular, the so-called “paj-seminar” has resulted in a number of important changes and I am grateful for the feedback provided by Ingalill Holmberg and the discussion that followed. Also to be mentioned are Charlotte Holgersson’s early critique of a quite chaotic short manuscript; Anette Hallin and Viviane Sergi, who have patiently read the whole manuscript before the “paj-seminar” and provided plenty of insightful comments; Annika Skoglund who has forced me to reflect more deeply about what different concepts mean. Furthermore, there are a number of more or less fortuitous encounters that I want to highlight: Patricia Martin and her course on gender and diversity, which directed my attention to gender practices and also energised me a lot; Silvia Gherardi and the RucoLa group holding a course on practices, which directed my work even more in that direction; Barbara Czarniawska and her course on narrative methods, which has provided occasions for interesting discussions. Also important is my relation to Mats Engwall, head of the department, with whom I have had an open dialogue and who has treated me with respect, even when he has been challenging my ideas. Speaking of
the text as a product, important contributions have been those of Sandra Brunsberg, who has proofread it and helped with translations, and Mateusz Dymek, who has helped with the layout and design. Not to be forgotten are the people that I have had the privilege to study, who have welcomed me in their organisations, often wondering what could be so interesting to be studied in their particular department, not realising all the fine-grained work they are doing every day. Finally, living in a material world, this work would have not been possible without the precious support of Handelsbankens Forskningsstiftelser and Vinnova.

But becoming a PhD student is more than doing research. As soon as I started at the department, I was included in the ritual of the “coffee break” which developed into a sort of trying the whole product range of GodBiten. In this case, one could really say that I was constructed in these interactions, and in a rather physical sense. Luckily, it was only during a rather short period of time that the coffee break took on another dimension with at least two different sweets a day... The group of people gathering around the sweets has changed during the years, but the ones closer to me have been Miko (hard to get to stop talking but sensible enough not to put a sandwich directly on the table), Lotta (not so reliable as regards lunch-dates but forgiven for introducing the Seven Eleven brownie), Thomas (still proud of our masterpiece?), Sven (always providing precious but “heavy on the wallet” advice), Vicky (always directly to the point and rightly convinced that Swedes “think too simply”), Steffo (who still owes me a Bacio ice-cream), David (who taught a very interesting course… even though I have heard it is even better now…), Alex (who shares my South European roots…), and Helena (who left right after I started, but not before we had time to share a really time-effective visit to the Prado discovering only in the shop that we almost missed “El Bosco”). As a result of people moving, in particular me to a larger office (an important step in a PhD student’s career), people coming back from maternity leave, inclusion in other projects and initiatives, and so on, coffee breaks and lunches came to include even more people. Anette (who I would really like to see panicking some day…), Annika (and the meaning words may have), Kristina (from Capri to cross-country skiing and climbing lessons), Viviane (you know when the conversation starts but you never know when it will end…), Klara (always constructive and who has witnessed my organisational skills at their best), Anna (always so quiet…), Cali (from Norrland). Further interactions that have been significant also include those with the rest of the so-called Fosfor group – Anna, Sophie, Pia –, old and new neighbours in the corridor – Man-
dar (to be thanked for not being sick after drinking coffee…), Lars, Jonatan, Ester, Kristina E., Charlotta L., Ingela, Henrik, Terrence, Mary, Linda G., David B. –, other researchers such as Marianne, Matti, Claes (who really tried hard to convince me not to take this route), Staffan, Birger and Lena; and people from the administrative staff such as our own punk rocker Christer, Caroline, Elisabeth, Johanna and Afzal. And the list becomes longer and longer, so I will stop here, but of course, even other interactions, in particular, at courses and conferences have been highly relevant for the direction this text has taken and the person I have become.

Finally, Lucia the somewhat normal person is a product of interactions taking place both within and outside academia, and is a good complement to Lucia the academic, also when it comes to producing academic texts. In particular, relations that have been crucial during these years, providing a room for developing and being happy, are those with my family in Italy and with what I consider my second family, acquired through my partner Anders. Anders, who may not always looks at the bright side of life… but who is always to be counted on when needed and with whom I have shared many ups and a few downs (and who is indeed the one ultimately responsible for this work having been written, as he tricked me into coming to Sweden…). And the latest recruits, the trio Dino, Giadí, Acke… laugh, hard work and perspective…

Kungsholmen, February 2011
Lucia
1 Introduction

It should be no radical claim that in most Western societies we take for granted that leadership matters, and matters a lot, which might explain why this phenomenon has been at the centre of attention for centuries – from books such as Macchiavelli’s *Il Principe* (1513/2005), a piece of work often quoted even today, to the continuous supply of new leadership books at the so-called Heathrow School of Management. Researchers active in a variety of disciplines, and people in daily life alike, put their hopes and trust in leadership. Researchers want to understand the phenomenon, to find ways of making leadership more efficient, to teach people how to implement better leadership. They assume that leadership is a positive phenomenon that will improve how things are handled in societies as well as in organisations. People cry out for better leadership, complain about lack of leadership, become furious with leadership that went wrong. Praise and blame are dispensed to leadership in a number of different situations. Whether it is a party’s chances of winning the coming election, problems with the school system accused of being caught in a downward spiral, or allegedly extraordinary performance improvements in a department, leadership is called in question.

Such a huge concentration on, and strong affection for, one phenomenon might lead us to it to have been studied in detail by now. Indeed, there are plenty of studies on it and approaches to it; as regards research on work and organisations, there is an entire field: leadership studies. We might also expect consensus to have been reached on what all these studies are about, in particular since it seems extremely difficult to imagine that our world could work without leadership. But leadership is, to say the least, a peculiar phenomenon, and a complex one that needs to be understood from different perspectives in order to grasp. At least, this is the positive interpretation of the lack of consistency between different studies (for a review of contradictory results see for example Yukl, 1989). I will subscribe to such interpretation in this thesis by arguing for the need for several points of view aimed at understanding different aspects of the phenomenon and, in my case, I will add one more reading, a reading rather different from the traditional ones, a reading with a number of consequences.
Leadership is also a curious phenomenon insofar as it presents quite apparent ambiguities even at a more immediate empirical level when entering organisations. Have you tried asking someone at work what leadership is? Or at least what good leadership is? And what about what people in so-called leadership positions, most often managers, do in order to perform leadership? Even more, is leadership really an individual matter?

Let me introduce some voices from the organisations I have studied in order to illustrate these points, before I explain what this means to me and how this thesis will address the study of leadership at work.

**What is Leadership?**

**Something that Matters, but the “Something” is Difficult to Articulate**

**Lucia**

**What is good leadership?**

Paul

"It has to be, it’s really about, what I think of good leadership. I like openness, that people open up, say what they think. That, and that they can give feedback, both good and bad. That they don’t hesitate to give feedback, I think that’s the most important thing."

Lucia

**What is good leadership?**

Iris

"A good leader is of course, he’s a strategist, an entrepreneur, because he thinks a lot more than he writes down, you can read between the lines. You act a lot on your intuition too, at the same time as you can link in with what you have... the goals you’ve set up, and it’s being able to integrate decisions and getting everyone to follow the goals. You know, [...] it should be someone that, as I said, has both feet on the ground, but at the same time can jump when it’s really needed, you know, so these are the qualities I see in a leader."
The question “what is leadership?” seems to be extremely difficult to answer. Either people start talking about good leadership or they do not know how to answer. That led me to re-formulate the question in terms of “good leadership”. But, not only did I get different answers to the question of what good leadership is—and everyone has an opinion about what good leadership is—but I also got curious answers. Paul, for example, directly links what he thinks is good leadership to what he thinks is “good” in more general terms. Leadership assumes a moral character of meaning “what good people do” rather than being associated with something more specifically related to the organisation and how it works. Iris, on the other hand, is unable to formulate a definition of good leadership without referring immediately to one person, quite typically a “he”. The phenomenon is thus described by referring to an individual. This is no common individual, though. “At the same time as” is quite a typical way of addressing the description of a leader and it indicates that what commonly might be considered as opposite qualities or capabilities—often mutually exclusive ones—should coexist in the person of the leader.

These are by no means unusual accounts. Rather, looking at what the people I interviewed say about leadership, they represent two of the most evident elements. First, it is difficult to speak about the phenomenon itself. Although some people may mention something about “common goals” or “common direction”, when the interviewees try to elaborate on the phenomenon, they readily start talking about “goodness” in general, rather than about something more directly related to leadership in terms of an organisational phenomenon. Second, the easiest way of describing leadership seems to be to talk about individual leaders. The phenomenon is reduced to what certain human beings do and how they are. This is quite a sharp and drastic reduction, and no one reflects on it. Moreover, the individuals they are describing are ideal individuals, capable of reconciling apparently contrasting characteristics. It almost seems that since we are speaking of leaders, who are supposedly special, we are allowed to describe them in terms that would not be realistic for any other “real” human being. Thus, describing these ideal individuals is easier than trying to describe the phenomenon itself, for which we lack words, unless we turn to more general descriptions of, again, ideal states. Therefore, the first curiosity I identify is the lack of expressions available to us to describe what good leadership, or leadership more generally, is about.
What is Leadership? “Ideal” and “Reality”

Having said that good leadership is described in terms of special individuals, let’s have a look at what leaders work with, according to people in organisations. If we turn to co-workers, and read what they describe leadership as in concrete terms, the focus moves to more mundane administrative tasks (cf. Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b; Tyrstrup, 2005). Not only, but often, the manager, who is recognised as the leader, is described as someone who has a practical relevance by coordinating work tasks within and outside the department, someone who is there in order to provide co-workers with what they need. A picture very different from the ideal emerges. Putting it drastically, rather than a coach we see a secretary – with all the connotation of such metaphors.

LUCIA

WHAT’S SHE SUPPOSED TO DO?

SHE’S SUPPOSED TO MAKE SURE THAT, AS WELL AS CONVENING MEETINGS, SHE’S SUPPOSED TO, YOU KNOW, KEEP THE STATISTICS UPDATED, ON THE FINANCIAL STATUS, SALES, EH, KIND OF BE THE COORDINATOR IN THE SALES GROUP, YOU KNOW.

JESPER

HE BRINGS IN INFORMATION, HE, HE KEEPS THINGS TOGETHER, HE MAKES SURE THE TIME SCHEDULE IS UPDATED, RUNS MEETINGS, HE ALSO WORKS WITH JEEVES [IT SYSTEM] AND THINGS LIKE THAT. […] BUT I SEE HIM AS A MONITOR. HE GATHERS BITS OF INFORMATION AND PUTS THEM IN THE RIGHT BOX. AND HE’S OUR SPOKESMAN IN CONTACTS WITH THE OTHER GROUPS.

PAUL

EM, IT’S, WELL, SHE’S SUPPOSED TO TAKE CARE OF PHONE CONTACTS, A LOT OF IT’S FROM PEOPLE PHONING IN, ON SERVICE JOBS, YOU SEE, IF THEY DON’T PHONE DIRECTLY, SO THEY’RE SWITCHED TO HER THEN. SHE’S MEANT TO PLAN, SHE’S TO DO THAT, […] WHEN THERE ARE DELIVERY DELAYS, AND WE CAN’T GO, THEN SHE HAS TO RESSHUFFLE, SO SHE’S SUPPOSED TO MOVE EVERYBODY AROUND, THAT’S WHAT IT IN FACT IS, IN FACT, I THINK.

CHRISTER

ANN’S IN CHARGE OF SALES.
What the quotes above describe is taking care of documenting, planning, gathering people, gathering information. Managers are expected to carry out such tasks in order to provide co-workers with the best conditions possible to get on with their work, which they can manage by themselves or together with other co-workers.

**LEADERSHIP, WHERE’S LEADERSHIP IN THE COMPANY, WHO’S THE LEADER?**

**LUCIA**

**PAUL**

**GARY**

Yes, if it’s, if it’s technical information I need, then of course it’s, eh, the supplier of, of the equipment [...] otherwise you have to try and solve it yourself. If it’s, if it’s some other kind of information that might be needed, then, of course, in my case I go to Marcus who, and ask him and then he gets hold of what’s needed.

Em, Marcus is my leader, that’s pretty clear, I don’t even need to think about it, and then I have the managing director. So first of all, I go to my boss, and that’s Marcus, and then if that doesn’t work, I go up to the managing director, so it’s pretty clearly defined, so it, I don’t see any problems there.

He’s there at project handovers, though actually we lead ourselves because we’re led by what we’re working with, but he keeps the group together and fixes and arranges and things like that; and we in the group help each other since we all of us do pretty much the same thing, so in actual fact it’s a gang of people that meet and go through ‘This is what we’re doing now’, ‘How did we do it then?’ ‘You’ve done this before, it’ll be quicker if you do it, would you be able to do it?’, things like that. So, in there we help each other. But then, I don’t know what Marcus does to lead the group, but it’s structuring [...] the Friday meetings he runs, because there’s where we actually draw up the structure, then if something comes up in the meantime, we have to rustle up the group again [...].
Thus, we are presented with multiple descriptions of what leadership is about and what leaders do. There are ideals described, and there are concrete situations. While it is of course in general common that the ideal does not fully correspond to how things are perceived in everyday situations – the ideal is just “an ideal”, what is peculiar is that there is no mention of the ideal being striven for in the description of concrete situations on the part of co-workers. In other words, the ideal seems to live a life of its own, decoupled from what people describe as concrete work. The curiosity lies therefore in the apparent contradiction in what leadership ideally is and what it is in concrete work situations, according to people’s descriptions, and how such contradiction seems not to be particularly problematic for co-workers. I am not saying that co-workers are always satisfied with their managers; this is not the case in these two organisations and it is hardly the case in general. But they are not asking for leaders closer to the ideal; rather they are interested in leaders that provide them with the conditions for doing a good job. What Paul says, when he speaks of doing things together, also leads us to the last curiosity I want to present.

What is Leadership? (Something Shared) – A New Model or a Widespread Practice?

This curiosity does not come directly from the empirical studies I conducted, but is still related to them. “Shared leadership” is a label that has slowly begun to spread within the academic community and among practitioners, at least in Sweden (Döös et al., 2005). Being a relatively new concept, shared leadership may mean slightly different arrangements depending on the context. The basic idea is, in any case, that a leadership position or function is shared among two or more individuals, most often two. It might be a formal arrangement, as for instance if two school leaders share their position, or an informal setting, the so-called “right-hand” being the most obvious example. Moreover, one could either share the same tasks or reach an agreement on how to divide tasks between people. In other words, there is an entire range of possibilities. But how often have you heard people speaking of shared leadership or read an article about that? – probably rather seldom. It seems to be quite a new phenomenon and a marginal one. At least this is my experience not only as regards the amount of attention this phenomenon has received within academia, but also when talking to practitioners and students. Curiously enough, when Ledarna, the
Swedish organisation for managers, sent a questionnaire to its members in 2003, 80% of them answered that they could imagine themselves sharing a leadership position (Ledarna/Temo, 2003). Even more surprisingly, in 2005 researchers at Arbetslivsinstitutet, a research institute focusing on working life, showed in a study that 40% of the managers that answered their questionnaire considered themselves as sharing leadership in practice (Döös et al., 2005). Of all the managers, 15% shared formally and 9% shared formally positioned on the same hierarchical level. A word of caution is necessary: since the concept is not commonly used, different people might understand it in different ways. Nevertheless, the interesting point is that, although expressed in different ways, sharing leadership is no marginal phenomenon. Quite the opposite: it seems a widespread approach to leadership. The curiosity lies, therefore, in the relative silence surrounding the sharing of leadership, both in academia and in society.

**Leadership – An Empirical Problem**

Leadership is a phenomenon that is taken-for-granted but is by no means an unproblematic concept. I see it as a curious phenomenon. Reading the limited empirical material produced in this study, I identified a number of curiosities. Leadership is expected to matter and to make an impact, but it seems to be difficult to articulate what leadership is about without either generalising to what “goodness” is about, or referring to an individual leader. Although I am not denying that individual leaders may have an impact, and there are many studies oriented towards answering such questions, what I am pointing at is the difficulty of speaking of the phenomenon itself. Moreover, leadership is talked about in widely different terms when focusing on the ideal and when focusing on concrete situations at work. This is interesting from several points of view. In particular, it may be considered as an invite to study more closely how leadership is practised in everyday situations rather than reconstructing the leadership ideal, which is, at least in part, a product of research on leadership. Finally, the third curiosity presented is related to the relative silence surrounding the phenomenon of shared leadership that seems to be, at least in Sweden, already very widespread.

Summing up, these curiosities point to what I call an empirical problem consisting of the lack of concepts to express what leadership is about, keeping the focus on the leadership that is done. In this light, we may read the first
curiosity as pointing to such a lack since people refer either to non-contextualised general ideals or single leaders. The second curiosity indicates such a lack since it shows how people, when speaking of leadership in abstract terms, refer to an ideal that has little correspondence to what they describe as the way leaders work in everyday life. The third curiosity highlights such a lack since it shows how talking about leadership is confined to single leaders, to the point that an entire phenomenon, shared leadership, goes mostly untold. Put differently, the empirical problem is related to the idealised and individualistic conception of leadership that allows us to speak of single leaders and makes it difficult to speak of leadership as a phenomenon going on at work (cf. Alvesson and Kärreman, 2003). This may be considered a mere intellectual curiosity, but has, in fact, serious consequences for people in organisations, both formal leaders and subordinates. The lack of concepts for expressing the phenomenon of leadership means, for example, that there may be many important activities going on at work that we are not able to fully appreciate and understand today. Also, the discrepancy between the ideal and the practice may not be of extreme concern for co-workers, but it may take its price when it comes to formal leaders and their interpretation of their own performance in terms of success or failure, as we will also see in this thesis — or, more theoretically, when one considers the disciplining effects on managers, and on people in organisations, that such an ideal has. More generally, leadership development efforts in organisations may benefit from approaches that open up for other possibilities than reproducing a construction of leadership that is most often an ideal hardly achievable rather than something people can actually work with.

Hence, this thesis is an attempt at addressing this empirical problem. Given that shared leadership turns out to be quite a widespread phenomenon, this study starts by trying to answer the question of how leadership is done in practice and, in particular, how leadership is shared in practice. Or, in other words, the idea is to study leadership as a practice and as a social, rather than individual, phenomenon.

This Thesis

The lack of concepts for talking about leadership is also related to problematic aspects of the concept at a more theoretical level. In chapter 2, I will show that the development of leadership theory has followed a path leading to a narrow and reductionist conceptualisation of leadership, most
often seen as an individual matter; such a construct is also segregating and hierarchising – people are divided into leaders and followers, the former superior to the latter – as well as highly masculine – intertwined with the construct of masculinity – and performative – prescribing how leadership is performed and enabling its performance. This theoretical problem is constructed from my position as a researcher taking a social constructionist stance and trying not to reproduce gender-blind constructions. With such theoretical lenses, I will question current leadership notions and what they do. I am not alone; there are a number of new developments in the field that also strive for widening or redirecting our understanding of the phenomenon of leadership. I will refer to such developments throughout the thesis, as my analysis proceeds. In chapter 2 I also underline the fact that, although there seems to be no real consensus about how to define leadership in the literature, there is at least one element that characterises most definitions: the production of direction.

In order to add to our knowledge of leadership at work beyond ideals and individualised conceptions, the purpose of this thesis is therefore to add to our understanding of leadership as a social phenomenon that is going on at work and to contribute to developing a vocabulary for talking about it. Since the focus is on the phenomenon rather than on leaders, I adopt the definition of leadership as the production of direction in organising.

Given the purpose of the thesis, the research question with which I started my work has thus been: how is leadership shared in practice? The phenomenon is, therefore, approached as social in a broad meaning, that is, as a distributed phenomenon including a number of people. But such a question has been subsequently modified as I came to read the empirical material more and more closely.

The path that I choose to follow in the text is to reproduce the different readings of the empirical material driven by a changing research question and informed by different strands of theory about leadership as a social phenomenon. After having introduced in general terms the method for this study and having given an impression of the two organisations studied in chapter 3, I start by asking “how is leadership shared in practice?” in chapter 4. In order to answer this question, I analyse the events that occurred at CleanTech over a number of months, when an attempt at implementing shared leadership was formally undertaken. My analysis is informed by the shared leadership literature and a broad idea of practice conveying the need for studying actual work situations. The result leads me to conclude that shared leadership as described in interviews and the literature was not
what was happening at CleanTech in practice. But this may not necessarily mean that direction was not produced and that leadership was an individual matter.

In chapter 5 I therefore reformulate the research question in more specific terms: “how is direction produced as a distributed practice?”. Reading once more a crucial meeting at CleanTech, as well as analysing meetings at both companies involving more people than formal leaders, the non-individual dimension of leadership starts to emerge, to the point that what was failing leadership according to a traditional understanding becomes the doing of leadership itself. In particular, the construction of positions and positionings going on in several ways is identified as having an important role in producing direction. Such an interpretation is strengthened by the strand of literature that I gather under the label “postheroic leadership”. These contributions, in fact, put the focus on leadership as a collective and collaborative enterprise, done by people together, not only formal leaders. But this may not necessarily mean that consensus and shared understandings are necessary for producing direction; the phenomenon may be more complex than that.

In chapter 6 I thus explore if there are more interactions in which direction is produced. A close reading of the material leads me to conclude that this is the case: direction may also be produced in contested, implicit and/or ambiguous interactions. Continuing to analyse the construction of positions and positionings, I come to the conclusion that it is not necessary to refer to individuals’ intentions in order to understand how direction is produced. Rather, one could concentrate on the interaction itself and consider the constructions produced having to do with direction as the object to study. Such an enterprise goes beyond a postheroic leadership framework and is, instead, better informed by theoretical stances linked to the concepts of organisational becoming and practice in organisation theory, and relational leadership in leadership studies. Chapter 7 is therefore dedicated to the review of these concepts and theoretical stances and how they can be combined in order to make sense of my empirical observations. This also leads me to discuss certain methodological aspects in more detail.

After such a discussion, it is possible to resume reading the empirical material with a more precise understanding of concept of practice informed by a process ontology, which becomes fundamental. In chapter 8, constructing positions and positionings is thus interpreted as a practice, a leadership practice, and its intersection with other practices, gender and seniority, is shown. My analysis of the empirical material also proceeds by
identifying a second practice in which the production of direction is performed: the construction of issues.

In chapter 9 I develop my argument about these two leadership practices, how they differ from other practices and how they produce direction. This results in a specific way of understanding leadership that I discuss: leadership as clearing for action.

Summarising, as my analysis proceeds, the concepts of practice and process will become more narrowly defined and the focus will be sharpened on certain aspects. The result is a specific reading of leadership to add to the ones already present in the field of leadership studies – a reading in which leadership is an ordinary, repeated, social achievement at work in which possibility for action and talk is constructed in constrained terms.

Of course, a reading of a phenomenon enables us to focus on certain aspects while inevitably overlooking others. Therefore I would point out that I am not arguing against the idea that people in different formal positions in organisations are provided with different possibilities for influencing what happens – a formal manager is able, for instance, to raise wages or fire people – or against the idea that formal and informal leaders seem to exist in most kinds of organisations. What I am suggesting is that we widen our attention and consider even other aspects. Moreover, some scholars within the postheroic tradition tend to propose new ideals of how leadership should be performed. Acknowledging that these are important contributions, I nevertheless want to distance myself from such an approach and limit my claim to having produced a novel account of what is already going on in organisations. Given the journey made and the particularity of the understanding of leadership to which such a journey leads, it also becomes necessary to discuss the consequences of the construct of leadership that I arrive at, how it is different from traditional ones, and what contributions it may make. This is what chapter 10 is about.

Finally, given the rather articulated structure of this thesis, figure 1 is an attempt at summarising the way in which my reasoning develops and my analysis proceeds through a number of steps towards a specific reading of leadership, driven by the ambition to more deeply understand the empirical material. In the upper part you see the chapters and, when relevant, which strand of leadership research informs them. The grey shape represent the development towards a narrower reading. I have, in particular, chosen to highlight how the concepts of practice and process become more and more theoretically grounded and specific. In the upper part, you can also see how the research question develops as answers provided by the previous step are
not completely satisfactory. That which is not satisfactory with the analysis so far is highlighted in the central part of the figure in the space between chapters. Finally, in the lower part of the figure I have summarised the general theoretical framework informing my work at the different steps, which also becomes more and more specific. At the end of chapter 4, chapter 5 and chapter 8 you will be reminded of this structure by figures containing those steps completed at that point.
Figure 1. The outline of this thesis. The chapter number and the leadership literature stream that informs the chapter, when relevant. The unsatisfactory aspects of the different steps of the analysis in between the chapters. The consequent development of the research question in the dark grey box. The narrower and narrower definition of the concepts of practice and process. Given the theoretical and empirical problem, the purpose is to add to our understanding of leadership as a social phenomenon and contribute to developing a vocabulary for talking about it.

Contradiction between the ideal and the practice of (shared) leadership. Is leadership an empty concept? Is leadership an individual matter? Is there no production of direction at CleanTech? Risk of reductionist accounts by highlighting the collective dimension. Is consensus necessary for producing direction? Can direction be produced, ambiguous and/or implicit ways?

Leadership as Clearing for Action
Leadership is a social, ordinary, repeated achievement at work in which possibility for action and talk is constructed in constrained terms.
Leadership is a label that is used by practitioners, and more generally by people, to explain a vast number of situations and their developments. Therefore, layman’s ideas of what leadership is about abound and everyone is likely to have some kind of opinion about leadership in general and good leadership in particular. But leadership is also a phenomenon that has been studied for years from a scientific perspective. Leadership studies have thus developed to become an important field of research that now has a long history of new theories replacing old ones. It is to the field of leadership studies that this thesis belongs, a field that is constantly trying to understand and explain a complex phenomenon, and a field where a number of recent contributions have more forcefully criticised the construct of leadership that has developed during the years. Furthermore, there are now openings for conceptualising and studying leadership differently. One of these openings is given by the practice of sharing leadership, which is increasingly recognised, even though still marginally. This clearly represents a challenge to the traditional ideal of the single, often heroic, leader.

In this chapter, I therefore start by discussing how leadership has been defined in the literature, concluding that despite the variety of studies the basic idea of leadership is quite stable, not only that, but the production of direction is brought forward as one central element to define leadership. What has changed during the years is where scholars have searched for leadership, as I show by briefly summarising some of the most influential leadership theories. Such an overview also allows me to discuss how these theories have contributed to constructing the leader as a hero. I then present some of the criticism levelled against such a construction. Feminist criticism is particularly important when it comes to critically analysing leadership constructions and practices, hence the space I dedicate to summarising these contributions. Building on the theoretical discussion on leadership so far, I go on to construct the theoretical problem that this
thesis wants to address. However, the myth of heroic leadership has recently been under attack, in practice and in theory. The challenge is therefore how to develop leadership theory beyond the myth. The Swedish tradition of studying leadership in practice and the increasing attention to the phenomenon of shared leadership (particularly in Sweden) provide a basis from which to start in order to add to the understanding of leadership with an approach not conditioned by a normative and individualistic framework. I thus conclude by claiming that studying how leadership is shared in practice is one possibly fruitful way of addressing the theoretical problem as well.

Defining Leadership – A Hard Task?

Leadership is a concept that has been debated for decades and a series of definitions of what leadership is about has been presented. The concept has been discussed and blamed for being too imprecise and ambiguous despite all the particular definitions that have been proposed. Yukl significantly reports Bennis’ observation, still relevant today, that

Always, it seems, the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it …and still the concept is not sufficiently defined.

(Bennis, 1959, p. 259, as quoted in Yukl, 2010, p. 20)

If one considers leadership as a concept that is socially constructed, it is not particularly surprising that “what” leadership is has changed over time. Leadership is a social and discursive construction, nothing more than what we name as leadership. In other words, since I take a constructionist stance, I am not interested in what leadership “really” is, a preoccupation that some of the researchers in the field might have. One could even argue that the development of the concept becomes interesting in itself, but this is not the aim of this thesis. Instead, taking a critical stance, I consider as potentially problematic what current leadership notions “do” with people in organizations.

Discussion has not only been about the concept of leadership. Leadership research has also been criticised for not having come to any consistent result. Theories have followed one after the other, but the question is
whether we know more about leadership after all these years or not. Parry & Bryman report the definition of leadership given by Stodgill in 1950:

> Leadership may be considered as the process (act) of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement.

(Stodgill, 1950, p. 3 as quoted in Parry and Bryman, 2006, p. 447)

More than fifty years later, Northouse (2010), trying to find a definition that comprises the common elements to different approaches to the study of leadership, gives the following one:

> Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. (p. 3)

Despite the claims of novelty and fragmentation characterising the development of leadership theory, it seems that what most people are doing research on has not changed so much. What has changed has been the perspective from which they are researching the phenomenon or what they are looking at in order to find leadership.

One important difference between the two definitions is the explicit reference to “an individual” in the most recent one. However, although the first one directs the attention to a process, rather than an individual, most research on leadership has explicitly or implicitly translated the idea of an influence process into the study of individual formal leaders (Yukl, 2010; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2003; Parry, 1998).

**Leadership as the Production of Direction**

Although it is often claimed that there is no consensus on a definition of leadership, I do think that there are some common elements to, at least most, definitions. What might be confusing is that there is no precise and detailed definition that is accepted and consequently operationalised in the same way in different studies. But the common element underlying leadership definitions is that it has to do with providing or creating direction in the organising process. This is seldom spelt out, although it is implicit, for example, in the above-mentioned definitions. As Smircich and Morgan comment:
Leadership lies in large part in generating a point of reference, against which a feeling of organizing and direction can emerge.

(Smircich and Morgan, 1982, p. 258)

At other times, such an element is named when trying to make explicit what is peculiar to leadership. Defining leadership as different from management, Grint (2005) writes, for example,

Leadership is concerned with direction setting, with novelty and is essentially linked to change, movement and persuasion. (p.15)

Also, when criticising leadership, as a construct, for being talked about in too broad a manner – i.e. leadership being everything and nothing – Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003c) use the concept of “direction” in order to argue that other phenomena may be also considered as leadership if leadership is not narrowly enough defined:

with sufficiently broad categorization of leadership, accounts or behaviors of managers going well beyond providing direction could be seen as examples of such categorization. (p. 375)

Direction is thus one element that they see as characterising leadership if one has to provide a narrower definition than “influence process”. The etymological roots of the word leadership reported in Grint (2005) also suggest that direction and movement are central elements:

“leadership” derive[s] from the Old German “Lidan” to go, the Old English “Lithan” to travel, and the Old Norse “Leid” to find the way at sea. (p. 30)

Similarly, Pye also argues that leading has to do with movement, progress, transition from one place to another (both literally and metaphorically), which means that leadership may be seen as the process by which this movement is shaped (2005, p. 35). But the production of direction is a rather general concept: do we need a more specific definition? There are surely different opinions. Among scholars arguing against the generality of common definitions of leadership we find Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003c), who are not satisfied by the lack of stringency in defining leadership as an influence process since “then almost any instance of acting can be seen as leadership as well as not leadership, depending on the definitions” (p. 378). Even though they themselves, as seen, use “direction” as a way to more precisely specifying what leadership is about, it could be argued that this
is still quite a broad concept since many interactions may be categorised as producing direction. However, I do not consider this a problem. On the contrary, this is an alternative approach to espousing a more reductionist stance in which the researcher tries to single out a restricted number of decisive moments or of salient people as an explanation for the course of events in an entire organisation. Both takes have shortcomings, of course. As I am going to discuss in the coming section, leadership research may be criticised precisely for having taken the second stance too often, thus reducing a complex phenomenon to what lone heroes do or are.

The Construction of Leadership in Terms of a Lone Hero

LEADERSHIP AS AN INDIVIDUAL MATTER

Reviewing the literature, it becomes quite clear that, although with different approaches, most of the studies have been carried out within a psychological framework and focus on individuals, mostly one individual. Of the different overviews of the field, Parry and Bryman’s (2006) tracing of the chronological development of the field reports the standard construction of the field’s history (see similar constructions in Yukl, 2010; Northouse, 2010). As summarised in table 1, Parry and Bryman distinguish a number of phases based on which aspect received most attention in that period, a development that may be seen as parallel to that in organisation theory. The conclusion these authors draw about the inconsistent results that the different approaches have reached, leading to continuous developments, may also be treated as the common ground on which researchers in the field try to build new knowledge. In other words, I consider the accounts presented as a rather shared self-presentation of the field of leadership studies and therefore I will partly build my argument on that too.
| **Trait approach** | Focus on leaders’ attributes for effective leadership — qualities that distinguish leaders from non-leaders. Physical traits, abilities and personality characteristics.  
The assumption is that one is born a leader and that it should be possible to identify traits related to successful leadership. | Overview in Stogdill (1948); Mann (1959); Gibb (1947) |
| **Style approach** | Focus on leader’s behaviours.  
Either studies about what managers actually do and how they handle their jobs, or quantitative studies of which behaviours lead to effective leadership.  
The assumption is that leaders are made, not born.  
These studies create a dichotomy present in many theories under disparate names: for instance preoccupation with the people and preoccupation with the tasks – consideration and initiating structure respectively. | Stogdill (1974); Cartwright and Zander (1960); Katz, Maccoby and Morse (1950); Bowers and Seashore (1966); Blake and Mouton (1964) |
| **Contingency and situational approach** | Parallel to the development in organisation theory at large (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967), contextual factors become the main interest of researchers.  
The focus is either what kind of similarities can be found across different contexts, or what kind of moderating effects certain contextual elements have on leaders’ attributes (be they traits, behaviours, etc).  
Following the latter tradition, the consequences could be either that a situation has to be changed to match the leader’s attributes (if they are considered to be constant), or that a leader can adjust her/his behaviour in ways appropriate to the situation at hand. | Contingency: Fielder (1967)  
Situational: Hersey and Blanchard (1969) |
New leadership approach

Different approaches that share the conceptualisation of leadership as “management of meaning”, in parallel to the interest in culture in organisation theory.

“Leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others. Indeed, leadership situations may be conceived as those in which there exists an obligation or a perceived right on the part of certain individuals to define the reality of others.” (Smircich and Morgan, 1982, p. 258)

In other words, “the leader gives a sense of direction and of purpose through the articulation of a compelling world view” (Parry and Bryman, 2006, p. 447). Such a view opens up for participation of other organisational members, and it is not as unidirectional as “influence.”

A variety of concepts proliferates. The most common are: charismatic leadership, transformational leadership (opposed to transactional leadership), visionary leadership.


Table 1. The development of leadership studies. (Parry and Bryman, 2006)

The new leadership approach has been very influential in the field. Central element of these theories are the power of visions and the transforming role of leaders, who should passionately and charismatically inspire and stimulate their followers. Therefore, although potentially more including than previous theories that were explicitly focused on one individual leader, these conceptualisations have contributed to making leadership even more confined to formal successful heroic leaders. In fact, criticism of such an approach encompasses the excessive focus on top leaders (at the expense of the majority of actors in organizations), too little attention paid to informal leadership processes (something common to most of the approaches), the return to universalistic thinking (at the expense of attention to the context), and the emphasis on success stories (while failures could also provide precious insights) (Parry and Bryman, 2006).

There have been developments in the field since the new leadership approach, one of which is the shared leadership approach that I am going to describe towards the end of this chapter. But before digging deeper into that, I would like to take a pause in the chronological overview and reflect
on what the object of leadership studies has been so far. While starting with similar definitions describing processes of influence, most of the contributions in the streams of research reviewed have reduced the phenomenon of leadership to the study of individuals, in particular of the individual formal leader. What has changed has been how the individual has been studied: from an effort to identify the proper traits to attention to the right behaviours exhibited by an effective leader. Not having found satisfactory answers, the focus moved to the proper leader in a certain context. And finally, the individual leader also became entitled to transform the followers. Not only leadership has been reduced to what an individual does, but the individual has also been accredited with intentionality, morality and superiority—an, in some way, extraordinary individual. The leadership construct, therefore, segregates people: those who dominate from those who are subordinated, those who are superior from those who are inferior—and the cause for that is often to be assumed to be the individual her/himself, thus making leadership theory apolitical and blind to power dynamics (Gordon, 2010). As expressed in early Social Darwinism, “success entitled a man to command” (Perrow et al., 1986).

The leader knows what is best for the organisation and directs followers toward such goals. A truly transformational leader even induces followers “to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the organization or team” (Yukl, 2010, p. 277). Without anticipating too much of the coming argument, I want to claim that the reduction of the phenomenon of leadership to the individual is not often acknowledged or discussed (cf. Wood, 2005; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2003). An exception is, for example, Grint (2005) when he reflects on “leadership as a person” and invites us to put the “ship” back into “leader-ship” since

This reduction of leadership to the individual human constitutes an analytically inadequate explanatory foundation (p. 33)

which is illustrated by, among other things, the importance of followers and their involvement in sensemaking. Another researcher pointing out the extreme focus on leaders has been Meindl (1995),

Over the years, leadership studies have tended to emphasize the thoughts, actions, and personas of leaders over those of followers. In addition, leadership situations have tended to be defined from the perspectives of leaders and not of followers.
Something rarely discussed is also the possible influence of the context in which many of the celebrated leadership writings have been produced; the US. The glorification of an “individualistic […], strong, masculine character who can lead” (Ford, 2005, p. 241) may be interpreted in light of individualistic tendencies in the US context, and might neither reflect nor fit the European context, as much as it is possible to talk of a “European context”.

Summarising, leadership research has historically been mostly focused on single individuals. With the advent of the new leadership approach, the heroic dimension of these individuals has grown even stronger. In the coming sections, I construct a critique of such a heroic conception of leadership.

THE LEADER AS A HERO

For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at the bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly all the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world’s history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these.

(Carlyle, 1841/1869, p. 1)

Criticism of Carlyle’s description of heroes was already fierce among his contemporaries, claiming that a great man is the product, rather than the source, of society. But undeniably, Great Men have attracted the interest and sympathy of people, and interpreting the unfolding of events in and outside an organisation in terms of what one Great Man, or more, have done is still very common, and convenient. We need leaders.

Claiming that talk about leadership, both in the research community and in society at large, is characterised by a recurrent reference to the leader as a hero is not particularly radical. Not only has such an observation been put forward by critical studies of leadership, for example, feminist studies (Fletcher, 2004), but also more “traditional” authors have recognised it. It almost seems to have become somewhat of an accepted fact. Yukl starts his book on leadership in organisation by writing:

Leadership is a subject that has long excited interest among people. The term connotes images of powerful, dynamic individuals who command
victorious armies, direct corporate empires from atop gleaming skyscrapers, or shape the course of nations. The exploits of brave and clever leaders are the essence of many legends and myths. Much of our description of history is the story of military, political, religious, and social leaders who are credited or blamed for important historical events, even though we do not understand very well how the events were caused and how much influence the leader really had.

(Yukl, 2010, p. 19)

Ironically, even though in these sentences we might guess a call for a more balanced treatment of the subject of leadership, each time we (including myself) write about the heroic connotation of leadership, we do, in a way, contribute to the reproduction of this as a fact.

Although there are several hundreds of traits associated with successful leaders and consensus has not been reached (Barker, 2001), an overview of which traits have been proposed shows a marked similarity to the traditional description of heroes to be found in the literature as well as in ancient tales (Gustafsson, 1992). Interest in leaders’ characteristics therefore continues a tradition of interest in the ideal human being – or rather, an ideal male human being. In other words, the myth of the hero may be interpreted as a culturally shaped description of the ideal man (p. 34).

As mentioned, criticism in the form of frustration with the heroification of leadership, and leaders, does not come only from marginal positions in the field. As Mintzberg (1999) puts it, “we seem to be moving beyond leaders who merely lead; today heroes save. Soon heroes will only save; then gods will redeem”. These leaders are often also depicted as heroes in the mass media, even though some researchers have started to question the real impact of such leaders on organizations and on their success (Czarniawska, 2005) and to show the disfunctionality of organizations inhabited by people playing heroes (Ely and Meyerson, 2000). Writing about major corporations such as Apple or American Express, which have been identified with their leaders, Mintzberg goes on:

Then consider this proposition: maybe really good management is boring. Maybe the press is the problem, alongside the so-called gurus, since they are the ones who personalize success and deify leaders (before they defile them). After all, corporations are large and complicated; it takes a lot of effort to find out what has really been going on. It is so much easier to assume that the great one did it all. Makes for better stories too.

(Mintzberg, 1999, p. 1 online version)
Even practitioners may downplay the importance of leadership, even though this is a rather unexplored question (French and Simpson, 2006). Still, it is a basic postulate of most recent theories of transformational or charismatic leadership that an effective leader will influence followers to make self-sacrifice and exert exceptional effort (Yukl, 2010). The leader is now described not only as the one who leads and gives orders, but also as a symbol, a source of inspiration, creativity and aesthetic perfection (Hatch et al., 2006). Pearce and Manz describe this romantic conception of leaders as heroes in similar terms: heroes “who single-handedly save followers – who are largely viewed as interchangeable drones – from their own incompetence” (Pearce and Manz, 2005, p. 130).

Indeed, criticising heroic leadership gives rise to colourful constructions of what “traditional” leadership theory does. According to Grint

the most interesting aspect of list-making is that by the time the list is complete the only plausible description of the owner of such a skill base is “god”.

(Grint, 2005, p. 34)

Interesting enough, trying to find the ultimate leader who with astuteness, charm and force will save an organization from the present leader, who has turned out to be a failure, one does not often reflect on the fact that it was the same selection criteria that led to the recruitment of such a failure (Grint, 2005, p. 34-35).

The label “guru” theories has also been used in order to describe an elite shaping the forms and practices of management (Ford, 2005). A guru may be an academic, a consultant or a hero-manager. Popularity among managers can be understood as the heroic status they prescribe for managers, who are depicted as a sort of organisational redeemer (p. 240).

One could even go further in the criticism of such heroic ideals: transformational leadership presents common elements with cultic forms of organisations characterised by members who display “high commitment, replace their pre-existing beliefs and values with those of the group, work extremely hard, relinquish control over their time, lose confidence in their own perceptions in favour of those of the group (especially of its leader), and experience social punishment” (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002, p. 157). This means not only that transformational leadership ideals have the potential to direct organisations towards authoritarian forms, but also that they may facilitate the growth of a trend towards spirituality promoting corpo-
rate cultism. Spirituality means that a transformational leader, to really be transformational, should also be spiritual and foster morality in followers: not just a hero, but also a spiritual guide.

WHY THE NEED FOR A HERO?

Why so much focus has been given to single heroes is something that may be debated. Pearce and Manz (2005), describing how the study of leadership in organisations emerged (in the USA), trace back the idea of the unity of command and top-down leadership to the industrial revolution. Such a conception became even more strengthened with the advent of scientific management in the 20th century, when the separation of managerial and workers’ responsibilities and tasks became the ideal, and subordinates became formally excluded from participating in leadership roles. The same authors also recognise the role played in Europe by Fayol, and his principle of management, and by Weber, and the ideas of bureaucracy and charisma. Other researchers have highlighted that it might be human cognition that, in order to make sense of complex events, needs to simplify the situation and attribute causality to individual leaders (Yukl, 2010, p. 495). Implicit leadership theories, for example, maintain that in Western nations experience is explained in terms of the rational actions people take (ibid.). Similarly, the idea of the Romance of Leadership has been proposed in order to describe how

the concept of leadership is a perception that plays a part in the way people attempt to make sense out of organizationally relevant phenomena. Moreover, in this sense-making process, leadership has assumed a romanticized, larger-than-life role.

(Meindl et al., 1985, p. 79)

In other words, leadership is important as a concept since it seems that people in organisations make use of this concept in order to make sense of what is happening, as total comprehension of a complex world is not possible. For example, according to Meindl and colleagues, people privilege explanations in terms of leadership when it comes to salient events, especially extraordinary events: a large increase in sales is more often attributed to the new manager’s leadership than to other plausible causes. Or, using their words, “leadership is perhaps best construed as an explanatory category that can be used to explain and account for organizational activities and outcomes” (p. 79). It may be interpreted as a tool for sensemaking.
Leadership has also been described as a myth, a myth helping people repress the anxiety, fear of failure and helplessness emerging when a group is faced with uncertainty and ambiguity regarding direction (Gemmill and Oakley, 1992, p. 114). Such an explanation might be criticised for being somewhat deterministic, but it points out an important aspect and shows again that leadership is about direction. The myth of leadership also leads to massive learned helplessness. And it provides ideological support for the existing social order: in a Darwinistic fashion: only a selected elite is entitled to a greater share of power and wealth (p. 115).

Such a myth is also reconstructed by those who are in a subordinate position. People come to appreciate the power that is suppressing them and they learn to fight those who question the principles according to which we organise our daily life, thus sustaining the reproduction of one's own oppression through a sort of micro-fascism (Styhre, 2003, p. 34).

Independently of “why” people believe in heroes and why researchers, as well as the media, build and justify them, it is interesting to study “what” such constructions do and to look for alternative constructions. While one could discuss even more what modern construction of leadership does by, for example, deconstructing them (Calás and Smircich, 1991; Calas, 1993), I just want to observe that being a hero is not only being in a privileged position; high expectations of what the hero will do, and normative assumptions about what a leader is, are the flip side of the coin.

Indeed, complaints about leaders and calls for more or better leadership occur on such a regular basis that one would be forgiven for assuming that there was a time when good leaders were ubiquitous. […] An urban myth like this “Romance of Leadership” – the era when heroic leaders were allegedly plentiful and solved all our problems – is not only misconceived but positively counter-productive because it sets up a model of leadership that few, if any of us, can ever match and thus it inhibits the development of leadership, warts and all.

(Grint, 2005, p. 34)

The Romance of Leadership is a double-edged sword (Meindl et al., 1985): it brings praise for positive outcomes, but also blame for the negative ones. Not only that, it also means disciplining the people in formal leadership positions, who are expected to behave as heroes. On the other hand, constructing leaders as heroes also means constructing followers as helpless people needing rescue, what can be called “learned helplessness” (Ford, 2005, p. 243).
Digging Deeper: Further Problematic Aspects of the Leadership Construct

So far I have focused on one problematic aspect of leadership theory: the construction of some (few) individuals as heroes and the following segregation and hierarchisation among people working in organisations. But there are other important aspects that deserve attention. Leadership is a construct built over the years in a social and cultural context. Reflection of what the construct “does” is a first step towards relating to it more critically. This leads us to discuss morality, masculinity, and performativity.

MORALITY

Is leadership moral? Such a question is seldom explicitly debated (Crevani et al., 2007a). It is mostly assumed that leadership is something needed and good. Not only have traditional leadership studies focused on a single leader, the concept of leadership itself is not “neutral”. Leadership is positive (Calás and Smircich, 1991): leadership is a solution, lack of leadership a problem.

When discussing famous examples of successful leadership, positive characters such as Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa or Gandhi are the ones brought to the fore. Although one could discuss how the characters themselves are constructed as positive and as lone leaders, what I would like to discuss here is how negative characters, such as Hitler or Stalin, are treated. That is, can a leadership be harmful or immoral? The present-day recurrent quote “leaders are people who do the right thing, managers are people who do things right” already gives an answer. Adel Safty, Unesco chair in 2003, writing in a time marked by the war in Irak, affirms that leadership is

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normatively apprehended as a set of values with connotations evocative of the higher achievements of the human spirit. Leadership, therefore, is irrevocably tied to morality. Measured by its results, leadership in whatever field should be the vision-driven achievements of those people who are able to transform their environment, morally elevate their followers, and chart new path of progress and human development.
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(Safty, 2003, p. 84)
While such a definition is disputable even in a political setting, it might be argued that such ideals are acceptable at the society level, but are not indicative of ideals at the business organisation level. We can turn to Bass, then, one of the “fathers” of transformational leadership:

Leaders are authentically transformational when they increase awareness of what is right, good, important, and beautiful, when they help to elevate followers’ needs for achievement and self-actualization, when they foster in followers higher moral maturity, and when they move followers to move beyond their self-interest for the good of their group, organization, or society.”


Not only is leadership done by individuals, only certain individuals deemed to be better than the others in an organisation, but also leaders are inherently moral and know what is best for the followers and see as their mission to elevate them. Leadership that is not moral is not authentic. This is also a consequence of the conflation of construction of the leader and of the ideal man: the leader should stand for the virtues celebrated in a certain cultural context (cf. Gustafsson, 1992).

The problem here, as I see it, is twofold: on the one hand, it is questionable how to decide on what is moral and what is not in a universal way (MacIntyre, 1985) – for whom is something not moral, for example? – on the other hand, leadership is invested with morality. For the purpose of this thesis, it is this second aspect that is the most relevant. The assumption of morality is seldom discussed and is not really implied by the definition of leadership as influence and direction. The effect is one of strengthening the segregation of the individual leader from followers – who are in such a way deemed not able to distinguish good from wrong – and elevating the leader to an even higher position.

**MASCULINITY**

Although scholars put so much effort into trying to describe which characteristics denote a leader, they have seldom explicitly commented on the gender of the ideal leader – an exception being traits studies naming masculinity as one of the identified characteristics (cf. Mann, 1959). Such gender-blindness in leadership research, and organisation theory more generally, has been denounced and discussed by gender-aware scholars for decades (cf. Acker, 1990; Collinson and Hearn, 1996; Eriksson-Zetterquist
and Styhre, 2007; Gherardi and Poggio, 2007; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993; Martin, 2001; Tienari, 1999; Wahl, 1998), and is today also acknowledged to a larger or smaller extent by a number of non-feminist researchers. This is not to say that gendered and gendering aspects are systematically critically analysed in leadership study; most studies do not name gender explicitly. Nevertheless, it is no longer radical to affirm that gender plays a role in organisations – and that organisations play a role in the doing of gender as well. It is legitimate to maintain that leadership is not a gender-neutral construct and that studying leadership and gender provides important insights into what leadership is about.

The most prominent way in which scholars have ignored gender in organisations, and in particular when theorising about leadership, is that gender is seldom mentioned at all. Decades ago, it was common to write books about leadership in terms of “he” or “his” without any reflections on the fact that either the author was describing only men, or – sometimes – was telling about both men and women using the masculine pronoun and adjective in an unproblematic way. It is difficult to miss that most of the celebrated leaders of the past were men and, consequently, most tales on leadership describe male leadership. I am not arguing that speaking of men means necessarily speaking of masculinities. But one could expect that speaking of only men would at least require a reflection on masculinities and femininities, and what kind of norms are being shaped. Too often, this has not been the case. Sometimes the examples cited are both men and women, but when generalising, the pronoun “he” comes back uncontested. Again, a reflection on that would be reasonable when producing knowledge. But gender is also absent in more fundamental ways. The people under study or the people inhabiting organisation theory books have no gender, since we are faced by disembodied beings. In organisational logic, jobs are considered as abstract categories separated from people: they exist before the workers that will take those jobs, and therefore can only be filled by disembodied workers. A disembodied worker is anyway not really a gender-neutral worker (Acker, 1990). Rather, in our society, this kind of abstract ideal worker has been a man, or at least may be characterised in traditional masculine terms. In fact, the ideal worker has been constructed as a disembodied and rational being, who has no other preoccupation in life than working – the individual in our society that is closest to this ideal type (still) is a male worker, the male worker who is able to dedicate his life to work since he is expected to have a woman at home who takes care of “the rest”. Such a construction is thus based on a gender-based division of work and implies the separation
of the public sphere from the private (p. 149). Of course, it is also a context-specific construction (Tienari et al., 2002).

The systems regulating how work in organisations is carried out may also appear to be gender-neutral. But organisational structures not only describe how work is organised, they also “create” people in organisation, maintains Kanter (1977/1993). It is not, or not only, individual differences that will lead to certain people making a career and becoming managers. Rather, it is how the organisation is structured that will affect who will become a manager. Organisational structures are gendering people in organisations – even though Kanter does not consider the bureaucracy as gendering per se as Acker does. In the corporations of the ’70s described by Kanter, jobs were segregated on the basis of sex and laden with idealised images of how the people in them should be. A larger number of women have nowadays entered a wider range of jobs, it could be argued. Nevertheless, sex-segregation in working life is still a relevant problem (cf. Billing, 2006; Tienari, 1999), a problem also related to the analysis of organisational life done by Kanter, which has not lost its topicality. Whereas in an ideal bureaucracy there is no place for personal discretion, in practice in organisations there must be discretion, due to those sources of uncertainty that cannot be regulated. The greater the uncertainty, the greater the pressure to control it. Social homogeneity and social conformity are means to deal with it. Communication is perceived as smoother, loyalty is demonstrated by total dedication to work, managers reproduce themselves, power is confined to people resembling those already in power. In such an organisation, there is no place for the “different”, at least not at the managerial level, not when someone has to be trusted. Moreover, trying to make the best of the situation and given the dynamics of power in organisations where men are dominating, men and women are likely to perform masculinities and femininities in order to adapt to the structural premises in place. Of course, summarising these complex aspects in a few lines, the risk is that I provide a very deterministic description of what is going on – and Kanter’s structural approach may also be criticised for that. Still, recognising that actual interactions in organisations might present more nuanced conditions, the important point I want to make here is that a first aspect to take into consideration is that jobs and structures are gendered and gendering.

Going back to the ideal worker, a disembodied worker is also someone immune to emotions and irrationality. Taylor is often cited as the one setting the tone for much of management thinking and theorising through the doctrine of Scientific Management (Taylor, 1911). Intellectual work should
be reserved for superior individuals able to make rational decisions aimed at improving efficiency on the basis of scientific knowledge. Managers are passionless and logical individuals. But as Kanter (1977/1993) observes, the primacy of rationality is hardly contested by the later advent of Human Resources. We learn that workers have emotions and that irrationality is present in organisations, but the role of managers is just to control their emotions, keep their mind clear of irrationality, and instrumentally use workers' own emotions and irrational behaviours. She therefore describes a “masculine ethic” identified as part of the early image of managers. This “masculine ethic” elevates the traits assumed to belong to some men to necessities for effective management:

a tough-minded approach to problems; analytic abilities to abstract and plan; a capacity to set aside personal, emotional considerations in the interests of task accomplishment; and a cognitive superiority in problem-solving and decision-making. These characteristics supposedly belonged to men; but then, practically all managers were men from the beginning. However, when women tried to enter management jobs, the ‘masculine ethic’ was invoked as an exclusionary principle.

(Kanter, 1993)

To be sure, the problem, as I see it, is not only that leadership is described in masculine terms, but also that masculinity and femininity are constructed as opposites in society, mutually excluding each other and essentially bound to male and female bodies – with the masculine most times superior to the feminine (Hirdman, 1988). Masculinity is, moreover, a misleading concept since we are not speaking of one kind of masculinity, rather masculinity may take different forms, of which the so-called “hegemonic masculinity” represents the dominating form in a certain context (Connell, 1987), dominating not in a quantitative manner – in terms of the number of people performing it – but in a more qualitative sense, being the form of masculinity to which other masculinities and femininities are subordinated.

The conflation of the construct of leadership with masculinity, and in particular heterosexual masculinity sustained by homosociality, has been exposed mostly by feminist scholars (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993; Wahl, 1992), while other scholars have failed to acknowledge it or, at least, to problematise it. Male managers have been studied as leaders, but not as belonging to a certain gender category, men, while female managers have instead been problematised in their being women, and the consequent “lack of …” explaining their rarity in top management.
Masculine success has thus been depicted as an independent, aggressive, secure, decisive, worldly leader (Ely and Padavic, 2007). Other terms used to describe leadership are assertiveness, dominance, (self-)control, individuality, autonomy, confidence (cf. Kark, 2005). Now we can even read about paternalistic leadership, “a style that combines strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence” (Farth and Cheng, 2000, p. 91 as quoted in Pellegrini and Scandura, 2008, p. 567) and how it relates to positive work attitudes. Strands of writings promoting heroic leadership have strengthened these kinds of images, even though empowerment is a more usually used concept than paternalism. The rational and controlling leader favoured by Taylor has been substituted with the Great Man able to manipulate emotions and shape culture. Cultural expectations have made men the natural inhabitant of organisations, while women are positioned as out of place (Gherardi, 1995). Feminine presence violating the symbolic gender order needs “remedial work” by both men and women to restore the norm (ibid.). Moreover, the more a man keeps private life under control and separated from employment, the more he will be seen as a committed worker (Collinson and Hearn, 1994). Such expectations may be even higher for managers, not to speak of what we will demand of a hero.

Structures and norms have contributed to maintaining a situation where women have entered the managerial ranks but have not made it up to the top echelon. Since heroic leadership mostly focused on few top leaders, there are few female bodies to which heroic leadership is attributed. Women’s difficulties in having a career leading to top positions have been discussed a lot. There are conscious prejudices and stereotypes (Eagly and Carli, 2003), but probably more difficult to grasp are expectations and assumptions on what leadership is about and what femininity is about (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Heroic women may be judged as “too aggressive” (Ely and Meyerson, 2000), at the same time as managerial jobs are for men dedicated to full (over-)time work (Acker, 1990). The token position of the few women at the top (Kanter, 1977/1993) and homosociality among men (Kanter, 1977/1993) also play a role. These are all important aspects that would deserve a longer discussion and that are just sketched here. For the purpose of this thesis, what I would like to point out by these considerations is that leadership is not a gender-neutral construct at all. Leadership has been constructed, in our Western culture, in masculine terms—and this has meant that leadership constructions have been excluding and marginalising, not only towards women, but also men not performing hegemonic masculinities.
But as with all constructions, leadership is not a fixed concept. The idea that women lead in a different way compared to men and that such leadership might actually result in higher performance is not new (Helgesen, 1990), but “feminine leadership” has gained growing attention in the so-called “knowledge economy”. Values and characteristics preached by current leadership ideologies, such as empathy, attention to emotions and relations, humbleness, care, and capacity to grow people, are well in line with how femininity has been constructed in our cultural context. Not only researchers, but even the media have raised this consideration and expressed the challenging idea that women should be better leaders in modern organisations (Billing, 2006). While it might be obvious that postheroic leadership ideals (quite a recent development in leadership research and discourse reacting against the construct of the leader as a hero) would contain such values, it is interesting to underscore that transformational leadership also stresses the importance of, for example, establishing emotional bonds. How has such an aspect been handled in management literature? One way to handle it is not to mention it at all, thus avoiding a reversal of the subordination of femininity to masculinity in management writings (Fondas, 1997; Kark, 2005). Among gender-conscious scholars, there is also a debate on whether there is any “feminine leadership” – the empirical material supports such claims only to a limited extent (Billing, 2006; Eagly and Carli, 2003) – and what such a construct “does”. Irrespective of one’s own take on the possible causes of difference, or of the absence of differences, focusing on a different “feminine leadership” risks making social and cultural constructs into essences and risks counterworking change in the division of work. As Wahl puts it, “the marginalisation of women is built into the “female leadership” rubric from the start” (Wahl, 1998, p. 51).

On the other hand, part of contemporary leadership ideals are no longer expressed in such strong masculine terms as they were before, something that has led researchers at least to speak of a de-masculinisation of leadership discourse (Billing, 2006). What impact do such discussions have in organizations? Fletcher (2004) shows how the potential for radical change inherent in new postheroic leadership ideals emphasising relations, collaborative achievements and mutual growth may become silenced if their gender and power implications are not considered. Narratives about leadership in organisations seem to be stuck in heroic individualism (p. 651); doing leadership intersects with doing gender and has traditionally meant doing masculinity (and doing power). Doing postheroic leadership might become associated with doing femininity (and doing powerlessness), thus
breaking with the traditional associations made with doing leadership. When stories are retold, such aspects may become reconstructed so as to fit with the expectations of masculinity typical of leadership. Moreover, women doing postheroic leadership might be interpreted as women doing femininity, rather than as competent leaders. The radical potential of the new models might also be jeopardised if the individualistic meritocracy so strongly present in how organisations are managed is not openly challenged. Fletcher invites us to acknowledge the importance of gendered and gendering dynamics and the different belief system underlying postheroic leadership, a belief system based on relationality and interdependence.

Such a consideration leads us to the last aspect that I want to point out here. At a deeper level, leadership is gendered and gendering since it implies the construction of subjects that treat other individuals instrumentally as objects. Feminist theorists have criticised Western philosophy and its dualism of mind and body – the mind being superior to and separated from the body – for excluding women from subject positions in the symbolic order: women have had to be objects in order for men to be universal rational subjects (Oseen, 1997). Men have ontology as subjects, women are “the other” – the lesser –, and masculinity stands in a hierarchical dichotomous relation to femininity. At a discursive level, men have had precedence in defining reality from the men’s point of view (without any need to problematise this) and language is structured around dichotomies – the masculine and the feminine – and implies power – if the masculine is the norm, the feminine becomes constructed as the “other”, the lesser, the subordinated (Gherardi, 1995). In this sense the traditional definition of leadership implying a subject directing others, objects, is gendered since such a subject position is masculine in itself. Domination seems to be inevitable. Relationships become only understood as subject-object relations, an individual independent subject instrumentally dominating a passive object. The narrative of leadership is in fact built on a subject-object understanding of relations. Leaders are subjects, able to act on the basis of their superiority and knowledge; they are the “architects of order and control” (Dachler and Hosking, 1995); they have precedence in interpreting reality and giving sense to it. A knowing individual becomes a subject, distinguishable from the objects that are knowable. The “others” are passive objects to be directed. The leader masters the world and is able to be emotionally detached. The relation itself is not the focus of the study of leadership; rather it is assumed that the properties of the entities, subjects and objects, are enough to explain what happens.
Summarising my argument, I consider leadership a gendered concept. Analysing the gender dimensions of leadership enables us to gain precious insight into the phenomenon. Not only that, it also allows us to understand how leadership has been conceptualised and researched. In fact, one way of making sense of the construct of leadership—which is based on individualism, instrumentalism and segregation—is to recognise the intersection with the construct of masculinity. The idea of an active, independent and superior subject, who is able to manipulate objects in order to reach objectives deemed to be “the common good” (the subject knows what the real common good is), is not so strange in a context where masculinity (as it is constructed in our society) is the norm. On the contrary, the opposite would be surprising. But this also means that an additional aspect of the leadership construct that I consider problematic is the potential for exclusion, exclusion of the ones who are not performing hegemonic masculinities. This brings us to another important aspect of the leadership construct: its performativity.

PERFORMATIVITY

In most contributions in the field of leadership studies, leadership seems to be a stable concept, a “real” phenomenon, something coherent and important (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a). Leadership is something that exists, an assumption rather than a hypothesis. Striving to find the key to effective leadership means that leadership is considered as a phenomenon that can be studied in order to find the best description of causal relations between the leader’s characteristics or behaviours and how “reality” is affected, and changed, by them. If the proper methodology is found, it will be possible to give the right picture of what leadership is about and how it works. Leadership is thus treated as an ostensive concept (Latour, 1986). This is the traditional approach.

What I want to argue here—and have previously argued together with my colleagues (Crevani et al., 2010)—is that leadership is not only an ostensive concept, it is most importantly—if not exclusively—a performative concept. Drawing on Judith Butler’s idea of gender as performative (Butler, 1990/1999), I will argue that leadership exists as long as people in organisations, in the academic community, as well as in society in general, talk and act as if leadership existed and mattered. As Butler writes about gender:

As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. (p. 178)
Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. […] Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (p. 179)

I want to extend the use of “performativity” from gender to other constructs, in particular leadership. Butler has a political agenda of emancipation and resistance to not only masculine hegemony, but also compulsory heterosexuality. Her idea of performativity has therefore a potential for both criticising current norms and subverting them. I would agree that there can be a risk of trivialising her ideas by applying the performativity concept to leadership, since gender and heteronormativity are phenomena that probably have a larger and deeper impact on people’s lives than leadership has, but I do think that it can still provide a critique of, and possibility for change to, a concept that is highly relevant and influential in society—and not least intersects with masculinity and heteronormativity.

In fact, leadership may be interpreted as a construct that is stable and apparently substantial thanks to the continuous repetition of leadership performances as we expect them to be. Even though, paradoxically, “bad leadership” practices almost seem to be what we usually expect, rather than more brilliant performances. Leadership “exists” as long as it is performed.

In more detail, and looking again at Butler’s work

 […] expectation concerning gender, that it operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates. In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way is which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration. (p. xiv-xv).

Transporting this reasoning to the concept of leadership one may therefore argue that the essence of leadership is a construct that is sustained by the re-construction we perform each time we talk about leadership, we act as if leadership existed – which means mostly that we act as if leaders or followers mattered – or do research about it. At the same time, expectations about leadership constrain as well as enable how leadership is performed.
Leadership norms establish what is considered to be leadership and how leadership is enacted. Legitimate expressions of leadership are therefore constrained. Again the parallel to Butler’s argument:

[…] the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality. (p. xxiii).

As academics we participate actively in the construction of what leadership is. What we do is that “we develop subject positions in which those who are designated organisational leaders will step” (Ford, 2005, p. 242), which means that “some must aspire to a complex identity which others follow” (p. 243). The search for the effective leader may be interpreted as striving to fix the concept of leadership, which means providing a core identity for leaders (ibid.). From an emancipation point of view, to which I subscribe, the problem is that only a narrow range of identities is permitted. This also means that there will be “exclusionary practices that aim to offer a homogeneous definition of what a leader in an organisation is expected to be” (ibid., p. 243). Failure to recognise the conflation of masculinity and leadership norms is one of these practices, for instance.

A Parenthesis: When the Leader is Not the Hero. Contributions on the Side of Leadership Research

While I am positioning myself within the field of leadership studies, in which leadership is assumed to be a phenomenon and to be an important one, there are also other theoretical strands that do not put leaders on a pedestal. This thesis being about leadership, I am not going to review all areas within organisation theory that do not consider leadership as a central phenomenon, but I nevertheless want to acknowledge that there is a whole variety of streams within organisation theory and far from all of them are concerned with the leadership phenomenon. A typical example might be institutional theory. If we take an institutional perspective, than our attention will be focused on processes involving the organisation and the environment in which the organisation operates (or organisational fields, depending on the stream), rather than on the importance of intentional individual leaders (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009a). Of course this is no general rule and for example Selznick (1957), one of the first scholars in the institutional theory field, conceptualises leadership as what makes an
organisation into an institution (a product of social needs, an adaptive organism), or what makes an engineered arrangement of building blocks into a social organism, thus relating leadership to the symbolic work of infusing values into an organisation. Another example of institutional theory and leadership is provided by the contribution of Woolsey Biggart and Hamilton (1987) who invite us to pay attention to the legitimating principles and norms of the social context in which leadership occurs when studying leadership strategies. Hence, although leadership might be studied, individual leaders are not focused on and even leadership is, usually, not what scholars within this stream take into consideration, at least in Scandinavia. This might also be one explanation to the relatively low interest in leadership studies in Scandinavia, where the institutional tradition is widely spread.

If institutional theory as a whole does not focus on individual leaders, other considerations may even de-emphasise the leader's role. For example, some scholars have pointed out that subordinates play a role of utmost importance. If power is conceptualised as something created in relations and not as something one individual has, than it is obvious that leaders depend on their subordinates for power to be performed. Rather than a leader exercising power causing follower to act, we have subordinates’ actions producing the leader’s power (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009b; Grint, 2005). In a similar way, rather than viewing leaders as controlling their subordinates, we could conceptualise subordinates as controlling their leaders. As Latour (1986) puts it:

> when you simply have power – in potentia – nothing happens and you are powerless; when you exert power – in actu – others are performing action and not you. […] Power is not something you may possess and hoard. Either you have it in practice and you do not have it – others have – or you simply have it in theory and you do not have it. (p. 265)

If subordinates act coordinated and successfully, than power is created and might be stabilised. As Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist describes, there have been examples of authors writing about leadership that have recognised the centrality of the subordinate, for example, Macchiavelli, Barnard and Luhmann, but generally the phenomenon of leadership has not been studied from the subordinate’s point of view (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009b). Most studies considering followers, in fact, merely focus on the implications deriving from the relation with the follower in terms of the leader’s behaviour or actions. Interest in the followers and what leadership is from their point of view is rare, which is quite interesting since it may be supposed to
be quite obvious that followers not only grant the leader the possibility of influencing them when leadership (here understood in a traditional way) is exercised, but also in a more concrete way, the leader depends on followers when it comes to both preparing and implementing decisions. For example, the pieces of information gathered before deciding on an important matter are produced by subordinates and actions taken as a consequence of the decision are performed by subordinates.

As regards subordinates and the role they play, it is important to point out that a subordinate is not a constant and uniform category: such a position is constructed along the dimensions of gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and so on (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009b). Depending on how these categories are negotiated (in society as well as in the particular relation), power in the leader-follower relation will take a different form. Such categories are also under constant re-negotiation, and organisations are one important site for maintaining as well as challenging current positions.

In Sweden, Stefan Tengblad and colleagues have taken seriously the challenge of studying “co-workership”, conceptualised as how co-workers relate to and handle their relation to the manager, organisation, their own work and colleagues (cf. Tengblad, 2003; Andersson and Tengblad, 2009). Their point is that it is meaningless to study leadership and co-workership as separated phenomena; rather they are constantly influencing each other. And since much work has been done on leadership, they focus on co-workership. This is not to say that managers are not important to these scholars. They give the example of empowerment philosophy and the consequent erasing of layers of middle managers in the 90s, which implied a number of problems connected to the fact that managers became responsible for groups of 50-100 people. One consequence they identify is, for instance, a worsening in the communication between managers and employees. Co-leadership is therefore different from empowerment in that the idea is of having highly committed managers and co-workers, not of merely transferring responsibilities from the ones to the others. Co-workership is thus a useful concept to describe a phenomenon, but it is also used as a normative concept in order to prescribe what an ideal co-workership could look like and how to get there.

Followership is another concept used by those scholars who have focused on the other side of leadership. The difference between followership and co-workership is that while the former suggests increased dependency, the latter instead promotes interdependency (Andersson and Tengblad,
Followership means improving the ability to follow. Just to give an example, in Kelley’s words,

we need to understand the nature of follower’s role. To cultivate good followers, we need to understand the human qualities that allow effective followership to occur.

(Kelley, 2001, p.143)

In his description of good followership Kelley constructs good followers as almost the exception, meaning that most people are (supposed to be) unenterprising. Alcorn (1992) starts an article by, for example, ironically asking if dynamic followership should be considered an oxymoron, given our assumptions about followers. Whatever the stance taken, what these researchers analyse are traits and behaviours, exactly as in leadership theory, rather than a phenomenon. Great followers display initiative, self-control, commitment, talent, honesty, credibility, and courage, sort of heroic or “martyrish” followers. Even if not void of shortcomings from my point of view, these contributions have still meant trying to reform leadership theory and to add more people to the active subjects worth attention in organisations. There are also some theories, as the leader-member exchange (LMX), that have come close to this area but have still confined the focus of attention to the dyadic relation between leaders and follower (cf. Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Another approach is taken by Collinson (2006) when, by means of a post-structuralist analysis, he puts the focus on followers and analyses the enactment of different kinds of selves performed by followers at the workplace. In this way, attention is paid to the repertoire of followers’ identities, rather than to normative models of good followership, and the interaction with the leader is problematised, in particular the assumed impact of leaders on followers’ identities, which may be not so “linear”. Identity is, of course, not a fixed construction either, being instead conceptualised as shifting and ambiguous. And followers would also have impact on leaders’ identity construction, since leaders’ and followers’ identities are thus linked and mutual constructing, rather than two separated and dichotomous entities (cf. Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001).

Finally, followership is also the label used for another type of studies, inspired by the “romance of leadership”. Having stated that leadership is a concept used by people in organisations to make sense of what happens, of complex and ambiguous processes (Meindl et al., 1985), Meindl (1995)
goes on by claiming that, just because of that, it is meaningful to shift the focus of research from leaders to followers. Followers are, in fact, the ones constructing leaders and it is these constructions, rather than “real” leaders, that are important for how organisations work. In other words:

the follower-centric agenda of romance of leadership seeks to understand the variance of constructions as influenced by social processes that occur among followers and by salient contextual/situational factors, and their implications for behavior. (p. 331)

In this way, leadership is considered to have emerged as soon as followers interpret their relations as having to do with leadership-followership. This is clearly an attempt to escape the leader-centred trap and take a coherent constructionist stance. The focus is then moved towards understanding how leadership constructions happen.

Summarising, it would be erroneous to affirm that leaders have been the only individuals being studied when it comes to understanding processes in organisations, although leadership has gained a central position in the interpretation of what is going on in organisations. On the one hand we have theories that focus on a level of analysis that often does not encompass single individuals, such as institutional theory; on the other hand, we also have scholars who have brought forward the role played by other individuals than the formal leader. Contributions focusing on co-workers are important in the development of a better understanding of the phenomenon of leadership, since they consider more elements than the individual leader. Still, there is not much empirical work done with such perspectives. Moreover, there might be a risk of ending up reproducing the dichotomy leadership-followership, instead of starting by questioning if it is meaningful at all.

**The Theoretical Problem**

So far in this chapter I have briefly summarised and discussed traditional leadership theories and what they do. I am now going to condense all these considerations into the theoretical problem that this thesis addresses. As mentioned, leadership is a concept that has received huge attention over the years and engaged scholars in a particular way. However, they often complain about the inconclusiveness of the findings they have produced, as well as about the lack of clarity on what leadership exactly is. Given my stance, which is inspired by social constructionism, the lack of consensus
about what leadership is represents no major concern. As shown, there is an important common element to most definitions of leadership: providing or creating direction. This can be the point of departure for a definition of leadership, of what to look for when studying it. Seeing leadership as a construction, it makes sense that different researchers will adopt different conceptualisations and that the concept is being produced and reproduced all the time. Still, the element of direction seems to me to be the stable element.

On the other hand, what is of concern, in my view, is what leadership theories have done. They have often taken complex social phenomena and provided an overly simplified account of causes and effects. They have tried to single out particular individuals, particular behaviours and/or particular situations in order to find plausible and, often, “mechanical” explanations, and to provide practitioners with schematic models. Of course, a practitioner working in a concrete situation may be helped by models supporting her/his decision making and initiatives – and a model is always a simplified version of reality, something one has to keep in mind. But leadership has grown in its importance as the crucial factor for success, which leads to the strength of leadership norms being quite impressive. It becomes, therefore, problematic if there is no active reflective discussion among researchers on what kind of norms and models we are producing, with which consequences and what are we ignoring. Oversimplification becomes an issue. Alternative constructions become a need.

First, leadership research is based on a narrow focus. Researchers have mostly searched for effective leadership, mostly for intentional influence processes, mostly for “direct” leadership – direct influence relationships. They have mostly assumed a dyadic perspective – an influence process between a leader and a follower. The scope of leadership theory and research has thus been limited (Yukl, 2010, p.450). With such narrow focus, it becomes problematic to give leadership too much explanatory power when talking about complex social processes.

Secondly, this narrow focus has implied an individualised conception of leadership (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2003). The explanation has to be found in individuals, sometimes individuals having relations or being situated in a context, but still individuals. The leader (a person) becomes confused with leadership (a process) (Pye, 2005, p.35). Much research has been carried out within a psychological tradition, which has certainly contributed to this attention to individuals. As Holmberg establishes when discussing organisational learning, making the individual profoundly
interesting means stimulating curiosity about the inner lives of people and what is going on in their minds, resulting in a process of individualisation and psychologisation and in making organisational life into a romantic drama, where individuals are presented as committed to some kind of quest (Holmberg, 2000). This means that self-knowledge and awareness are incentivised in order to find the “true self” and, describing people as designers of their actions, an image of individuals as separated from the context in which they act is reinforced. Furthermore, individuals have intentions and such intentions have gained an important space in understanding events (cf. Alvesson and Kärreman, 2003). As Carroll puts it,

the individual agent is credited with primacy, a linear relationship is constructed from intention to intervention, and performance is governed by purpose, principles and co-option into an overarching strategic plan.

(Carroll et al., 2008, p. 364)

The confidence placed in the belief that leadership matters, and matters a lot, and that it is a question of individuals means that lone heroes are constructed. The analysis is limited to single discrete elements, with the risk of forgetting the complexity and interrelatedness of the social world. The possible distributed nature of the phenomenon is thus not even taken into consideration.

A third point is that, consequently, leadership theories are segregating and “hierarchising”. People are categorised into subject and objects. There is an implicit assumption about the asymmetry in the relation leader-other, one example being the attention paid exclusively to the active role taken by leaders, when there is evidence of managers behaving reactively in many situations (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b, p. 1439). As previously discussed, several elements concur to produce these effects: a mechanistic and deterministic view of cause-effect relations, for example (Barker, 2001); a focus on independence rather than interdependence and a masculine construction of relations (Dachler and Hosking, 1995); the morality inherent in the construction of leadership, the interest of the leader being equated with the interest of the group, the interest of the company, or even the interest of the followers (in the sense that the leader knows what is really best for them), and the leader being invested with the responsibility for raising others’ moral behaviours. The so-called learned helplessness of followers is one of the consequences.
A fourth aspect is that the current leadership construct is masculine, in a number of ways, as previously discussed. Heroic leadership is conflated with constructions of masculinity. Postheroic leadership is a more feminine construct but, as described, if constructions of leadership and gender are not explicitly discussed there is a risk of constructing a feminine rhetoric but maintaining masculine practices, thus not challenging masculinity as hegemonic. Gender is therefore a relevant category when talking about or doing leadership, and since leadership constructions are gendered, they are also excluding and marginalising, providing unequal conditions for women, but also men. Moreover, hegemonic masculinity and leadership are two constructs that might reinforce each other, given the privileged position they have gained. From an emancipatory point of view, this is problematic. Not only are leaders attributed importance and influence, but also gendered hierarchisation is reconstructed, with hegemonic masculinity dominating over other constructs of gender. To be sure, my purpose is not to promote any kind of feminine leadership. From my point of view, the “ideal” situation would be one in which gender is not a relevant category at all. But this is not the point of the analysis I am going to perform. What I argue needs to be done is to pay attention to how leadership practices interact and intersect with gender practices. In a way, I think there is a need to contribute to answering Fletcher’s call. Not only that, but to a more profound level, the leadership construct itself might be interpreted as a construct embedded in masculinity, given the categorisation of people into subjects and objects, where the subjects stand for agency, instrumentality, rationality, while the objects are passive and provide the silent support for subjects’ individual achievements.

Finally a fifth and major aspect of the problem is the performative character of the leadership construct. The apparent “essence” of leadership is sustained only by the continued performance of leadership. Expectations on leadership thus constrain as well as enable how leadership is performed. Academic research participates in trying to fix the concept and therefore contributes in allowing only a limited range of leader identities, of socially constructed positions brought into being by the label “leader” (Ford, 2005), thus also having a disciplining and homogenising effect. Performativity itself is not problematic, but, to me, performativity of the leadership construct (and researchers’ contributions to that) are problematic because of the aspects just discussed: conflation of leadership with/ embedment of leadership in masculinity; moralisation; the resulting exclusion, segregation and hierarchisation.
Given the discussion above, I claim that there is a need for research that adds to understanding of the phenomenon of leadership at work and going beyond the study of heroic leaders by taking into account the problematic aspects mentioned. Because of the performative character of the construct, studying leadership and producing a vocabulary also means a possibility for influencing what leadership “is”. This is the practical relevance of the theoretical problem. The researcher has a responsibility when it comes to which constructions s/he produces, since such constructions will enable and constrain the phenomenon in practice as well, thus even limiting people’s space for action and talk.

One Challenge to Heroic Leadership:
Shared Leadership

Going beyond heroic leadership calls for studies based on different assumptions than those usually made in leadership research. What if leadership is not an individual matter but is instead a social phenomenon? As anticipated, shared leadership is a model of leadership that includes more than one individual in the doing of leadership. The advent of the so-called “knowledge economy”, and the consequent supposedly novel forms of work and new types of workers, is an often used argument to claim that we need new leadership practices and ideals. In particular, shared leadership, or similar arrangements, is a relatively new model for how leadership should be exercised. Interestingly, it is not just a proposed model. It is also a rather widespread practice already, although not a practice that is often heard of.

Therefore, new leadership models, or increased awareness of already existing but ignored models, are the objective of scholars active in the stream of research that I group under the label “shared leadership”. In other words, researchers want to reform the normative models prescribing how leadership is to be exercised. I use the label “shared leadership” since this is probably the label that has gained most attention (Pearce and Conger, 2003), even though it may be argued that the attention gained is still not adequate compared to the dimension of the phenomenon. As mentioned in chapter 1, in Sweden, for example, the results of a survey among managers published in 2005 showed that approximately 40% of them shared leadership. Even though the majority of them (26% of the total) had no formal arrangement, they shared in practice (Döös et al., 2005). Also, 75% of the respondents were quite or very positive to the idea of sharing leadership.
We may therefore conclude that, in Sweden, shared leadership is not the exception, but rather is an established way of handling things in organisations, and that people seem to appreciate such arrangements. Of course, since shared leadership is a rather new concept, a concept that is not much heard of, either in organisations or in management and leadership courses, the understanding of what one means by saying “sharing leadership” could vary among the people studied. On the other hand, the figures are interesting just because they tell us how the people working as managers interpret the way in which they are doing leadership. And almost half of them made sense of it in terms of sharing leadership. To be sure, I am not arguing that we can draw any general conclusion from this study other than that shared leadership seems to be quite a common and widely spread phenomenon, albeit a silent and mostly still nameless one.

In leadership studies, the concept of shared leadership has been around for a while, “Shared leadership” edited by Pearce and Conger in 2003 being one of the most cited references on the subject. Pearce and Conger define shared leadership as “a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both. This influence process often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence” (Pearce et al., 2008, p. 623). Such a definition opens up for people from the whole organisation to take part in the leadership function. Still, the “peer influence” is the more analysed aspect: when scholars discuss examples of shared leadership, they mostly speak of two or more individuals leading together (cf. O’Toole et al., 2002) – thus substituting one individual with a (small) group of individuals. Sometimes they consider teams or groups and how leadership could be shared among their members (Pearce and Conger, 2003) - Very seldom do they discuss what shared leadership in the whole organisation would mean by describing empirical examples (Vanderslice, 1988). Indeed, ideas of more than one person exercising leadership are older than that; the classic example now being cited is ancient Rome, where under a long period of time the republic was led by two elected consuls (Sally, 2002). Nevertheless, even though the debate and the attention on shared leadership have increased over the years, the concept is still peripheral in the development of leadership theory. Shared leadership is confined to being the exception or, at least, the arrangement that may work under certain conditions. The applicability of shared leadership to the vast majority of situations is often rejected; for example, a sceptical view expressed by Locke in a letter exchange with
Pearce and Conger is that the absence of one person having the final say would lead to chaos and anarchy (Pearce et al., 2008). Commenting on the use of consensus and power by leaders, Locke goes on to state:

Leadsrship is an art, so a good CEO knows when he (or she) needs full or partial consensus and when a firm, final decision has to be made. (p.627)

Clearly, against such conservative positions it is difficult to argue for leadership being distributed rather than individualised. We should probably appreciate the effort made to “include” women in the category “potential good leader”.

Nor are the proponents of shared leadership making too radical claims. For example, they argue that shared decision making is preferable under certain appropriate conditions. More generally, shared leadership is considered as a form or model of leadership in line with contemporary working and business life. The knowledge economy is supposed to require different leaders than those that “old bureaucracies” needed; autonomous knowledge workers, network organisations, increasingly complex tasks, rapidly changing environments are all elements making the lone leader obsolete (Pearce and Conger, 2003).

Shared leadership is thus conceptualised as a model for how to exercise leadership in an organisation. Researchers are rationally reasoning about what the strengths and weaknesses of this arrangement are, how best to implement it, how to measure and research it, which kind of challenges it presents, and so on. The argument is both that in practice leadership is already shared between two or more people, such as a CEO and a COO, and that it makes sense to include more people, at least in certain aspects of leadership, in order to increase efficiency in an organisation. Other labels such as co-leadership (Sally, 2002), joint leadership (Wilhelmson, 2006) or dual leadership (de Voogt, 2005) are also used, clearly signalling that sharing is done by two individuals, while a leadership team instead suggests the participation of more people (Miles and Watkins, 2007).

All these contributions are important for the development of leadership studies. They openly challenge the norm of the single leader and, apparently, provoke strong reactions. They often produce normative models aimed at improving the functioning of an organisation. Attention is therefore paid to arrangements, – how should who share, – rather than on increasing the understanding of the phenomenon itself. These studies therefore provide a precious description of how people narrate their experience of leading
together, how they organise and which effects they see, but they do not add so much to the understanding of the phenomenon of leadership itself. Moreover, there is also a certain undertone of “linearity”, co-leaders are supposed to reach consensus. While diversity and divergence are regarded as a resource and as one of the reasons for shared leadership being more effective, it is the “1+1 is more than 2” that becomes fundamental. There is one direction to take, and that direction is the best just because it is the synthesis of different directions. A rational view of organising is therefore built.

The Swedish Way

As anticipated, many of the theories described have been developed in the USA. The situation is different in the context in which I write this thesis: Sweden. The study of leadership has not captured as much attention as in other contexts, such as the US. The strong influence of new institutional theory, which downplays the role played by single individuals, might be one cause (Strannegård and Jönsson, 2009) – I have already mentioned the influence of national culture and trust in individualism, clearly higher in the US, as another important element. The notion of Swedish Leadership is itself telling: a style based to a great extent on delegation and trust in co-workers (Edström and Jönsson, 1998). On the other hand, Strannegård and Jönsson also recognise that there have been several studies dedicated to the phenomenon of leadership and they identify a common interest: leadership in practice – although “practice” may be interpreted in different ways. Such a tradition is opened by one of the classical studies in the field: Sune Carlsson’s “Executive behaviour”, in which the researcher follows a number of leaders’ quotidian activities (1951). Subsequently, researchers have been interested in studying how certain actions become categorised as leadership, but also in analysing how leadership can be understood as social relations and they have turned their attention to leadership done in everyday work. Criticism of the excessive importance given to individual formal leaders in (mainly American) leadership theory is therefore a point raised by several researchers, even though from different points of view.

In Table 2, I have gathered some examples of recent contributions (during the last 10 years), the ones closer to my own approach to leadership. This list is absolutely not exhaustive of all research done, but it nevertheless gives an idea of the kind of conversation that is going on in the field in Sweden, and in which I aspire to participate, when it comes to less normative
stances – with the exception of Tengblad and colleagues who are, however, included since they represent a particularly original voice in the debate. In the table, I do not include those studies that are closest to mine and that will be commented on in detail later on in the thesis (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010; Nordzell, 2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Some recent Swedish contributions influential for this thesis.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Study of Co-Worker’s Role and Their Participation in Doing Leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study of Shared Leadership (Organisational Arrangements, Premises, Etc)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study of Everyday Leadership from a Process Point of View</td>
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<tr>
<td>Description of Leadership Ideology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critique of the Construction of Leadership with Reference to Morality, Gender and Postmodernism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study of Leadership with a Social Constructionist Approach</td>
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<td>Study of Leadership From an Aesthetic Perspective</td>
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In addition, there are other researchers approaching leadership from other points of view, but still keeping a close relation to the practice of leadership. To mention just two of them, active in the same milieu as myself, Ekman and her work on change and development in organisations through an action research approach (cf. Ekman Philips, 2004), Kaulio and Uppvall and their work on leadership roles via a critical incidents method (Kaulio and Uppvall, 2009) and Palm and her work on the risks connected to too much
commitment (Palm, 2008). Of course, there are also studies taking a more traditional quantitative approach and developing leadership theory along that line, for instance, Arvonen and Ekvall (1999).

Hence, what I want to underline is that in Sweden there are active efforts to contribute to developing leadership research outside the traditional focus on heroic leaders, by applying critical lenses or moving the focus to other actors or to practices. It is in such a context that the research group I belong to work and it is in such a context this thesis has taken form. The strongest criticism of grandiose ideals and talk about leadership reaching an international arena comes from Alvesson and Sveningsson in a series of articles (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c); they questioned whether the leadership construct is meaningful at all. Their criticism is directed towards both heroic and postheroic constructions of leadership. Heroic constructions are evident in discourse on leadership celebrating the management of meaning, visions, values, long term strategies; and this kind of discourse is present in managers’ accounts of their leadership, but less present in the accounts of their practicing leadership. In fact, while speaking of visionary and strategic aspects dominates in the description of good leadership, managers seem then to be faced by much more mundane problems and tasks in the daily work. When asked about how they accomplish the leadership they describe, they fall back on practices of an administrative nature, such as budgets and planning. As Alvesson and Sveningsson observe:

What is considered visionary and strategic leadership might very well be interpreted as esteem-enhancing identity work for those vulnerable to—or attracted by—the modern leadership discourse.

(Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a, p. 983)

Heroic constructs of leadership are therefore interpreted as being material for managers’ identity work, not having anything to say about the essence of leadership as something “real”, or about what managers do in organisations. Alternative postheroic constructions, prescribing leaders dedicated to supporting and helping followers grow, are criticised because they imply an extra-ordinarisation of mundane activities such as listening and small talking (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b; Sveningsson et al., 2009).
The field of leadership studies has developed over the years and is now an important field of research. The construct of leadership is strong and has come to be, mostly, about a heroic lone leader. By analysing what this construct “does”, I constructed a theoretical problem. The result is, in fact, a construct that provides a narrow and reductionist conceptualisation of leadership, most often seen as an individual matter; such a construct is also segregating and hierarchising, as well as highly masculine and performative – prescribing and enabling how leadership is to be performed, hence, the need for empirical studies going beyond the heroic ideal and starting from different assumptions.

One such possibility is offered by the concept of shared leadership, which means studying leadership without being limited from the beginning to assuming that it is a single leader one has to focus on. Instead, leadership is assumed to be a phenomenon that is, to some extent, distributed. Furthermore, this seems to be, at least in Sweden, a rather widespread phenomenon – something that has been brought forward in recent years, but that surely needs more research. In particular, building on the Scandinavian tradition of studying leadership in practice, this thesis will address the question of how leadership is shared in practice. This is, in fact, an aspect that is relatively unexplored, scholars having focused more on organisational roles and arrangements rather than on the doing of shared leadership. Therefore, taking such an approach would also contribute to the field of leadership by developing a vocabulary for naming what is done when sharing leadership.

In summary, studying how leadership is shared in practice opens up for producing an account of leadership that goes beyond an individualistic and heroic construct. This may be an important step in producing accounts that are less reductionist, individualistic and segregating. Studying the practice of leadership may also allow us to study how this is related to gender practices, a well-developed field (cf. Martin, 2003; Poggio, 2006), thus not reproducing a completely gender-blind analysis.

In conclusion, the knowledge interest underlying this project is a deeper understanding of the complex social phenomenon of leadership (cf. Alvesson and Kärreman, 2003). Recognising that there have been some steps in this direction, I am convinced that there is much more to do and this thesis is an effort to contribute to such endeavours.
3 Setting the Study: Some Methodological Considerations and an Introduction to the Empirical Cases

After having discussed the empirical and theoretical problems, in this chapter I introduce the empirical study. I start with some methodological considerations and end by presenting the two organisations studied. As regards the methodological part, I discuss a number of issues that concern the entire study. But methodological considerations are not something to keep separate from the rest of the study, in particular from the effort of producing the empirical material and an analysis of it. Therefore, they will not be confined to this chapter only. During my analysis, which will become more and more focused on certain aspects, I will also raise methodological questions as it becomes necessary.

As regards the empirical material, what I am going to focus on in the rest of the thesis is episodes of collective work in the form of interactions. But such interactions do not take place in a vacuum. They take place in a specific setting that they at the same time also produce. Therefore, in this chapter, I provide a description of the organisations studied, a description based on observations during my stay at the companies and on the interviews I conducted. The idea is to provide the reader with a more general understanding of the context and also to give a glimpse of what constitutes work at these organisations and how it is performed.

Theoretical Influences
Performing this study has been a process. One important influence since the beginning of this process has been the research environment in which I am active, which is characterised by a social constructionist approach
(Berger and Luckmann, 1966), combined with feminist perspectives (for an overview, see, for example, Calás and Smircich, 2006) and an interest in critical management studies (cf. Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). While I have certainly come into the process with my own preferences, convictions and interests, I was quite a “tabula rasa” when it came to theoretical pre-understandings, since my education is not related to leadership, organisation theory or social science at large. Still, I was directly attracted to social constructionism, which may therefore be absolutely considered the basis for my understanding of reality and for the other theoretical concepts I use to make sense of it. Social constructionist studies of leadership are relatively rare on an international arena, but there is an increasing interest in such approaches within the scientific community (Tourish and Barge, 2010; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). As regards what such an approach adds to leadership research, one could say, in broad terms, that

A social constructionist approach to leadership focuses on the communicative practice of individuals and the construction of social arrangements.

(Tourish and Barge, 2010, p. 327)

Two characteristics are common to most studies undertaken with this approach: they avoid a leader-centric approach and they focus attention on leadership in the form of the processes and outcomes of interactions (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010).

I am also influenced by postmodern thinking in the form of scepticism towards grand theories and a tendency towards “modest narratives” and “small stories”, of reflection over the constitutive character of knowledge activities in respect to the phenomenon studied, of the conception of theorising as a political process rather than a neutral representation, and of language as performative rather than representative (Calas and Smircich, 1999). In particular, in this thesis a lot of attention will be paid to talk and what is achieved in talk (Shotter, 1993), thus following what has been called the linguistic turn in social science and organisational sciences, in particular (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004). Although talk is therefore action in itself, since people are viewed as using primarily language to accomplish things rather to represent a separated reality, I will speak of “talk and action” in the rest of the thesis. This is in order to acknowledge that not all action is talk, but it is also to underline the fact that the possibility for action (other than talk) can be constructed in talk.
Method

In the beginning of this thesis, I have claimed that I am going to study how leadership is shared in practice. The idea of paying attention to the actual practices and how work is performed has gained increased attention in recent years, not only in the field of leadership studies, but also in organisation theory in general. In fact, it is claimed that there is a need to pay more attention to practices performed in organisations by going back to studying work in organisations rather than only focusing on more abstract concepts and theories (Barley and Kunda, 2001). This means researching leadership as a “lived” experience rather than a “reported” experience in interviews (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Alvesson, 1996). This need is also connected to the need to pay attention to the context in which a phenomenon takes place and to potential contradictions and ambiguities. These ambitions require a specific approach, and observations become a central element in order to come close to the practice (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2003). I therefore opted for an ethnography-inspired approach in this study.

Ethnography may be defined as a “written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 1) or as a method for studying people in their “natural” context, for exploring the nature of a social phenomenon over time/space (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). Thus, even though my aim is not exclusively to represent a culture, I borrow such an approach in order to study mundane activities in organisations as they go on daily, in order to approach the lived experiences of individuals and working dynamics (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992; Alvesson, 1996) – which, of course, are part of a culture. As a consequence, while this thesis does not provide a complete “thick description” of the culture at these organisations, what may be called the interpretative perspective in ethnography (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994), it both reproduces a number of instances of work and provides a one-day immersion in daily activities. The focus on instances of work draws, therefore, more from the ethnomethodologically informed perspective in ethnography (ibid.), focusing on everyday accomplishments that sustain social life, although the prolonged observations of workdays at the organisations add an interpretative dimension (Vine et al., 2008), hence my use of the label “ethnography-inspired”, rather than “ethnography”. Such a label is meant to convey a similar idea to Alvesson’s proposal for a situational approach in leadership studies, in which particular situations are analysed in depth with the help of a more contextual understanding (Alvesson, 1996). A similar approach
goes under the name discursive pragmatism, which signals an interest in
discursive productions, such as conversations, but allows for interpretations
beyond the specific level of language in use, although keeping a cautious
stance as regards the researcher's claims of understanding the meaning
people give to their actions and talks (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). This
is also an accepted approach when studying organisations, although rarely
used when studying leadership, given the rather scarce interest in studying
practices in this field (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010).

Hence, I was able to talk to the people I studied, to follow them in their
everyday activities, to observe them as they talked – and to document all
of it. The strength of ethnography is, in fact, the attention to details and
to the mundane (Kunda, 1992). This way, the thesis reproduces a number
of episodes of work. Given the focus of my research, formal and informal
meetings became what I observed the most, meetings being one of the sites
in which leadership may be done, practised. But, while I started by analys-
ing meetings, I also had the interviews to analyse and my own notes about
my interpretations of what was going on more generally at these compa-
nies. A strict focus on interactions and what is happening in them was thus
complemented by a broader understanding of the socio-cultural context
in which the interaction was taking place (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010;
Alvesson, 1996). However, the “native point of view” will not be privileged
in this thesis – rather it is mostly a view “from the outside” that is presented.
This is not to say that the native point of view is not important. On the
contrary, it is also by gaining an understanding of how people reason about
things that it becomes possible to interpret what is going on. What I mean
is that the analysis will not put forward such a point of view. Rather, it is my
interpretations of what is going on that will be described. Once again, the
label “ethnography-inspired” suits better.

Consequently, interviews are treated as accounts to be interpreted to
make sense of what interactions are about, since they provide situated
legitimate accounts of what is going on, rather than objective informa-
tion about it (cf. Alvesson, 1996). But it is not only this. As Czarniawska
(2004) points out, “an interview is an interaction that becomes recorded,
or inscribed, and this is what it stands for”, which means that an interview
is “not a window on social reality but it is part, a sample of that reality” (p.
49). Thus it offers the possibility of analysing people's interpretation of the
world, but it is also an interaction itself, reconstructing the world, probably
through the same constructs and narrative devices otherwise used (ibid.).
The last observation means that interviews may also be treated as another
interaction at the workplace, potentially producing leadership as well. I will show how in my analysis.

The Sites of the Study

As previously mentioned, two companies have been studied. One is a large Swedish, relatively old, industrial company within the process-industry present on different sites in Sweden; a company that I will call STRONGMAT here. This is the company where I had experience as an employee, but for the purpose of this research I studied two departments in which I had not worked (even though I had met some of the people in my job). Like most traditional industrial companies, this is also gender-segregated, both vertically and horizontally: men occupy the leading positions, and men and women work in separated areas. My understanding of this company was that of a “native” because of my previous experience. On the other hand, I had no such “native point of view” for the two departments studied. The second company is a small one, with approximately 20 people, but with the ambition to grow. It is an engineering company within the clean tech sector, therefore named here CLEANTECH, and it had gained some attention in the media thanks to initiatives aimed at investing in the employees and promoting more shared forms of leadership. When I started my study, they were in the process of introducing a new “management team”, which would gradually take over responsibility from the managing director, the founder’s daughter, who was very busy in managing external relations. The management team was composed of three women and two men (three group managers and two representing supporting functions).

What guided the choice of what to study was the potential for “access” in order to generate interesting empirical material rather than any other particular consideration. It was also important to deal with rather “normal” organisations in order to study the phenomenon in an ordinary context, compared, for example, with previous studies of leadership with an alternative perspective made in orchestras or during movie projects (cf. Koivunen and Wennes, 2009; Soila-Wadman and Köping, 2009). At STRONGMAT I was welcomed because of my previous position and my contacts; at CLEANTECH I was welcomed because of their interest in developing shared leadership and in participating in different networks. Since it was crucial for my purpose to be able to observe different kind of meetings, access was the primal criterion for selecting the companies and during the study I actu-
ally gained access to a great number of interactions. A bonus was that the two companies were quite different in a number of aspects (at first sight): small-large, innovative-traditional, “gender-equal”- male-dominated. While such differences generated certain expectations, after observations and interviews I had to reconsider some of them. For example, I could have imagined the small company being more flexible in managing work and being satisfied with that. But, while the large company had an articulated formal structure, informal relations were very important in coping with new issues and emerging problems. On the other hand, the little company was in a phase where the management group tried to bureaucratise it. Even though it could have been interesting to focus on the different dynamics and possible paradoxes, in my analysis I have concentrated more on similar patterns in order to find examples of practices in which leadership is accomplished.

**Me and the People I Studied**

As the producer of the analysis done in this thesis and the author of this text, I think it is important to introduce myself. I am a white European woman graduated from an Italian university with a degree in Management Engineering. The study was performed in Sweden where I have been living for almost ten years now. Three of them were spent working at one of the companies studied.

As regards my position as a researcher in relation to the people I studied and the power performed in such relations, I would say that there could be different aspects to consider. Simplifying a little, as a young woman in the context of this Western society I was put in a subordinated position when meeting older men with engineering or technical backgrounds (as they mostly were) in technical companies, even though my degree in engineering partly compensated for this. As a researcher, I am in a superior position since I am the one who is writing the story at the end. Moreover, my education was on a higher level than that of most of the people I met. On the other hand, as non-Swedish I was again in a subordinated position having to deal with almost only Swedish people. Also, different aspects played a part at different times. Generally, I would say that being a young non-Swedish woman has helped in establishing good relations and gaining acceptance among these people, who have been open to talking to me. My educational and professional background has also offered some common ground on which to build meaning in relation to the “technical people”. As
regards my position as a researcher, I take full responsibility for the text I am writing and acknowledge that these interpretations might not necessarily be shared by those whom I studied. I will also protect their integrity by anonymising the companies and the employees.

In the Field

Having excellent access to the companies, I was able to participate in several meetings and more informal conversations during some weeks over a period of almost a year. Some days I shadowed the manager, since those who had allowed me into the company thought it was a good idea to have me follow them; other days I was taken to various meetings by those co-workers who had meetings (they just passed by and took me with them). In the meantime, I listened to informal chat and went around to talk to people. Access to informal chat was still limited: when they discussed something of a more sensitive nature they would make sure I was not around. Therefore, the empirical material I have produced is clearly limited. Even though, admittedly, I was present during some meetings that became quite emotional – where failure was discussed, for example – or quite ambiguous – where people discussed the manager’s position on a certain issue with other managers, for example.

Nevertheless, there was certainly more going on than what I observed. Still, for the purpose of my research I think this should not be a major problem. First, I have observed a large variety of interactions – which is not so common in leadership research – and I think I am able to say interesting things about them. Second, as my analysis proceeds, I am going to discuss more the “how they do” rather than the exact content of what they say. Similar “hows” may be found in more informal settings as well. Third, I am not going to search for any form of “outcome” and try to find out how it was done – in this case a more complete picture of the events and what led to what would be essential – but only to interpret the local interaction.

Hence, meetings are the main form of interaction I have analysed. By meetings I do not mean strictly formal meetings with a chairperson. Most of them were quite informal in tone and scheduled as they were needed. As Boden puts it, “meetings are where organizations come together” (Boden, 1994, p. 81); in meetings there is interaction that “involves and commits us to specified times and spaces that we dedicate to each other and to the organizational relationships that are critical to our extended coordination of
activities and agendas.” (p. 80). Organising is done in meetings. Even from a formal point of view, the higher up one comes in the hierarchy, the longer one is supposed to spend in meetings.

Almost all the meetings (with few exceptions due to logistics) and many other interactions were tape-recorded. I also took notes and pictures in order to catch those aspects not conveyed by the dialogue, such as how people occupied the room and what they did besides talking, for example, when they co-edited documents. Even during the day, I took notes on what was going on when I was not following any specific interaction. Everyone knew about it and was informed about how I intended to use the material.

In addition, I had longer interviews with 27 people, both managers and co-workers, where I asked them about their work and about how they reasoned on leadership. Most of the interviews took place after I had been at the organisation for some time and it was therefore easier to talk with the interviewees, since we had got to know each other and since I was already developing an understanding of the organisation. In this study, accounts provided by managers have the same dignity as accounts provided by co-workers. I tried to interview as many as possible at the departments of the large company and at the small company. Of course, I respected the fact that not everyone had time for that. None of those I asked refused because they felt uncomfortable or did not value my project. Generally, the impression was that people felt free to ventilate their ideas and opinions with me and I was not seen as someone sent from the managers to check up on the employees. All interviews were tape-recorded.

The Analysis Process

Empirical observations and preliminary analyses have guided my interest in searching for theories, and theories have impregnated my understanding of the empirical observations, in an iterative way. Therefore, I would define the approach as abductive (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). Even if the term has suffered certain inflation, I nevertheless find it the best way of describing how my theoretical framework has grown and become more defined, taken certain directions, in relation to the empirical material and my repeated reading of it, as well as in relation to the contributions of other scholars that I have encountered (in the form of written material or oral presentations) and in dialogue with my research group composed of Monica Lindgren and Johann Packendorff (Crevani et al., 2007b, 2010).
I started this process by analysing interactions and interviews at CLEAN-TECH and at one department of STRONGMAT, in order to compare the two settings and see if I found similar ways of doing leadership. By analysing interactions I mean analysing what is said in interactions, without making assumptions on other aspects of the relations existing between the people interacting. Of course, talk is just one aspect of interactions. On the other hand, it is what is possible to empirically observe for a researcher and it is an important, if not the most important, element in constructing social reality (cf. Alvesson and Karreman, 2000) – organisational researchers have seldom access to events not embedded in talk. This implies by no means that talk is self-evident; the researcher interprets talk and needs to be transparent about this.

As you can read in this thesis, I identified constructions performed in interactions done in certain ways in both settings. As I deepened my analysis and re-read the material, I came to the point where the analysis of more interactions no longer contributed to newer understanding, not even when interactions from the other department at STRONGMAT were analysed. Therefore, the second department at STRONGMAT is part of the empirical material of this study, but I will not give empirical illustrations from this third setting, making it hopefully easier for the reader to follow the interactions reproduced in the text and to keep track of the people involved and the context in which their conversation takes place.

Therefore, starting with a project that I interpreted as directed to the study of how people do leadership together, in a “shared leadership” fashion, this journey ended with what I consider a completely different conceptualisation of leadership, more “radically” social constructionist. Starting with a broad social constructionist approach, I then narrowed down the analysis as my reading of the empirical material proceeded, thus also specifying certain concepts in more theoretically specific terms. This is a process that is transparent in this thesis and that will be reproduced in the coming chapters. I will, for example, read the same dialogue two times showing what analysis is possible when asking slightly different questions. Given this process of narrowing and specifying the focus of the study, it will become necessary to re-discuss methodological considerations as the analysis proceeds. In particular, in chapter 7 I will rather extensively discuss the perspective on leadership that results from this process, the analysis of the empirical material I will perform and the writing of this text.
Entering the Setting

Having described how I proceeded in this study, the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to the reproduction of its context: the two organisations. Reproducing a context is no easy task. My aim is not to reproduce the context in terms of faithfully describing some kind of objective reality in which the interactions I will analyse have come to life. Rather, I want to “re-produce” the context by editing the empirical material consisting of my notes and my recordings in order to provide the reader with an impression of the context as I interpreted it. Given my aim, I decided to include a variety of descriptions. Therefore, I start with an info box giving a short account of each company and some basic information on the work done, as well as introducing the people that work for the company/department studied, those that you will meet again in the coming chapters. Finally, I portray one typical day for me at each site. I could have chosen to narrate about a specific day, but, in order to give an impression rather than a description, I am going to go through an “ideal day” at work, a fictive day containing episodes happened on different days. In order to produce an impression, I also attach some pictures I took—even if the people portrayed were aware of me taking the pictures, I have hole-punched their faces in order to protect their integrity.
CleanTech

CleanTech is a Swedish engineering company within the so-called clean tech sector, i.e. products and services promising customers not only “traditional” efficiency and profitability gains, but also environmental benefits. In this case, the company is focused on small plants or components to be included in larger industrial plants or linked to industrial machines. They design the plant and assemble it, but they have no production themselves; they buy components from suppliers. As for other companies in the sector, the challenge is to convince customers that such investments are not only a necessary cost; rather, they should actually result in an economic gain. CleanTech is based in a small town in the southern part of Sweden. Most of the people employed come from the surrounding towns and villages. The atmosphere at the company is relaxed and informal. All the employees, the Managing Director included, sit in a large open-space office.

CleanTech is quite small; there are 23 employees, four of whom are the owners of the company. Karin, one of the owners and the retired founder’s daughter, is the Managing Director. The other owners – Jesper (sales person), Alec (sales person) and Paul (project manager) – have no managerial positions; they speak of themselves as “ordinary co-workers”. At the beginning of the new millennium, the organization faced a choice: to grow or not to grow. It was quite a turbulent period and, according to the MD, the decision to grow made some people leave the company. The owners decided to invest heavily in a teambuilding programme consisting of one and a half days per month “in the woods” during a period of approximately one year together with a coach, Monica, and an “adventurer”. The idea was to form the organisation by building a common culture and making people take more initiatives and feel responsible for the company’s operations. Monica still works as a consultant for the company and comes to visit them when her coaching help is needed. From an organisational point of view, what was introduced was process-thinking, instead of departmental thinking. Other ideals brought to the fore were delegating responsibility to the employees and creating a good, open work-environment.

The MD is also very active at networking, since this is something that she considers vital for gaining influence, especially for a small company. Several newspapers and journals have published stories about CleanTech, and Karin is now member of a committee working for the government (providing advice in a specific question). Telling others about “the new way of working” has become one of the ways of participating in different networks and gaining access to interesting arenas for CleanTech.

The new way of working involves a new Management Group, which is a group of five people who are responsible for leading CleanTech: Ann, Christine, Marcus,
Mary and George. In fact, the vision is that this group will take over the role of the MD, who, until then, had been the only formal manager in the company. Since Karin often travels due to her involvement in the many networks she is part of, the group is meant to take all operative decisions and to take more and more responsibility for long-term decisions too. The group is often proudly mentioned as an example of what people can achieve if they are just given the chance to do things. The fact that three of the members, the three women, are currently (during the period of the study) on part-time maternity-leave is also provided as an example of the flexibility and open-mindedness characterising the company.

The Management Group started working during 2006 by talking about which role they should take and how. During some months they met and discussed things, but they did not communicate what they were doing to the rest of the organisation. The official communication took place at the beginning of 2007. Three of the five members of the Management Group then became officially managers for their departments: Marcus for engineering, Ann for Sales and Mary for Service, Maintenance and Spare Parts. For a number of reasons – and one sequence I will analyse in this thesis comes from a meeting discussing them – the group did not succeed as they had hoped. After a few months, Alec became vice-MD taking over the leadership of the company, and Ann and Christine formed some kind of “advising group” that would work in close connection to him. The Management Group still existed, but less responsibility was given to them.

PEOPLE AT CLEANTECH

The Managing Director: Karin (also owner)

The Management Group: Ann (sales manager), Marcus (engineering manager), Mary (service, maintenance and spare parts manager), Christine (accounting) and George (IT).

Sales department: Jesper (also owner), Alec (also owner), Iris (export manager), Michael (part-time marketing), Patrick, Peter, Carl, Ellen (administration).

Engineering department (project managers): Paul (also owner), Joe, Gary, Chris, Rose (administration).

Service, maintenance and spare parts department: Christer, Leonard, David and two guys that are almost never at the office.

External coach: Monica.
One of the organisational diagrams produced by the Management Group.
CleanTech is located on the outskirts of a small village in southern Sweden. I leave my hotel at 7:15 and drive to the company. It is winter and snow covers the ground. Traffic is not a problem here. Fifteen minutes later I am there. I park near some other cars, in the space between the larger building – workshop on the ground floor and open-space office on the first floor – and the smaller building – where the large conference room and the coffee room are to be found.
Some people have already arrived; some will drop in during the next half-hour. Paul and Jesper are immersed in a discussion on how to solve a problem for an important customer. They stand in the conference room at the other side of the large open-space office: they are drawing on the whiteboard. When they are done, they agree on how to answer another customer that has complained about some defects in the machine delivered. They will also have to talk to the maintenance guys to get an idea of what kind of spare parts could be sent to the customer. In the meanwhile, Ann and Karin have arrived.

Laid back in the armchairs at the entrance, they are speaking with each other. They keep their voices low and I do not hear what the subject of this conversation is. In fact, the hum of the office has muted the conversations. Christine is asking Marcus about some invoices, Kirk is discussing some project with Joe, and Ellen is joking with Michael about not cheating in the competition started after Christmas, when everyone received a step-counter as a present.
Today is Monday. Like every Monday, at 8.30 the “weekly meeting” starts. We are in the other building. Cheese, bread, marmalade and coffee had been prepared on the table in the coffee room and everybody has grabbed something to take to the conference room where we are now gathered around a long table. Carl is connected on the phone from Stockholm. Everyone is looking at the screen on the wall, which shows a table with all the on-going projects.

As the meeting proceeds, people from the different departments report on what is going on and what is coming. It is no “one man’’ show. Questions abound and people supplement each other’s answers. The projector is turned off. The last points to be discussed are “continuous improvements” – meaning initiatives taken inside the organisation to improve how they work – and “business intelligence” – meaning that everyone having something to report on potentially interesting developments outside the company is invited to speak.
Today, Karin monopolises attention during this last point and narrates at length the different networking activities she has been involved in.

After about an hour and a half, the meeting is over. Most of the participants go back to the other building in groups of two or three. Some stay a little longer to exchange some more words about a project that was discussed.

Finally, only the Management Group is left around the table. It is time for their own meeting now. This meeting should be held on a weekly base, but, since three of them are on part-time maternity leave, such a tight schedule is still only an ambition. Actually, in the break, Christine’s husband has dropped by and left the baby with her since he could not take care of him the rest of the day, so she is sitting with the baby in her arms now.

Today they discuss a number of questions. What takes up most of the almost two-hour-long meeting is the issue of overtime. Apparently, there was some kind of emergency last week about how to pay the maintenance guys when they work overtime during weekends. The discussion widens to include the idea of overtime itself: how they should treat overtime, how they should monitor people’s working time. They end up by considering a very formalised procedure in which the Management Group should approve each time someone is going to work overtime. This is quite a different solution than the mostly informal way of handling such issues up to now. One aspect also discussed is whether Karin should be involved or not and if this is a good opportunity to show that they can work independently and achieve results.

After deciding to formulate a proposal to discuss next week, they go on to talk about a number of things: the parking zone, competence development for the employees and for themselves, the development in a quality assurance project, a student interested in writing her master’s thesis here, and the organisational diagram that Ann has sketched. Here again the discussion widens to deeper questions of whether they should have departments or not,
how to express that they work in processes, and whether they should use the label “manager” or not, among other things. At the end, they seem to conclude that the time is ripe for actually speaking of managers and departments. They will continue to work on how to convey the process aspect.

Lunch time. Some stay at the office and eat in the coffee room. I follow some others at a local restaurant. We speak about a ski trip they are planning. Some of them turn 50 this year and this trip is sort of a present—they have dreamed of for years. They also speak about one of the men’s son. The village is not that big, so they all know each others’ families quite well. They drive me back to the office. One of the sales persons leaves; he has to meet a customer. Apparently, he has forgotten about the afternoon sales meeting that Ann had organised in the morning, taking the chance now that all the sales persons were here (except for Carl in Stockholm).

When I enter the office again, the scene is similar to this morning. Some work at their desks, some talk to each other in front of a PC screen, some discuss over the low bookcases and file cabinets that separate their desks. Ann and Iris, for instance, are working on an official letter to send to the main supplier. Later, when they have finished, Ann will go to Jesper and check the text with him too.
I walk to the little conference room where I find Jesper and Christer sitting. They are reading some papers together and discussing them. Marcus comes in after a few minutes. Some few more minutes and Gary and Ellen join us too. This is a “hand-over” meeting: Jesper has sold a plant and Marcus will be the project manager assigned to it. The first point to be brought up is the financial part, so that Ellen is able to leave as soon as they have gone through that. Then we dig into the technical details. Jesper draws a sketch and everyone looks at it. Christer also takes a few notes. Marcus is going to design the plant, Christer to assemble it at the customer’s site and Gary is going to work with the electrical details that are quite complicated in this case. Jesper has to answer numerous questions from the interested audience. The meeting is still quite short, “to the point”, and in less than half an hour it is over. They go back to their desks.

Telephones ring, people talk, someone walks to someone else’s desk. Work goes on.

At 14:30, it is time for the afternoon coffee break. Almost everyone goes back to the coffee room in the other building. The break consists of almost half an hour of chatting about both business and personal matters. It seems that men tend to sit with men and women with women.
At 3 pm Ann goes to the conference room and in a few minutes most of the sales persons and Ellen are gathered. Ann notices that Alec is missing; she is not happy about this, but not really surprised either. We wait some minutes for Jesper, on the phone to Germany. When he finally comes in, Ann circulates a paper with a list of things that she wants to discuss today. It is a long list: templates for business proposals, new folders for brochures and other papers to be handed to customers, a translation of the homepage, Fact AB (a company doing market research), a contract with the main supplier for distribution on the Norwegian market, the Chinese market. After that, it is time for each person around the table to say what they are working with. Ann finally brings up the work they are doing with different market plans. Ellen adds that she wonders about seminars for customers (marketing occasions), if it is time to start organising some. Christer and Ann discuss this briefly. Ann summarises what has to be done by the next meeting.

Back in the open-space office, I notice that some people have already left. It is now almost 5 pm. The atmosphere is more relaxed, voices kept low, one hears the noise of fingers tapping on keyboards. I gather my things and leave.
StrongMat

StrongMat is a large industrial company in the process industry; its products are sold on a global market and are known for their high quality. This organisation has a long history and employs around 10 000 people in Sweden. It might sound like a large organisation, but compared to international competitors, we are dealing with quite a small company. As regards its performance, the company has been rather successful and shown good profitability for a number of years. StrongMat is also present in different locations in Sweden. The study I conducted was at one location in a middle-sized town in the countryside, where StrongMat is one of the main employers. Most of the people working for the company come from this town or the neighbouring villages, but there are also people from other parts of Sweden and even from other part of the world (I was one of them). The company is relatively old and, although people consider it a modern organisation employing competent personnel, it is also possible to feel the presence of a more traditional spirit, either as something still present in some parts of the organisation or as something to distance oneself from when talking about how the organisation is today.

The company had recently gone through a restructuring – one of several – which meant that two companies were merged into one, becoming two divisions of a larger company. One of the aims of such a change was to exploit possible synergies in those areas common to both divisions. This ambition had led to the launch of several projects directed towards assessing potential for saving money in a number of areas. Thus, the highest level of management is now sitting at the head office, at another site than the one where the division I studied is located. Looking at the division organisational diagram, one may observe that most of the people on the management levels have been recruited internally and have often a technical background. The number of men is clearly larger than the number of women, and men and women are found in different areas of the company. Women dominate, for example, in administrative tasks, above all those not closely related to production. For instance, production planning, which is a purely administrative task performed in the same IT system used by other administrative functions as well, is male-dominated.

The division I studied was structured along the classical functional areas: Production and Sales. A third unit consisted of IT, purchasing and external logistics. Support units in the form of Personnel and Finance completed the organisation. Such traditional structure had not been modified over the years, but which groups belonged to the different divisions has been object of discussions and changes. The departments I observed had been restructured a couple of times during the last few years and they were still in the process of negotiating formal areas of responsibility. While I studied two departments, for the purpose of this thesis, in the coming chapters I focus only on one of them, the Distribution
and Transports department, within the IT and external logistics unit. Neverthe-
less, as regards my more general understanding of the organisation, how work
is carried out and which norms may be found, such knowledge is based on the
observations and interviews in both departments.

Distribution and Transports department deals with finding proper solutions
for transports, warehouses and contractors (for operations not possible to do
in-house or where the capacity in-house is not enough). Their responsibility
stretches over a number of areas: finding operators, negotiating and writing con-
tracts, following up that demands on quality and time are met, testing new facili-
ties, solving crises. About 12 people work for the department, which was larger
in the past. Recent reorganisations have moved responsibility for certain areas to
other units and therefore people have moved out. Anyway, not all the tasks have
been handed over yet. The manager is also rather new and comes from another
department within the division and, before that, from a company in another sec-
tor, which means that he does not have long experience of working with these
tasks.

The department on which I do not focus is the department for Production plan-
ning, in the Production unit.

PEOPLE AT STRONGMAT – DISTRIBUTION AND TRANSPORTS

The unit manager: Alexander

The department manager: Jacob

Working with warehouses: Hans, Rebecca

Working with contractors: Ingrid, Andrea

New employee: Jack

Working with transports, often together with Hans, but reporting directly to Al-
exander: David

Other people work with transports by truck and with quality assurance.

People from other departments participating in the interactions I analyse,
belonging to the Sales and Finance units:

Delivery assurance manager: Maria

Responsible for the invoicing group: Frank
Organisational diagram showing the Distribution and transports department and other departments mentioned in the thesis.
One day at StrongMat

I arrive at one of the gates around 7.45 am. In December it is still pitch dark here. I go through the gate, showing my card to the guard, and then walk for about 10 minutes to reach the Distribution and Transports office. It is located in the middle of the mill and I pass some large buildings containing production lines and warehouses on my way. At some point, I even have to stop in order to wait for a train that is rolling out from one of the loading facilities. When I arrive at the office, I go around for approximately half an hour and talk to people in their rooms.

When I come down to Ingrid, she is on her way out to join a meeting at the Production Planning department, “the central meeting”. I accompany her.
We have to walk for just five minutes through a large hall where trucks are being loaded in order to get to the building where all the people working with production planning have their office. When we enter the conference room on the second floor, some men are already seated around the large table. Kyle, the manager for the department, is working on his PC in order to get the Excel sheets he has prepared projected on the screen that dominates the short side of the room. Jared, who has worked with planning all his life, is looking through some papers and asking questions to Kyle. One after the other, the remaining participants make their entry. Eventually there are 15 of us, too many for the table, so we end up sitting on a second row of chairs behind the ones around the table.

This meeting is held once a week and there is one person representing each production line, some people from planning, some from the Sales unit—Maria from Delivery Assurance and a man from sales planning—and Ingrid and David from Distribution and Transports. In this meeting they discuss how to tune the lines and how to handle warehouses and transports in the coming week, by sharing information on production problems, delivery problems, delivery priorities, sales status, transport status, and so on. People present their figures and statistics by referring to the Excel sheets now projected on the large screen.
In production facilities based on process production, what happens in one part of the “chain” affects all the other parts. Different options are described, evaluated and decided upon. After one-and-a-half hours, the meeting is concluded. Groups of three-four persons go on discussing problems or events that will affect their areas and the common interface, for example a problem with lack of wagons in the railway system, which means that material has to be redirected in the production flow and storage place has to be urgently found.

Ingrid exchanges a few words about an external contractor with a couple of people and then we are ready to walk to our building. Back at the office, Ingrid is going to meet Jack, a new co-worker, to discuss how to proceed in order to improve the way an external contractor is handled. Jack has some concrete suggestions since he had already started working on this task before he officially entered the department. Ingrid seems to be satisfied and she adds some other ideas based on her experience with other contractors.

In the meantime, Jacob, David and Hans sit in Jacob’s office and do some brainstorming, as they claim themselves. They have to produce a document that shows the results, in terms of potential for saving money, of a project about synergies launched by the upper management of the company. They are trying to gather enough potential by finding areas in which they have done some work that may be framed as “synergy”. Jacob takes notes and will later write them down in a document. They are in a hurry with this document since they have been informed that the project is to be closed before Christmas. These are the directives from the headquarters. Jacob is leaving this afternoon, and therefore he will not be able to meet Alexander tomorrow in order to present the document and check with him that it is in line with what they are expected to deliver. Hans and David will do that.
Time for lunch now. I heat my food in the microwave following the example of some of the co-workers here. Others go to the canteen. We sit around the table in the coffee room. Compared with the rest of the building, it is quite cosy. The manager who worked here before Jacob had consulted some of the women at the department and together they had ordered furniture from IKEA in order to make the environment more pleasant. New sofas, new curtains, new lamps. Now it is almost Christmas and they have put up a Christmas tree as well. After having eaten lunch relatively silently and quickly, Ingrid and Rebecca take me with them for a short walk to the city centre.

They both have to do some quick shopping and we hurry through three or four shops before we have to get back. Both of them are going to participate in the department “project meeting” that starts at 1.30 pm. We have just time to grab a cup of coffee before Jacob calls from the conference room.

Jacob starts by reading notes from the previous meeting. The others listen. The others are Hans, David, Ingrid, Rebecca and Andrea. They are co-workers involved in operative tasks but also leading some kind of development project. Other co-workers occupied only with strictly operative tasks are not included in this kind of meeting. Jacob has also updated an Excel table with all the projects going on: the procedure is that, during this meeting, they are going to talk about each of these projects, how things are going and if there are making progress or having problems. If decisions have to be made, this is also an occasion to discuss them.

Finally, new projects might be added and someone responsible for each of them is chosen as the meeting unfolds and problems/opportunities are discussed; sometimes, it is the person that is talking that reports on new tasks s/he has been involved in. “Project” is the label they use in order to identify the specific tasks, but, as they affirm, it is really about “normal” work. For each project they go through, the person responsible gives a brief picture of the situation. Often the others have questions and/or suggestions. Sometimes a longer discussion develops, for example when Jacob starts speaking about the US warehouse: it has been decided that it will be transferred under the Swedish company’s ownership before Christmas. They are seldom in disagreement – most of the time it seems they agree on what has to be done; they contribute by providing different viewpoints on the matter under discussion.

At about 3 pm the meeting is concluded. Everyone goes
back to the coffee room. Only Ingrid and Hans stay, she had asked him about a particular kind of transport and she is interested in some details about it.

In the coffee room the rest of the department has gathered, most of them relaxing in the sofas, sharing the narrow space there. They are chatting and laughing. David is telling some long story about one guy who used to work here many years ago. Rebecca and Ingrid are going to leave in a few days and reach Jacob in The Netherlands, where a big meeting with a contractor is scheduled. They will be joined by a woman from Delivery Assurance as well. The conversation turns to this and how much fun this will be: the other woman is a real character. After a few more laughs, everyone goes back to her/his room.

I follow Jacob to his office, where he sits at his desk and starts typing the document on synergies discussed in the morning. After a while, Rebecca knocks on the open door and asks him if he has time to talk. He welcomes her in and she tells him about her concern for the situation with the US warehouse and what such a decision might mean for them. They discuss the question for about 20 minutes, coming to the conclusion that this might really mean a lot of worries for them. After that, Jacob goes back to typing.

I take a tour around the office. David is shouting over the phone. The situation with the lack of wagons has apparently become even worse. On the ground floor, Ingrid is in Andrea’s room and they are speaking about how to handle some contractor in Spain. Hans has dropped in on Carina, a woman working with buying transports, no longer employed by the department after the latest re-organisation. Hans goes and chats with her regularly; he thinks this gives him a picture of how the market is doing, something he values for his own work. This is how he explains to me what he is doing here.

I go back to Jacob’s office. Ingrid comes in after a few minutes and they agree on what the department’s position should be at the meeting with representatives from the Sales unit tomorrow. Ingrid will attend it. Jacob goes back to his typing. At 5 pm, most of the people start to gather their things to go home. Jacob and some others stay longer. At 6 pm the last light is turned off.
Summarising

This chapter has been dedicated to preparing the reader for the coming chapters. General methodological issues are discussed. Starting with the broad theoretical framework, in terms of social constructionism informed by critical theory, feminist studies and a postmodern attitude, I then discuss the approach to the study based on a call for studying work as it happens, and thus requiring an ethnography-inspired method. Related to the method to be used was the choice of two organisations to study, which was based mainly on the possibility of gaining good access to daily work.

The two organisations were very different from each other at first sight. As I explain, I chose to focus on similarities rather than highlighting differences. Moreover, having good access to the companies, I was able to participate in, and tape-record, a variety of meetings and to interview people. Of course, not all interactions were accessible to me. The most sensitive ones were out of reach. But, as I discuss, one could assume that the “how constructions take place” happens in similar ways in most interactions. And it is the “how” I will mainly focus on. Finally, a first discussion of the analysis process is provided, a process that can be described as abductive.

After the description of how the study has been carried out, I introduce the reader to the two organisations by providing a short description in a “card”, but also by reporting a typical day at the company, thus hopefully reproducing a more lively impression of the contexts of this study.

Having thus set the study, in the next chapter I turn to a first attempt at answering the research question presented in chapter 1: how is leadership shared in practice? In order to do that, I analyse the development that took place at CleanTech during the period of this study, when they actually tried to start working with shared leadership in a formal way.
In search of shared leadership

In order to add to our understanding of leadership as a social phenomenon, I have formulated the research question “how is leadership shared in practice?”. In this chapter, I make my first attempt to answer such a question by describing and analysing the developments that took place at CleanTech when it was decided to introduce shared leadership as a formal arrangement for how leadership should be exercised. My reading of the empirical material is informed by the literature on shared leadership. Having identified contradictions and discrepancies between the tale of shared leadership and my reading of what happened at the organisation, I end this chapter by discussing what that means for our understanding of leadership. Such considerations led me to re-formulate the research question, going to the core of what leadership is about.

One-Day Seminar on Shared Leadership in South Sweden


One of my supervisors and I are invited as speakers to a seminar on shared leadership held in a village in the south of Sweden. The seminar is part of the activities undertaken by a network of small companies and public sector organisations in order to learn from each other how to work with HR in innovative ways that lead to increased profitability. Participants in the seminar were supposed to be Managing Directors or HR managers, but in some cases another person had come instead. Ann was representing CleanTech.

My colleague and I had been asked to give a presentation about what has been written on shared leadership, while two women from Stockholm were asked to give a presentation about their work as co-leaders in a private school. After our presentations, the discussion continued in a more unstructured way and each participant reflected on whether shared leadership was something already happening at her/his organisation and how, as well
as on what challenges would probably arise in the organisation if one tried to implement this kind of leadership.

The day started, therefore, with the presentation held by the two school co-leaders. After an introduction about how the model came into being, they went on to list which premises are required for shared leadership to work and concluded by enumerating advantages and drawbacks. Premises brought up were, for example, the need to trust the co-leader, the need for a shared set of values, the necessity of not seeking to increase one's own prestige (in a way, being able to show vulnerability) and the necessity of having complementary personalities. The last-mentioned was also brought up in connection with the main advantages of being co-leaders: the synthesis of two different points of view, ways of working or perceptions gives better results than when leadership is exercised only by one person. Differences may mean that different experiences are integrated into one decision and/or that more people will be able to have a good relationship with the holder of the leadership position since they can choose the one with whom they feel a better affinity. Also, the organisation becomes less vulnerable if one of the two co-leaders decides or is forced to leave. As regards the drawbacks, some consequences mentioned were that it takes time to make decisions together (or at least inform the other when a urgent decision had to be made by one of them), even though the quality of the decision will be superior, that misunderstanding may lead to neither of them taking care of an issue (the issue thus getting stuck between the two of them), or that employees may try to use one of the co-leaders against the other (as children do with their parents).

After this presentation based on practical experience, my supervisor and I presented a summary of the literature on shared leadership, which largely confirmed the analysis made by the two practitioners. Our presentation started with a very short introduction about how leadership is usually defined, and went on by describing what shared leadership is, which kind of forms it may take, how much the phenomenon is spread, the advantages at the level of organisation, individual and society, the challenges likely to arise, the relation between the idea of sharing leadership and what is usually called “Swedish leadership”, which premises are necessary and how this form of leadership may be better suited for contemporary organisations than more traditional forms of leadership based on only one person.

Both presentations generated interest and a number of questions. In addition, some people realised that even though their organisation did not have any formal position where leadership was shared, in practice there
were already people sharing leadership functions at an informal level. One example given was of one person taking care of external relations and another person focusing on internal relations. After a couple of people had spoken, it was Ann's turn to speak. Here follows a summary of what she told the others about the way in which CleanTech worked with shared leadership.

On paper, CleanTech has a Managing Director and some managers, but in practice they share the leadership. The previous Managing Director (under whom the creation of a new organisation had started) has left the company and now the Managing Director is Alec. He shares leadership for the organisation with two people – Ann is one of them. These three people share the whole responsibility but have different roles and different areas of interest. The group has thus, for example, HR, strategic and financial responsibility. They meet once a week, inform each other and discuss, and afterwards communicate with the different departments. Once a month, the group meets with three more people that were previously involved in another attempt at shared leadership, what I will call the Management Group. Ann goes on by underlining that she does not experience the problem of shared leadership as being time-consuming, something that the school co-leaders, among others, had mentioned. On the contrary, her experience is that one saves time, in fact. Problems are solved directly and quickly, as they arise. Of course, this could be a result of CleanTech's employees being able to work autonomously and not needing constant supervision. Not only that, Ann also explains that since all functions of the organisations are represented when decision are taken, there is no longer a need to justify to employees what has been done afterwards. Everyone knows that all decisions are taken bearing in mind what is best for the company and are grounded in detailed knowledge of the situation at the different departments. Finally, Ann also wants to draw attention on one important premise for successful shared leadership: the people sharing should not be people seeking to increase their prestige.

The Seminar and the Tale of Shared Leadership

The seminar just described was meant to be an occasion for small companies and other organisations to learn from each other in order to improve how work is organised. The presentations held reproduced the ideas about shared leadership to be found in academic and popular literature. Such
literature is often based on interviews, sometimes on what others have written about particular companies, and, in the case of popular books, in a few cases on own experiences. In other words, it is in the same kind of conversations as the ones held at the seminar that the tale of shared leadership has been written – conversations in which some person representing a particular organisation presents a coherent and polished picture of how things work at her/his own workplace and/or in which researchers re-tell what others have said about how shared leadership works.

It is therefore no surprise to see that the elements brought up at the seminar correspond to what has been described in chapter 2. Typically, we find lists of premises, advantages, challenges, forms (Döös et al., 2010). The presentation of shared leadership is therefore often concentrated on how the work of those people sharing leadership is organised and with what consequences, rather than on how leadership takes place. Rather than describing the exercised leadership, these texts describe how to divide work tasks between people or how several people can agree on doing the same task together. For example, is the best solution to have different areas of responsibility for different people or should all the people sharing leadership be involved in all the matters to be handled? Also, the premises discussed often are about the personal characteristics of the ones who have to share – people who are not sensitive to prestige – and about organisational and logistic aspects – two co-leaders should share the same office, or there has to be time scheduled for meeting in which the co-leaders update each other and agree on which stance to take on different problems. And finally, benefits and challenges are also often presented in terms of what happens with the individual – two co-leaders can support each other, while being a single leader today may mean a significant risk for burnout or at least personal problems – and/or what happens with the organisation – in the knowledge economy two co-leaders are more efficient since no single person can ever possess all the necessary knowledge and competence.

The examples given above illustrate typical points to be found in the literature. While they provide useful information on practical arrangements, from an individual and an organisational point of view, and on matters to be taken care of when deciding to share leadership, they do not develop knowledge about how leadership takes place – the phenomenon of leadership itself. Referring to the common definition of leadership previously introduced,
Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal. (Northouse, 2010, p. 3)

one interesting question should be, is shared leadership different from “normal” leadership? And how? Hence, while it is of importance for practitioners to learn more about how to organise their work as leaders, there should also be interest among academics in studying leadership as it takes place. To be fair, this is something not always prioritised in leadership research in general. On the other hand, I do believe this is a crucial aspect to analyse when proposing a new model of leadership that is, at least in part, promoted as an alternative to heroic tales of leadership accused of having little to do with reality.

The question that becomes crucial is, therefore, how does shared leadership happen in practice? Or, how is shared leadership done? Which forms can be observed in organisations?

**Leadership as Practice**

A call for studying how shared leadership takes shape in practice is supported by those scholars maintaining that there is a need for observing organisational phenomena in their setting, rather than only relying on stories about such phenomena told afterwards. In a broad sense, referring to “practice” allows us to answer the call for “bringing work back in” (Barley and Kunda, 2001), to move the focus back to detailed studies of work that should serve as an empirical foundation for theoretical developments. Such a call is motivated by the observation that organisation theory has gradually lost interest in the actual work in favour of more structural and abstract aspects of the analysis of postbureaucratic organising, thus lacking a deeper and nuanced understanding of the dynamics of organising as it is “done”. Instead of focusing on abstract leadership ideals or on measures of leadership effectiveness, the researcher is invited to look at everyday situations. Instead of studying reported people's traits and behaviours, the researcher should look at what people do at work. Such claims may be interpreted in quite different ways depending on which assumptions one relies upon. As Geiger (2009) notes, some scholars, like Whittington (2006), for example, argue that observing micro-processes in organisations would allow them to come closer to organisational reality, which means presupposing that there is a reality “out there” to be discovered, if one just comes close enough.
This was my starting point when I entered the field in search of shared leadership: my interest was focused on observing how shared leadership takes place in daily situations at work, how people do leadership together. The empirical observations reported in this chapter, and how I interpret them, are based on such an assumption: we need to observe what happens in “reality” in order to understand what shared leadership is about in practice.

Although the practice perspective is not new in leadership (Knights and Willmott, 1992), it should not be so controversial to claim that in recent years there has been a growing interest in studying leadership as practice, an interest probably fuelled by the turn to practice in social science in general and by the turn to postheroic stances in leadership studies. Still, it is often claimed that empirical studies are few and more are needed (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2003).

One of the oldest studies focusing on how leadership is done in practice was performed by Knights and Willmott (1992) when they analysed a meeting gathering senior managers in a financial services company and proposed a framework for studying “how leadership is socially constituted both as a practice and as an object of analysis” (p. 762) comprising phenomenological, existential and structural aspects of the interactions between managers. Without going into details about their argument, the concept of practice is used to convey the idea that leadership is a process involving a number of people, rather than an individual matter. Referring to phenomenological dynamics, it becomes possible to analyse the dialogue between managers as a negotiation process regarding interpretative schemes, thus accomplishing management of meaning. In this way, what is analysed is what people do and, in particular, their interaction. The focus of the research is redirected to the context of leadership and the dynamics of its enactment in order to bring forward processes usually (in traditional research) hidden (p. 776).

More than fifteen years later, Denis, Langley and Rouleau (2010) start their article on the practice of leadership by stating that much research “does not fully capture the experience of doing leadership as a practical activity in complex organizations” (p. 67), even if there are tendencies to pay more attention to how leadership emerges and evolves in concrete social settings and to interactions. A practice perspective is conceptualised as focusing on human action and on the understanding of how people take part in the production and reproduction of organisation and of leadership. Therefore, “a practice perspective focuses on micro-level activities, examin-
ing in a fine-grained manner how they achieve their effects” (p68). To date, there is a lack of such studies. The aim of their own study is to illustrate the “dynamic, collective, situated and dialectical nature of leadership practices” (p. 68). A dynamic phenomenon in the sense that it is a process evolving over time, leadership emerges and shifts when leaders and others engage in actions and interpret them. Such practices have consequences that can be analysed and that influence the context for future leadership practices. The process idea introduces a temporal dimension of unfolding events and interactions, thus bringing in an element of ambiguity and unresolved situations. What today is a successful practice may become a hinder later. Leadership is also seen as collective, in the sense of actors forming coalitions and aligning themselves in coordinated actions—the focus is on how individuals move in the political landscape. The situatedness of leadership indicates that the micro-level details of leadership enacted are important, even if they must be interpreted in the larger context. And finally, leadership is dialectic, in the sense that practices seldom have unequivocal effects: practices that seem to be successful embed potentially contradictory effects that might emerge later and turn the situation around. This is also why looking at practices only in the here-and-now might prevent us from seeing potentially different consequences in the long term. This is why they propose to focus both on the micro-level, but also on a broader processual and contextual analysis.

Leadership as practice means, therefore, to pay attention to micro-aspects such as day-to-day activities in organisations. Leadership is considered to be not static in nature but a process: things develop over time. The focus is thus on individual leaders and how they act in a number of situations that develop over time (see also Denis et al., 2001; Tyrstrup, 2005).

In order to discuss shared leadership as practice I will use the case of CLEANTECH, where efforts to develop shared leadership started in 2006, two years before the seminar described at the beginning of this chapter. It is, in fact, important to look at what happened at CLEANTECH over a period of time rather than simply taking a snapshot of the situation, such as that given at the seminar described. I can already tell the reader that the picture that will emerge from my observation is, at times, dramatically different from the picture presented by Ann at the seminar.
The Story of CleanTech
– How the Organisation Started Working with Shared Leadership

Let’s start from the beginning. According to the stories told by CleanTech Managing Director and members of the Management Group, the efforts to create a new organisation in which to implement shared leadership started in 2006. Until then, the company had been led by the Managing Director herself. But the Managing Director had been more and more busy with working in a number of networks, something beneficial for the business opportunities for this small organisation, but problematic for the daily operations in the organisation, an organisation that was presented in interviews as growing at a fast pace. This was the main reason for initiating the change. Even before that, the organisation had undergone a long period of teambuilding activities, and three fundamental values on which to base all actions had been identified: respect, care and openness. Therefore, when the Managing Director and some of the employees talk about CleanTech, they depict the organisation as unusual and special. Other employees, on the other hand, do not use the same dramatic words when recollecting the journey made by the organisation and consider activities like teambuilding as normal and soon forgotten.

The idea in 2006 was that a Management Group should take over all the Managing Director’s tasks and responsibility, with the exception of external relations, which she would continue to handle. The Management Group was originally composed of four people: Ann, from Sales, Marcus, from Engineering, Mary, from Service, maintenance and spare parts, and Christine, from Accounting. These people should represent the different processes in the company’s operations (Sales, Engineering and Service) and the overall view (Accounting). After a while, George, the person working with IT, joined the group since this was also judged to be a cross-function to be included in discussions and coordination of activities. Instead of communicating directly to the organisation that a new form of management had been adopted, the Managing Director and the group decided to start working “in the shadows” and wait with the official presentation in order to “find their feet”. Moreover, the ambition was also to have a functioning working form to present, not just an empty construction and a piece of paper with a new organisational diagram, something that they felt would jeopardise not only this initiative but all the work done to build an organisation of autonomous people gathered around a uniform culture.
This effort represents one way of introducing a formal shared leadership function. On a more general level, the teambuilding effort previously made is also an initiative directed towards sharing leadership in an informal way. Each employee had in fact been encouraged to take initiatives and to take responsibility: everyone should be involved in leading the company by working together. For example, the weekly meeting gathering all the employees is an occasion where everyone is expected to contribute information and feedback, rather than one-way communication that other companies are considered to have.

The Tale of the Ideal Work Organisation

During the month of November, 2006, I visited the company for the first time and interviewed the Management Group, first together and then one person at time. What was presented was a picture similar to the one given by Ann at the seminar: a success story of shared leadership, success thanks to the people involved in the group and the organisational culture and working climate that offered the proper terrain on which to build. Leadership should be based on what the organisation needs, not be an empty construction based on hierarchical roles — this was the ambition. And, according to what I was told, things were already working in a good way.

As I explained that my study could give them some feedback on how they were working with the new leadership model, they reacted with enthusiasm. The most verbal of them was Ann:

YOU SEE HOW WE HAVE DEVELOPED LEADERSHIP IN FACT BECAUSE THINGS HAVE HAPPENED QUITE FAST SINCE THE COMPANY’S GROWING FAST. WE’VE GOT A RATHER SPECIAL PLATFORM AND BACKGROUND, SO TO SPEAK, TO START FROM [...] AND THEN IT’S FANTASTICALLY EXCITING TO GET FEEDBACK LIKE YOU SAID, SINCE IT’S SO DYNAMIC AND WE’RE DEVELOPING ALL THE TIME.

THE REASON [...] THAT YOU DON’T TAKE A MANAGING DIRECTOR AND A MORE TRADITIONAL STRUCTURE OUT OF A BOX MAYBE IS PROBABLY THAT WE’VE STARTED FROM THE IDEA [...] HOW DO WE RUN THE BUSINESS MORE EFFICIENTLY, MORE SIMPLY AND SMOOTHLY, AND YOU TRY TO FIND A LEADERSHIP THAT WORKS, MATCHES THE BUSINESS.
Manager or Just Responsible?  
And How Should a Leader Be, Really,  
When Performativity Interferes?

The official communication thus took place at the beginning of 2007. Three of the five members of the Management Group officially became managers for their departments: Marcus for engineering, Ann for Sales and Mary for Service, Maintenance and Spare Parts. The step of adopting the labels “department” and “manager” was quite sensitive, given that during teambuilding the ideal of “the special organisation” had been so much emphasised, an organisation based on dynamic processes and not on departments. The Management Group had also expressed ambivalence in their relation to the label “manager”.

Ann

It’s probably the case that you sometimes think management groups just sit then with the recruited bosses who then come out to their department and say that, ‘Yes, today we’ve decided we’re to do this and that’, which doesn’t have any support, isn’t in line with the business [...] here we’re all sitting with the day-to-day activities and we know what resources are available, what works, what doesn’t work.

That’s what we think anyway, we fight like mad not to be this management group that sits up there and decides a lot of things (laughter).

Marcus

Because it’s quite easy now for everybody, when there’s a lot of running around and fussing, to: ‘No, we’ll take that up with the management group, they’ll have to fix it’, the question is just brought up and then it’s up to us... to straighten it out somehow.

From the sales side [they think] it’s really great that there’s someone that can take care of these questions.

We don’t have any job descriptions, there are no fixed roles in that way; instead, we have a very broad range of duties, a free organisation and we call in staff, resources, expertise, when it’s needed. I think that’s unique if you compare with other work places.

The reason [...] that you don’t take a managing director and a more traditional structure out of a box maybe is probably that we’ve started from the idea [...] how do we run the business more efficiently, more simply and smoothly, and you try to find a leadership that works, matches the business [...] here we’re all sitting with the day-to-day activities and we know what resources are available, what works, what doesn’t work.

Because it’s quite easy now for everybody, when there’s a lot of running around and fussing, to: ‘No, we’ll take that up with the management group, they’ll have to fix it’, the question is just brought up and then it’s up to us... to straighten it out somehow.

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The reason [...] that you don’t take a managing director and a more traditional structure out of a box maybe is probably that we’ve started from the idea [...] how do we run the business more efficiently, more simply and smoothly, and you try to find a leadership that works, matches the business
Still, the Management Group decided that they felt people needed to know where they belonged in the organisation and opted for a more traditional organisational structure, even though they kept some of the process-thinking. This was commented on by certain people as being contradictory and as a step back towards a traditional organisational structure that did not correspond to what Cleantech had striven for. While the decision for establishing departments and the titles of managers can be interpreted as being motivated to a large extent by practical and operational problems, I also want to highlight how this development provides a first sign of the strength of the constructs of management and leadership. It is really hard to think outside what these constructs prescribe, and deviations meet resistance in the form of, for example, “but we have to do like this”, or “but it has to be like this”. In this case, one could interpret many of the discussions held in the Management Group as re-constructing the expectations they feel as the ones who stand for leadership. Leaders are the ones who have to take re-
responsibility for the organisation, which means that they expressed a strong need to be precise in defining how things should work since they thought that otherwise people would feel lost in too flexible an organisation, at the same time as they also expressed a need to be in control: as leaders this is what they are expected to do. For example, there were long discussions on how to handle overtime work, something that had been previously solved in a sort of informal ad-hoc way by the Managing Director. Such an operative question became larger and larger and gave rise to questions of principle and to the feeling of a need for formalising in a precise way exactly how the different situations are to be handled. In a way, one could interpret this example as showing that once in the position of leaders, the five people in the Management Group started feeling particular kinds of expectations that can be related to how leadership is constructed. Thus, instead of taking a pragmatic approach and treating people in the organisation as responsible and working for what is best for the organisation, they opted for trying to take control and reducing employees’ autonomy. They tried to make them followers. But my reading is that such an attempt caused problems and an increasing focus on abstract principles rather than on operational problems, something that took a lot of energy and led the Management Group to feel powerless and unable to respond to the expectations they themselves had built up. Moreover, these expectations clashed with the expectations built on the organisation in its entirety, an organisation that should be flexible, not hierarchical, and composed of autonomous and responsible people.

A telling example of how the construction of leadership constrained and informed how the Management Group constructed its leadership is provided by different utterances about leadership from the same person, Ann, but on different occasions. It becomes clear how there are contradictory expectations and descriptions of what leadership is about. Starting with the first interview I had with her, before my observations of meetings and daily life at the organisation, we can see how the ideal of leadership is reproduced. The question I ask is itself telling, since I asked about “a good leader” rather than “good leadership”. The reason for my question is partly that I had tried the question about leadership and either got an answer about leaders or no answer at all (and then I reformulated the question in terms of leaders), and partly that the interview has come to be about good leaders.
Later on in the interview:

**LUCIA**

**WHAT IS A GOOD LEADER?**

**ANN**

**A GOOD LEADER SHOULDN'T BE NOTICED, MY PHILOSOPHY. [LAUGHTER] A GOOD LEADER SHOULD PREFERABLY GET RID OF HIM OR HERSELF.**

**LUCIA**

**EXACTLY, WHAT SHOULD PRODUCE A GOOD LEADER?**

**ANN**

**HUMILITY, A GOOD QUALITY, AND ACTUALLY JUST BEING THERE TO MAKE SURE THINGS WORK AS WELL AS POSSIBLE ROUND ABOUT YOU. [...] I SUPPOSE IT'S LIFTING, LIFTING UP YOUR COLLEAGUES. I MEAN, THAT'S THE FUN THING ABOUT BEING A LEADER IN ALL CONTEXTS, SEEING WHEN OTHER PEOPLE GROW.**

**LUCIA**

**HOW DOES ONE DO THAT?**

**ANN**

**WELL, MENTORSHIP, COACHING, CHALLENGES WITH JUST ENOUGH SUPPORT, BEING THERE AS A SOUNDING BOARD, BEING THERE WITH LOTS OF IDEAS, BEING, SUPPORTING. THAT'S PROBABLY ABOUT WHAT I THINK IT...AND THEN OF COURSE DIFFERENT COLLEAGUES HAVE DIFFERENT NEEDS, RIGHT. SOME NEED A REALLY DETAILED SCHEDULE FOR WHAT THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO DO FROM MORNNG TILL WHEN THEY GO HOME, WHILE OTHERS NEED AN EXTREMELY FREE CLIMATE, AND SOME NEED A LOT OF APPRECIATION WHILE OTHERS COPE BEST ON THEIR OWN.**

This is a quite a common way of portraying what good leaders do nowadays. It is part of a larger ideal of the leader as a coaching figure that brings out the best in her/his co-workers (cf. Holmberg and Strannegård, 2005) and it is deeply connected to how CLEANTECH as a special organisation had been constructed. But when it comes to discussing leadership while working, the picture might change radically. The following quotes come
from a meeting in which the Management Group discussed the situation and its own leadership. They had some problems affirming its leadership in the organisation, as they themselves would say. Discussing such problems, it becomes apparent that Ann claims the necessity to do many things but certainly not to “get rid of herself”.

This is part of a longer discussion, but we can see that the problem she expresses is not how to find ways of “getting rid of themselves”, but how to find ways of imposing their will and showing their strength to the organisation in order to be recognised as leaders. Although this is a quite particular situation, I would expect many people to recognise these opposing demands: on the one hand, the strong ideal of a coaching role in which the leader does not take actions except those aimed at fostering co-workers’ growth, and in which the leader does not need recognition for her/his contributions; on the other hand, the need for being in control and being recognised as the one in control when one is a leader and is expected to handle things.

Of course, each account is staged in a particular context, the interview with me versus a meeting with the Management Group where problems are discussed, but this gives a good example of the different accounts of leadership that can exist in parallel. What I realised when presented with such contradictory accounts was, on the one hand, the really pressing need for supplementing interviews with observations, and, on the other hand, the difficulty for the people involved in handling such contradictions, both in relation to others and to themselves.
Shared or Not Shared? Ideal versus Practice

We can already see in Ann’s way of talking about how things should work that the ideal of shared leadership is not so easy to live up to in practice, at least when we consider shared leadership as something everyone in the organisation contributes to, of course, to different degrees. While there may be an ambition to share responsibility and decisions, and the taking of one’s own initiatives is incentivised in the rhetoric, the performativity of the leadership construct also plays a role: leadership presupposes a difference between leaders and followers, the ones who steer the organisation in the right direction and the ones who should adapt to the direction pointed out.

In a more specific sense, I also looked at how shared leadership worked within the Management Group. The process was not as smooth as I would have expected after the first round of interviews in 2006. In 2007 I participated in a number of Management Group meetings (some with, some without the Managing Director), as well as in meetings gathering all the people from one department and the department manager (who belongs to the Management Group). The situation faced by the Management Group in practice did not correspond to the ideal of shared leadership retold in interviews in two ways.

On the one hand, exercising leadership proved to be not so easy. As could be expected in an organisation proud of the autonomy the co-workers have, limiting such autonomy and “harnessing” people met resistance, above all in the form of people continuing to work as usual, without following the new directives provided by the Management Group. This situation was made even worse, from the point of view of the Management Group, by the fact that the group had decided to work in parallel with the organisation at the beginning, which means that they met and discussed, but did not formally show the rest of the organisation what they were doing. This way of working was motivated by the ambition of finding a good form of leadership directly related to the operational needs of the organisation, rather than imposing a new “empty” form of leadership. But this arrangement quickly gave rise to that very problem. The other co-workers did not see any result produced by the Management Group and therefore felt their leadership to be “empty”. One could interpret such a development as meaning that leadership cannot be exercised and formed in a vacuum. It is a relational phenomenon and not something that can be designed and then implemented. What the management group tried to do was to find first a “good leadership” and then to exercise it. This might be possible to

106
do if leadership is interpreted as a function or a behaviour to be performed according to what leadership theory says. As I interpret the empirical material, such an effort could turn out to be futile.

Furthermore, here again I suggest that the performativity of the leadership construct interferes. Leaders are expected to show strength and decisiveness, to act and to act purposefully and loudly. The people in the Management Group did not.

The second discrepancy between the ideal and the practice has to do with the sharing of leadership among the group members. Listening to their discussions on this matter, it becomes evident that it is not so easy to find a good arrangement for sharing leadership.

Let us then look at what happened at CleanTech. It is February 2007 and the new organisation has been in place for a few months. Monica, an organisational and leadership coach, is here today; it is one of her coaching days at CleanTech. Waiting for the Management Group to come to the conference room, she drinks coffee in the nearby coffee room where Joe, one of the project managers, is eating a sandwich. This is a good occasion for sounding the ground and she takes it. To her question about how things are working out for the Management Group, Joe answers that he feels they are mostly sitting in meetings but not really showing any action. He understands that they need to talk to each other in order to find a way of working, but they also have to show where they stand, otherwise the impression is that it is the owners who really manage the company. Monica listens carefully.

Once all the five people of the Management Group are gathered in the room, they start discussing the organisational diagram they have produced – something the Management Group has already spent some time on in the morning meeting they have had. The question is whether to have departments or not, how to communicate that they work with a process philosophy, whether there should be “managers” or not. Such dilemmas include both organisational and cultural considerations. Not only what is the most efficient way of working, but also what is the “right” way of working. Monica reacts to the picture they have drawn since it seems like the organisation is becoming more hierarchical than it was before, which was not really the idea behind the Management Group from the beginning. The way she puts it suggests that this is something people in the organisation are talking about.¹

¹ All the dialogues in this thesis are presented in the form of “comics”. For the ones who may not be familiar with this genre, the bubbles should be read as normal text, starting with the upper part of the box and proceeding to the bottom, and going from left to right.
There’s somebody who’s slow on the uptake quite simply…

But we show up that quite clearly when we did the presentation too, we brought up both this, I mean, what we thought had been the problem and why we were now doing like this.

Oh, we’re back to why this came about, and we weren’t supposed to be talking about it so much, but what was… I mean, the feedback comes here.

There’s somebody who’s slow on the uptake quite simply…

But we showed that quite clearly when we did the presentation too, we brought up both this, I mean, what we thought had been the problem and why we were now doing like this.

But we can go through it once more.

Oh, I think so! [laugh]

That must be the reason. It can’t be because of us.

I mean, if we’re really honest we’ve done, we’re probably not really clear ourselves about what we are and where we.

That’s the next thing, I think.

It’s probably even harder for the one who maybe isn’t sitting here with us to understand why is this happening now, why isn’t anything happening or why are they doing this and why aren’t they doing that.

And what, what’s going to happen.
Reaction to Monica’s provocation comes in the form of frustration over the people in the organisation and their incapacity to understand how the organisation is supposed to work and why, but also in the form of insecurity and consciousness of one’s own faults.

What, when and how the group should act is not clear. This is a major point that is repeated throughout the whole meeting. Which tasks should the group take and which not, how should the group act, how should the group show that they are acting, how should they handle their relation to the rest of the company. These are all questions discussed over and over again. It might be on a general level or on a more detailed level. For example, how often should they meet, what should they do if not all five are at the office and a decision has to be made, how are they going to support each other. In other words, even the practical arrangements for sharing leadership are, in this case, not easy to agree upon – moreover, they also “multiply” each time one wants to discuss something in more detail, and there is no real lower limit to the level of detail.

The relation to the rest of the organisation is not unproblematic: on the one hand, they are guilty about their own ignorance – they have, in fact, been given a Powerpoint presentation on how things should work; on the other hand, they are justified in their confusion – the group has not lived up to what was promised. While this is a specific situation, I believe these are themes easy to recognise from own experiences at work for many people.

The meeting goes on. Jumping a little forward, we come to this interaction.
But I feel we’ve only had one or two management group meetings since then, we’re not here, most of the time I’m in the situation that I’m sitting by myself up there and it’s no fun facing the music. I don’t feel we have a group that can face fights, so it’s me that has to go in and do it.

The way I understood it, you’re not strong enough and teamers, I don’t know what you say in that case...

...glued together yet...

...is that what you’re saying?

And I don’t think we’re confident enough in ourselves.

No, in some way, we don’t.

And we don’t really know what routines.

No.

There’s a lot that’s unclear.
In this dialogue it is again possible to see different problems. The problem of people ignoring the new form of work and continuing to act as if there were no managers, and the problem of the group not really sharing its leadership. The organisation is ignoring the group and crushing their authority by making their own decisions as they are used to. Problems within the group are caused by the group being weak because of the lack of routines and because of the lack of self-confidence, but also by the fact that they do not behave like a group: individuals feel alone when they have to face fights.

Yes.

Oh, that’s your problem.

Yes.

Haha, sure, they’re the old men, then it was my problem, because it was them.

And then we were supposed to try and do something and it was just me that was there, with the salaries, that day, then there were two of us. And I mean, sure, wait for the management group, we should really have said then and we did a little bit, but we don’t have...
Mary is the group manager for the service department and she tells us about one occasion when she has been left alone. It is one in a series of examples of circumstances in which the group has failed and individuals are let down. Moreover, the last thing said by Ann refers to Karin, Managing Director, coming in and making a decision instead of letting the Management Group take this responsibility. Again, the group also lacks character in relation to the Managing Director.

I think we don’t really know where we want to go and what we, I mean, what’s our role? I think there’s still something that’s not right, or that I feel I’m not really sure about.

Because we have of course written quite clearly, we do have goals I can feel.

Yes, that we do.

I’d dearly have loved to go in when there was that service discussion, when Karin came to you and me, eh, then I’d love to have said that sure, what you are showing us we actually take care of in our jobs and said that, “not your business, leave that to the Management Group”, if I’d felt I had had a strong group.
Here again we see the missed fight with Karin, contributing to reinforcing the construction of the group as failing. The group had the chance to show that they have really taken over the leadership from the Managing Director, but they did not take this opportunity. Not only that, some of them also still feel unsure about what the role of the group should be. Although they have been talking and discussing this matter for months, they have not succeeded in building a common platform, something that the literature on shared leadership deems to be fundamental.

The failure of the Management Group is then attributed to its members’ personal traits. Again, they are encouraged to help each other and push each other in order to show strength and decisiveness.
In this last excerpt, one aspect of the problem becomes clearer: the group should take initiatives but within certain limits. Too much initiative is not perceived as welcome. The Managing Director is not prepared to delegate all leadership to the new group. The same is true when it comes to the other three owners of the company who are also co-workers (no one in the Management Group). They want the group to take the leadership, but at the same time they may still decide on major issues without consulting the
group, for example, regarding the possibility to second one of the service personnel to another company for a longer period of time.

In conclusion, this meeting was very much about the Management Group’s failure. Starting by discussing an organisational diagram, the conversation developed and covered a number of aspects. While this discussion emerged around a drawing and was partially steered by a professional coach, other similar discussions emerged around practical problems to be solved, for example. One way of reading what happens is that this is a realisation of the problems faced by the group and the conversation develops in quite a destructive way in which problems add to problems and few solutions are proposed spontaneously by the members of the group. This, therefore, is not what doing leadership is supposed to be about.

What I want to underline is the discrepancy between the version of shared leadership at CleanTech provided in interviews and at the seminar, and the version I constructed myself by participating in meetings at the company. In my observations, shared leadership is not easy to implement: there are a number of unresolved problems and conflicts, people are preoccupied by their own prestige, people do not always support each other, and building a common platform could take months depending on what kind of platform people need and what degree of detail is felt necessary. Before discussing which conclusions I draw from such discrepancy, let me just conclude the story of the Management Group with its de facto dismantling.

Reducing the Ambition
– From Shared to Traditional Leadership

In May 2007, a new organisation was presented at CleanTech. The Management Group role was reconsidered: they would meet only occasionally in case there was a need for all the parts of the organisation to be present when discussing something or making some decision. The leadership was thus transferred to a smaller group: Alec (already the vice-Managing Director, even though he had never worked in practice with such matters earlier) together with Ann and Christine, representing Sales and Accounting. After this decision was communicated, I briefly interviewed the members of the Management Group and Alec. In their accounts it is possible to see how those elements present in the meeting reported in the previous section are recognised to be some of the main reasons leading to the substitution of the Management Group with a smaller group. Since the people involved
here are just a few individuals and they, at times, express criticism, I have chosen for this particular section to completely anonymise them; the interesting thing is only what has been said on the fate of the Management Group and which different points of view one can find, not exactly who said what.

The main argument is that decisions were too difficult to make and they took too long, partly because there were so many people involved, partly because the Managing Director was not participating in the meetings and was only rarely at the company, which meant that each decision had to be checked with her before it could be implemented. A decision could therefore take weeks, which was judged to be too much time. Also, the interface between the Managing Director and the group was not really clear, and the group sometimes did not dare to make all decisions, at other times took too much initiative.

Lucia

Interviewee

Was it hard to make a decision without Karin?

No, it wasn’t but then we’ll maybe have to have the support of [the Managing Director] […] it’ll be the long way round actually, […] we sit and say that this is what we’ll do. Then, Anna will, it’ll be Anna then who chairs the group, who’ll talk to Karin, right, it’ll be extremely slow going. So it’s a good thing that this [the new arrangement] should be a smoother, easier way to work to come to fast decisions.

We had the Management Group […] and that was an attempt by Karin to let go of the MD’s role, but then at the same time I don’t think she was quite comfortable with letting it go to that group, even if she tried and it was, it was a good try so to speak, but, em…she still kept a whole bunch of issues for herself […] and then, then we were a bit cautious and didn’t take the whole lot and […] we didn’t take enough and on the other hand when we did take initiative then, maybe we weren’t the right group to take the initiative either [according to the owners], so we, we didn’t produce any good results.

Lucia

No, but let’s say, the old Management Group, […] we had Mary in Service department, [and we] still discuss those sorts of questions with her, […] so it is about more that we, we kind of bring things to a head, we have, as it were, you know what I mean. We get a bit quicker decisions then.

Do they [the ones who no longer are included in the leadership group] only come when you’re talking about things like that [things having specifically to do with their department]?
The argument is often framed as taking the next step and taking the group to the next level (by reducing it). Ann will contribute with knowledge about Sales and Engineering, Christine with knowledge about the economic and financial situation and Alec with knowledge about Service (even though he does not work with it, he has been interested in that part of the business from the beginning). Also, Alec being one of the owners, there will be no need to check each decision with the Managing Director, since Alec has the same authority. Therefore, the organisation should be able to work faster.

Although people agree that it is probably a good solution, the process of reaching the decision to substitute the Management Group is reported to have been not completely transparent.
Also, as regards which functions should be represented when making decisions and guiding the organisation, there are different opinions.
Finally, while the Management Group had originally been presented as an attempt at a shared leadership, the new arrangement is presented more in traditional terms of a leader (Alec) guiding the organisation with the help of some assistants that provide him with information in those areas that he does not know in detail. And while the ideal organisation was characterised by flexibility and the ability to rapidly change, the plan for the coming months is to write formal job descriptions that clearly establish different areas of responsibilities, division of work and chain of command.

What Happened at CleanTech?

All the vicissitudes here narrated happened before the seminar on shared leadership in which I participated in 2008. After the new arrangement had been made at CleanTech I did not continue the observation of the company. I cannot therefore say anything about how things worked out, but certainly the implementation of shared leadership, if we can talk of shared
leadership at all, was not as smooth and painless as the story told about it. I think this is important to keep in mind when producing knowledge, popular and/or academic, about organisations. The empirical observations and the possibility of following the company over a period of time gave another picture of the situation than the interviews alone had. While this could be a point to discuss as regards which methods are proper to use for which kind of questions, I choose here to simply recognise this fact and to discuss what this example tells us about leadership and shared leadership.

Clearly, the ideal of the lone hero is challenged by other kinds of ideals in which leadership is exercised by more than one person and in which leadership is recognised as superior when more people are involved. Also, there are coherent accounts of what such a new model of leadership requires, what advantages it brings and what challenges might be faced. Even though these elements are said to be based on the experience of people working with shared leadership, I would interpret them as an ex-post rationalisation of what happened and a reflection on idealised experiences rather than actual experiences, at least in the case presented in this chapter. Of course, in the business world of today, where the organisation brand is of utmost importance, it is difficult to be given anything else than success stories coherent with the promoted brand, since employees themselves reason in terms of working with shared leadership as a way of strengthening the brand. Still, it is interesting to note how the ideal of shared leadership has reached some kind of stability, since different people highlight more or less the same elements, and how it is actually valued as positive, something that can help the company image by suggesting that this is a modern and dynamic company.

When it comes to practice, the performativity of the construct of leadership in traditional individualistic terms reappears. Even in an organisation that has actively worked on becoming flexible, flat and dynamic, an organisation in which employees are said to be expected to take initiative and responsibility, a leader may feel expectations of showing traditional characteristics, such as being in control, imposing one’s will and being strong. This, of course, interferes with the express ambition of leadership being distributed throughout the organisation. Moreover, a lot of importance is accorded to showing results and showing action to the organisation. The fact that what the Management Group works with is mostly quite trivial everyday operational problems and issues gives rise to frustration among the members and a sense of inefficiency and insufficiency.
But also when it comes to sharing leadership within a group of five people, things turn out to be contradictory. In the case presented, such an experiment failed. The reasons for such failure may be several, but I would say that performativity of the leadership construct is again one element to take into consideration. It is difficult to dare to be vulnerable and support each other, when a leader is supposed to be strong and to show courage. If none of the people involved in the team feels comfortable with behaving in such a way, or is given the chance to do so, then tensions start to rise within the group. Moreover, the ideal of shared leadership is constructed as all the people should participate to and agree on all decisions to be made, and they should communicate to the organisations together too, in particular in the case of conflict. As I interpret it, this idea of how to work is based on an ideal of formal perfectly shared leadership, rather than a more pragmatic approach in which people trust each other and recognise that certain decisions “grow” in the interface between several people that formally or informally share a leadership function, while others do not. That is, “shared” is taken literally and becomes a sort of cage restraining individual initiative both at the level of the organisation – no decisions should be made outside the Management Group meetings – and at the level of the group – everyone has to be there each time something has to be discussed. Of course, such referring to the formal arrangements may also indicate a position of powerlessness: the ones informally powerful do not need any formal arrangements to drive their initiatives. In this case, the fact that the owners are also co-workers complicates matters for the Management Group, but a similar situation may be found each time there are people, other than the managers, charged with power.

Having come to the conclusion that, despite the tale of the successful implementation of shared leadership, such a new form of leadership at the very least encountered a lot of resistance and, in a more radical interpretation, completely failed, what can we say about shared leadership and leadership more in general?

**What Does This Tell Us About Leadership?**

The accounts reported in this chapter show discussions and descriptions of how the group has been working. They do not show much of what they did, and if there was anything they did that could be interpreted as leadership. During my observations and when I read through the transcripts from
the meetings, I myself had a hard time finding examples of “leadership”, in terms of rather exceptional moments in which the leader clearly influences the followers. In some of the quotes we could read, for example, what expectations co-workers have of managers: mostly a support function for the co-workers themselves rather than someone that would change the way they work. And this was what I could observe too in, for example, department meetings (and at the other company which I observed during this study). If it was difficult finding examples of leadership, it was even more difficult finding “shared leadership” at CleanTech, that is, I did not find instances of the five persons together exercising influence that would constrain the work of the other co-workers. Moreover, one of the major problems of the group according to themselves was precisely that they did not show any great act of leadership. Referring to recent literature on leadership, it is possible to conclude that these situations are not peculiar to this company alone. Rather, they could be interpreted as indications that it is difficult to observe the “ideal of leadership” in practice.

In practice, leadership is often nothing extraordinary. This becomes clear when the researcher observes people at work and/or asks them about their daily activities rather than abstract conceptions of leadership. One example is provided by a study conducted by Alvesson and Kärreman (2003). The researchers observed the work of a project team during two days and searched for manifestations of leadership. What they concluded was that most of what could be seen as leadership consisted of quite mundane actions with small consequences, like summarising a problem or giving an instruction, and that, otherwise, the leader worked in the same way as the other members of the team. Therefore, what the researchers saw was no heroic leadership act directed towards steering the group according to a preconceived visionary plan, but rather ordinary actions in which the leader participated in the same way as the other members, working on a concrete project under the pressure of a deadline. Such observations are possible to made once researchers abandon the assumption that leadership happens and instead approach the empirical situation with the question “does leadership happen here?” by observing people (not only formal leaders) at work, and not just asking formal leaders about their leadership.

A similar view is offered by Holmberg and Tyrstrup (2009) when they set out to study everyday leadership by analysing managers’ narrative about what constitutes leadership (typical leadership situations), at times together with the managers themselves. What emerges is a picture of leadership as an event-driven activity—rather than intentionally planned—triggered
by unexpected occurrences, characterised by constant adjustments and temporary solutions. An important aspect is the time dimension, since, for example, time pressure is a decisive factor and since situations, problems and solutions are changing from one day to the next. We get the impression of managers constantly trying to momentarily grasp the situation, make sense of it, and to find ways of dealing with it, to intervene – to bring order into what has become chaotic or, as they say, “to draw the map while orienteering”. This study clearly brings up less heroic accounts of what goes on in organisations – as they observe, it is the very absence of messiness and of tricky incidents that is the criterion for successful leadership in traditional accounts – and describes the somewhat chaotic work done on a daily basis and the changing nature of situations and meanings attached to them – aspects that absolutely need more attention.

To conclude, there is a contradiction between talk about leadership in general and abstract terms and the practice of leadership, whether observed and/or described in interviews. The practice is very much about operative and administrative tasks and does not correspond to the ideal; the ideal may thus be interpreted as material for identity construction by leaders, rather than something that has to do with what happens at work (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003c, 2003a).

Should we conclude that leadership is an empty concept? And, in particular, that there is no shared leadership at CleanTech? One way of answering is to go back to definitions of leadership, and to the element they have in common: the production of direction. Given that it is difficult to identify leadership as described in abstract accounts when looking at the practice, does this mean that there is no production of direction at all?

And as regards shared leadership, it is dubious whether at CleanTech there is shared leadership as the literature describes it. These people started working with shared leadership and they interpreted the new model as a formal arrangement in which all of them had to participate all the time, and they were expected to agree on decisions or initiatives. “Shared” meant therefore collective and uniform, the result being the synthesis of these five persons’ opinions and points of view. In a way, leadership as exercised by a “super-person” is constituted by the reduction of all conflicts and differences between the five of them. Such efforts did not succeed and problems arose along the way. Does this mean that leadership was an individual matter at CleanTech? My answer to such a question is no, absolutely not. My reading is that the interpretation of the word “shared” in these terms allows us to see only part of the leadership going on at CleanTech. Therefore,
what this means is that “shared” interpreted as “collective”, “uniform” and “formal” may be hard to achieve. But leadership may still not be an exclusively individual matter. In fact, it might not be necessary to have a collective and consensual action from the appointed leaders in order to produce direction. In the next chapter, I will therefore reformulate the research question to a more specific one: “how is direction produced in practice?”. Figure 2 summarises the analysis done so far. The more specific question will lead me to discuss the non-individual dimension of leadership that emerges in the empirical material.
Given the theoretical and empirical problem, the purpose is to add to our understanding of leadership as a social phenomenon and contribute to developing a vocabulary for talking about it.

Chapter 4

Shared Leadership

How is leadership shared in practice?

Practice
Focus on how leadership is shared in actual work situations, rather than as reported in interviews and questionnaires.

Process
Leadership is not static, it develops over time.

Contradiction between the ideal and the practice of (shared) leadership. Is leadership an empty concept? Is leadership an individual matter? Is there no production of direction at CleanTech?

How is direction produced as a distributed practice?

Figure 2. A summary of the development of the analysis so far.
Having set out to study leadership as a social phenomenon beyond individualistic conceptions, as a distributed process going on in organisations, the analysis produced so far has resulted in a change of focus from the research question “how is leadership shared in practice?” to the slightly different and more focused research question “how is direction produced in practice?”, “is there any distributed production?”. In this chapter, I show directly what this change means in terms of different conclusions about the leadership done by going through the same meeting analysed in chapter 4, and analysing the same dialogues. I then expand my analysis to other interactions. What I highlight is one important construction done by people together, one construction that produces direction. Such a reading of the empirical material goes beyond a shared leadership theoretical framework and is, instead, better informed by the postheroic leadership literature.

Re-reading the Meeting at CleanTech

Reading one more time the vignettes illustrating the Management Group meeting at CLEANTECH already described in chapter 4, I now focus on the production of direction. Is it achieved and how? In order to answer such questions I refer to a social constructionist stance and ask the material in two steps, “what is being constructed here?” and “is this construction producing direction?”. Reading this conversation with such lenses I found one category of constructions producing direction to be quite dominant: the construction of positions and positionings.
The dialogue above touches a number of delicate questions that the Management Group is struggling with: the reasons for the existence of the management group, which problems it should be a solution to and how, what the Management Group is and how far they have come as regards practic-
ing what they should do, why these changes are happening at this point of time, why they are doing things in this way and not in other ways, and what is going to happen in the future. Therefore, from this short exchange of words we can understand that there are many unresolved questions as regards the Management Group, questions that arise in different settings but that in this meeting become particularly intense given that the professional coach is present and that the group is going to discuss how to develop their work. Even though this is not what the professional coach had planned to discuss on this occasion (as she says, she thought these were questions already discussed), her presence and her first comment triggers the discussion.

When I read these conversations, I interpret them as performing a number of constructions. They are constructing the group as separate from, and in a certain position in relation to, the rest of the organisation. They construct it as a group that is trying to implement something new, but at the same time are not really clear about what this “new” is going to be. What is the group role? Which tasks are appropriate to be handled by the group? When should the group act? And how should the group show that it is acting? How should they relate to the rest of the company? These are questions with no clear answer yet. They are brought up in different forms during the meeting and the conversation returns to them several times.

The rest of the organisation is also being constructed. It is constructed as spectators to the new group’s actions and, as seems to be the case, inactions. They are constructed as interested spectators with opinions about what is going on. They are constructed as guilty of their own ignorance on the one hand – they have in fact been given a Powerpoint presentation on how things should work –, and as justified in their confusion on the other hand – the group has not lived up to what was promised.

In all these constructions, both organisational arrangements, – which tasks are pertinent, – and personal characteristics, – “they are slow to understand”–, are brought up. Moreover, so far, it is a group of people that are being constructed, what I would call collective positions. We have the Management Group and the Organisation. And both facts and emotions are intertwined. For example, when Ann says “but we showed that quite clearly when we did the presentation”, the sentence speaks of a fact – there has been an official presentation – but also an emotion – frustration with others not listening and understanding. This also shows another theme often recurring when positions are discussed, the tension between formal arrange-
ments and informal ones. Informal positions often seem to be stronger than formal agreements about what people are supposed to do and how.

Another aspect that is present in several situations is the co-production of artefacts – a Powerpoint presentation or the organisational diagram – that becomes an occasion for discussing such things. Co-editing texts is common and time-consuming in organisations, although it is not usually a phenomenon studied (Czarniawska, 2005). Texts stabilise organising. In this case, one could interpret the texts produced by the Management Group, containing descriptions of what the group is and how it is supposed to function in relation to the organisation, as stabilising such organising for the people involved in the group. In fact, they quite often motivate their actions and talks by referring to the texts produced. Therefore, these texts help them direct their coming efforts. On the other hand, such organising has not been stabilised in connection to the rest of the organisation. No one else refers to these documents. Thus, they fulfil the stabilising function only among those who edited them. The Management Group position in relation to the rest of the organisation constructed in other interactions remains ambiguous.

As the meeting progresses, problems continue to be discussed. After a while, this dialogue takes place.

BECAUSE THERE I HAVE A QUESTION I’D LIKE TO BRING UP [...] WHAT WE DECIDED WHEN WE GAVE THE PRESENTATION WAS THE VERY FACT THAT THIS IS SOMETHING NEW TO BE ABLE TO USE THESE PARTICULAR COMMUNICATION CHANNELS, THEY BECAME COMPLETELY NEW CHANNELS, BEFORE THAT WE HAD INFORMAL, BUT NOW HAVE TO USE... AND THEN THERE’S THIS ORGANISATION CHART, THIS IS WHAT WE’RE GOING TO DO. THEN IT DIDN’T TAKE MORE THAN 5 MINUTES BEFORE EVERYONE WAS OUT ON THEIR OLD CHANNELS, RIGHT?
But I feel we've only had one or two management group meetings since then, we're not here, most of the time I'm in the situation that I'm sitting by myself up there and it's no fun facing the music. I don't feel we have a group that can face fights, so it's me that has to go in and do it.

The way I understood it, you're not strong enough and teamers, I don't know what you say in that case...

...glued together yet...

...is that what you're saying?

No.

We don't have any kind of routines at all.

And I don't think we're confident enough in ourselves.

No, in some way, we don't.

And we don't really know what routines.

No.

There's a lot that's unclear.
In this dialogue it is again possible to see the construction of groups. In this case, the Organisation is again constructed as separate from the Management Group and now the relation between the two is explicitly a hostile one, a fight. The Organisation is ignoring them and crushing their authority by making own decisions as they are used to. The Owners are also constructed as another group in relation to the Management Group. Then there is a temporary shift to the construction of more individual positions. We will see more of this later; here there is only a glimpse of it, since the attention is then back to the group. Again, “technical” and emotional aspects are involved, or, in other words, organisational roles and identities. The group is constructed as not strong because of the lack of routines – an organisational aspect – and because of the lack of self-confidence – an identity aspect –, and the two aspects are related to each other. As the meeting goes on, individual positions and positionings become the main construction performed.
Like Ann in the previous interaction, Mary also talks about one occasion when she has been let down by the group. During this conversation, several examples of this kind of failure are given. Again, if we look at what is going on, I would say that they are constructing both the group and the individual positions. The group is being constructed as a non-efficient group that lacks character: members of the group are let down. Moreover, the last thing said by Ann refers to the Managing Director’s interference in a decision that they should have made. Therefore, the group is also constructed as weak in relation to the Managing Director. Even individuals are being constructed as lonely, having to rely only on themselves, and defeated, not strong enough to win the fight. Again, both emotionally defeated and organisationally defeated, they have succeeded neither as a person nor as a manager.
Even in this short exchange, the missed chance to fight with Karin is recalled. This is related to the construction of the group as haunted by insecurity. Ann refers to a document about what the Management Group’s role is and how it is supposed to work. Such an inscription is recalled as something that should have “fixed” the group position but apparently it has not really succeeded in that respect.

In the extract above, the conversation again moves towards constructing individual and individual traits and behaviours, their shortcomings and what they have to do about it.
In this last excerpt I would like to draw attention to two aspects. The first one is the creation of a boundary around the group’s position, the production of a position by establishing a clearer boundary between what is included and what is not. The second is the sensemaking process about what happened years ago (something apparently traumatic), which is constructed as a cause for the insecurity still felt. This way the group is also positioned in relation to issues and other positions; in this case we may deduce they are talking about some measure that the owners took.
In conclusion, this meeting was very much about the construction of the Management Group's failure. While the setting was clearly favourable for the conversation becoming focused on constructing positions (since it was led by a professional coach), the starting point was a discussion around the organisational diagram and how to represent the different functions. But almost directly, the conversation took a more dramatic turn and came to be about the construction of the Management Group as failing, the efforts made as flawed and inadequate, the people involved as inadequate themselves. A peculiar position was produced for the Management Group: a position implying powerlessness, conflict, the need for better routines; a position requiring more precise boundaries, from a formal point of view, but also more action, to perform those boundaries. The position is apparently inscribed in documents, but what the position is about in terms of which tasks should be included is something that is produced and reproduced in discussions. While this discussion emerged around a drawing and was partially steered by a professional coach, other similar discussions emerged, for example, around practical problems to be solved. The relation with (or positioning in relation to) other positions is also constructed. The Organisation, for example, is produced as a group of people the group has to fight with, to impose one's will over, to convince, but also a group to understand and a group to which the Management Group has not delivered what it should have delivered. One could also interpret the problems the Management Group is describing as at least partly emerging in the construction of the Management Group performed by the members of the group in disconnection from the rest of the organisations. What has been inscribed in documents does not correspond to their positions as constructed by the rest of the organisation. Facing such discrepancy meant constructing failure. The position Management Group may be seen as lacking an interactive construction involving the whole organisation, which means that, in the organisation, the construction of the Management Group becomes “the ones sitting in meetings and working with something we have no idea of”. Such constructions contribute to constructing “reality” and, in this case, work at CleanTech in certain ways, and not others. Hence, they influence the direction in which organising evolves. Even though this is not the focus of my analysis, it can be interesting to notice that, as seen in chapter 4, this is also the direction at a more meso-level that the organising process takes, leading to the dismantling of the Management Group. Of course, such a development is not the result of just one conversation, but of a number of conversations that, to some extent, build on each other.
Of course, there is much more going on here too. As evidenced, the people interacting mention, for example, the use of artefacts in order to make things visible and understandable (Kellogg *et al*., 2006), here in the form of Powerpoint presentations and organisational diagrams—which in this case are constructed as “non working”. But in this major breakdown it becomes also evident that talk produces positions and positionings, a kind of construction that contributes to the structuring of relations and tasks, to production of direction, which means to the doing of leadership. In other words, what from a traditional perspective could be interpreted as failing leadership becomes the doing of leadership itself when one searches for the production of direction. Hence, although the formal leaders are not performing what they feel they are expected to do, they are still producing direction for organising at CleanTech, for example by constructing positions. It is a less glamorous achievement, but at the micro level it is nevertheless important as a premise for the development of organising processes in certain directions. In the following sections I elaborate on these ideas and link them to those contributions in leadership literature that I gather under the postheroic leadership label.

**Positions and Positionings**

As the example above shows, one way in which work is carried out is by constructing and reconstructing positions and positionings. Reading the empirical material it becomes evident that such constructions are not stable and unitary entities; rather, they seem to be local and temporary achievements existing in the relations that construct and reconstruct them. Local and temporary, but also repeated achievements, constructions that reappear in other conversations, something that gives these constructions an appearance of stability. Some constructions may become so taken for granted that they can be considered institutionalised (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) – one typical example of this process is the construction of the “expert” in some subject, a person that is continuously constructed as the one to ask for advice or consult in certain matters (even when formally not in charge of those matters). My interpretation is thus that, in order to perform work, people constantly produce positions and positioning.

What I mean by “positions” is the construction of single persons, or groups, in terms of what one is supposed to work with and how one is supposed to be, two aspects that I consider interrelated. In such a definition, I
include both organisational consideration of which tasks one is supposed to carry out and how, and aspects related to the identity of the people working. As is possible to see in the dialogues presented, these two aspects are often intertwined in the same interaction. Another concept I might have used is “roles”, but the risk in using such a label would be suggesting that I am speaking of something static and that I am referring to people consciously taking one or different ready-defined roles based on their own intentions and psychological character (cf. Davies and Harré, 2001; West and Zimmerman, 1987). This is not what the empirical material shows. My interpretation of the conversations observed is, in fact, that positions are continuously in the making and they are also produced when people are speaking of other things and not necessarily reflecting on what is being constructed. Moreover, positions constructed are interesting per se, even if people do not “assume” them later, as for example when the position of a person not present during the conversation is constructed. Such a construction might not influence that person so much, but the people present during the interaction have created a position to which they can now relate in a certain way; they have re-constructed their reality in a specific way.

Although such aspects are central to leadership research, and organisation theory at large, they are often not conceptualised in terms of constructions. For example, from a formal point of view, hierarchical arrangements and role descriptions are two mechanisms for achieving distribution and division of work. Organisational roles may then be conceptualised as abstract positions, designed for bodyless ideal workers, void of emotions and other preoccupations, performing work in an objective way – bureaucracy is the best example (Acker, 1990). Moreover, one typical way of conceptualising how roles are designed is that of two opposing requirements: the division of labour into tasks to be performed, and the coordination of such tasks in order to get work done (Mintzberg, 1983). Research has also studied the emergence of arrangements of a more informal nature, for example, by political activities within an organisation (Pfeffer, 1992).

The structuring of work is one of the dimensions important in leadership theories. In particular, the definition of tasks and responsibilities formulated by the leader for the co-workers, what has been labelled “preoccupation for the tasks” for example (Bryman, 1996). As I have tried to show in the dialogue introducing this chapter, and as will become even more evident in the coming extracts of conversations, such an aspect of leadership is constructed in everyday interactions as well, when positions and positionings are constructed. That is, there may be formal attempts at
influencing other’s work by formulating tasks and roles, but this is not the end of the story. Positions and positionings are also re-constructed on a local level when doing work, in a more or less formal way. Moreover, the distinction formal-informal may be seen as something researchers have applied to organisations, often considering the informal as inconvenient but at times functional, thus explaining away the organisation-in-action that is constituted mostly in what is usually named “informal” (Boden, 1994). It is in this organisation-in-action that positions are constantly constructed and reconstructed.

Moreover, as regards the identity aspect, which I also identify as part of the construction of positions, one could refer to a long tradition of research on the concept of identity in organisation studies. Following Lindgren and Wåhlin (2001), I would divide research into two streams: “the essentialists” and “the constructionists”. The former stream considers individuals and groups as carriers of a stable, coherent and unique character. The latter stream highlights instead the continuous construction of identities, performed in a social context, and subject to possible unresolved contradictions and changes. Such a distinction is also similar to Fletcher’s idea of growth conceptualised as either separation and individuation, or as interconnection and interdependence (Fletcher, 2004). Reading the empirical material, the second stance is the one that helps understanding of what is going on by conceptualising identity as constructed in relations. The self is therefore conceptualised as a social self, constructed in multiple dialogues. Identities might thus be considered as sensemaking performed by the self and by others in interaction (Alvesson and Billing, 1999). Identity is no longer a stable construct but is fluid, shifting and possibly consisting of contradictory and fragmented constructions (Czarniawska, 2000). While one could study such dynamics by analysing how individuals construct their identities in social interactions and through repeated self-reflection (Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001) or by analysing such dynamics in terms of identity work aimed at forming a more or less coherent understanding of the self (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), in this study I will limit my analysis to what happens in practice and which kind of identities become available in talk.

This aspect is related to the other dimension often found in leadership theories, a dimension that has more to do with the emotional side of leadership, “preoccupation for the people” (Bryman, 1996). This dimension encompasses a number of aspects. In any case, the building of relations between the leader and the followers is a central element, and how influ-
ence is achieved thanks to such relations. While my analysis is not centred on how formal leaders relate to co-workers, I focus on the ongoing, at times subtle, construction of available identities in terms of how people are and how they should be, and on the positioning of these identities relative to each other.

One important point is that I am not interested in why people say something or behave in a certain way. One could, of course, analyse such aspects by referring to that particular person’s background, education, agenda, and so on. On the other hand, I am more interested in what the interactions at work, situated as they are, produce in terms of available positions and positionings or rather, in showing that such constructions are going on and providing examples of how it is done. While one could argue that repetition of a certain construction of positions is what makes it stable and therefore provides more influence to the organising processes, what I will focus on is the local and temporary production of positions which in that moment and space are significant for what kind of “reality” is produced (cf. Shotter, 1993), which direction is taken. I will acknowledge that some positions become institutionalised (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966), for example “the expert”, but most of my attention will be directed to more fluid constructions.

Finally, by positioning I mean in which relation one position is to other positions. Of course, one could argue that the idea of “position” already implies that of positioning: a position is such only in relation to others. But I opt for using this term anyway in order to underline this aspect when it is particularly relevant to bring it forward. In positioning, power is produced and performed since the relations constructed offer different possibilities for action and for talk, for example (Davies and Harré, 2001). Of course, I recognise that structural aspects and employment conditions are important elements influencing how division of labour is implemented, and that not considering them might lead to a description blind to important power aspects. On the other hand, focusing on interactions when analysing the empirical material and what is done in interactions provides a complementary description to more structural analysis.

To conclude, the construction of positions and positionings may be seen as adding to traditional leadership theories by highlighting how aspects that are usually treated in a rather static manner, and thus considered as given premises, can instead be seen as ongoing constructions done by people together when interacting in concrete situations. Direction is produced
as “reality” and relations are constructed and structured in certain ways, and not others.

Explicit Discussions About Positions and Positionings

Looking again at the empirical material, I would like to reproduce some examples in which positions and positionings are produced in a number of ways, both at CLEANTECH and STRONGMAT. In the following paragraphs we find examples of conversations in which these constructions are more explicitly discussed; some of them might even feel quite obvious. The three examples I provide are related to different situations: the first refers to a new position that is constructed, the second to changing positions given the changed circumstances with which to cope, and the third to a potential position.

WELCOMING JACK, A NEW CO-WORKER

December 2006 at STRONGMAT. Jacob is the manager for Distribution and Transports department and we are in his office. The train has just left the warehouse next door, so now it is possible to hear each others’ voices again. We sit around a little round table. “We” is Jacob, Ingrid, Jack and I. Ingrid is responsible for managing relations with external contractors (cutting lines, for example). And Jack is a new co-worker, coming from one of the production lines. After many months of fighting for a new co-worker because of the work overload that the department has suffered from, finally Alexander, the unit manager, has agreed on allowing Jacob to have one more person in his department, partly thanks to the resignation of another employee belonging to the department. And they have found the right person, it seems.

We are laughing. Jacob has just stated how glad they are Jack is coming to work at their departments, now Ingrid and he will finally be able to get some vacation.
Welcoming Jack, a New Co-worker

I think it'll be good, I think I complement XX a bit more with my knowledge, what I do in cold rolling, it's a lot similar to what is needed here.

Yes, yes.

So I think it'll be great.

Yes, and it is, I think so too. Em, and it'll, yes, there are a number of things right now that will need attention. Among others this, now Company A...

Uhm.

...and then Pedro wants, he wants to start on, or as such, has already started some subcontract jobs, but we want to formalise it a lot more, and see if we can define the process routes and get it working properly. Em,...

Then we have Company B.

Then we have Company B.

Right, which is now yet another process route and then it slipped a little so production was subcontracted.

Yes, yes, uhm.
The discussion takes up in quite an unstructured way a number of things that need to be done, some have been “waiting” for someone to take care of them for some time. The list of things intersect with other elements such as what Jack is qualified for because of previous jobs, who is going to retire, what other people have started working with. And so the conversation goes on, too.
While there was a clear need for one more person, there was no formal description of what that person would work with. The conversation in this first meeting is therefore about such questions. I would interpret this dialogue as constructing Jack's position. As we can see from the extract above, different grounds for what Jack's duties will be are presented: Jack's own knowledge and experience, Pedro having started a business, Kenneth's retirement that actualises a task – a task in which Jack has been involved in the past –, a new business and a contractor whose volume is increasing (because of increasing sales and internal production problems) – a task with which Jack has already started to work in his previous job.
The discussion continues. Jacob points out that Jack’s language skills will also be useful for the department. Another useful area of knowledge that Jack brings with him is that of the quality assurance system, a task he has worked with on the production line. This will be helpful since Anna has resigned, and she was the one working with those matters.
The job Rickard has done is moved to another department, but there will still be a need for some supervision and management. Another task for Jack—Jack or Andrea, as Ingrid points out. And the interfaces between the positions will be discussed in coming meetings.
Of course, this last part is more the production of a narrative about how positions are created, than any direct illustration of it. But it is interesting to note that they are themselves making sense of how people find their place and how working happens in tight relation to other co-workers, a relation characterised by mutual support. This is also an example of the construction of positionings: the relation to other positions is constructed—in this case in the form of no fixed boundaries between them and supporting relations. Similar discussions will take place afterwards. Some tasks will be discussed, others will grow as Jack, alone or together with someone else, works on things that need to be done or that he had already started working on.
Summarising, this was an example of an explicit discussion about a position, in this case a new position, and its positioning in relation to other positions, for instance Andrea’s and Ingrid’s.

MOVING THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE U.S. WAREHOUSE TO THE HEAD OFFICE

December 2006, still at Strongmat. As usual, when the Christmas holidays are approaching, urgent tasks emerge. This year, the management has decided to move ownership of a warehouse in the US back to the Swedish division, since the consultants performing an audit had made a remark about how the financing of such stock had been implemented. The problem has to be solved before Christmas. It involves several thousand tonnes of material that has to be “moved” in the administrative IT systems, not to mention the necessity for making an inventory of the material actually in stock against that registered in the system before re-registering it. Understandably, this quickly became a major issue.

We are in the conference room of the department. The unit manager, Alexander, has come down all the way from the head office in order to meet David, who is working directly under him, and Hans, who is working in Jacob’s department. David and Hans work together on almost all tasks and have known each other, and Alexander, for decades. Today they have a lot of issues to discuss. After a while, they start talking about the situation with the US warehouse and the consequent question of transports to and from the warehouse. While the re-registering in the IT system has been decided on, questions related to it, such as the one about the responsibility for transports (operationally and formally), have not been considered in detail and are still unclear.

But, as I said to Jacob, it has to be someone who’s done it before.
As we see, there are discussions going on about who should do what, discussions that also involve other people and other fora. The three of them seem to agree that a formal position responsible for transports may be created, but that in practice things should go on as before; they are not competent to
do the job required and their own positions should not include these kinds of tasks. In the following dialogue, positions concerning Kevin, the USA unit manager, are discussed.

**Kevin:** And Kevin’s ambition is for us to take care of everything, [...] that’s been the argument anyway all these years...

**Hans:** Yeah, it’s going to be just the same now.

**Alex:** But, so to speak, the expertise is there, they work at StrongMat too, and it’s their job to run, continue, there’s no reason for us to take it over now. Now we’re going to have a talk to them and make sure we steer them [in the right direction].

**Kevin:** This expertise, there’s more of it in [the other Swedish division]. They’re better at it.

David: Yes, but who’s doing it for us today?

**Kevin:** It’s, it’s Kevin that buys it [transports and stocking place].

**Hans:** Sure, but I mean, [...] if it’s people who’ve been doing it year out, year in, it’s bloody obvious they’ll have to go on doing it.

**David:** [...] quite agree.

**Hans:** In that case you go to that meeting tomorrow and make it clear that this doesn’t mean we’re taking over tasks, we take responsibility but we take for granted that the ones who have been doing this go on doing it, and we want better reporting.
The formal situation in this case is clear. The management has made a decision and formally the warehouse is going to be managed by the Swedish division. Fredrik from the other department has been given the task. On the other hand, people are sceptical about how realistic such a solution is and afraid these changes will affect their work. In the dialogue above, we see how the three men construct the position of the guy in the US (and in general of the US unit) and the position of the Swedish unit. Change in the formal arrangement only partially affects how they construct such positions. The tasks attached to them are reconstructed as the same as before, for example. It is anticipated that the US unit will try to move the boundary between the unit and this department and such a reconstruction should be resisted. In this way, even Hans' position is constructed: he will be the unit's voice at the meeting, he will make clear that things are not going to change and that the unit does not want to be involved, and such affirmations will be legitimate. Such a position is also constructed as different from that of Hans's manager, Jacob, but as the de-facto one. Indirectly Jacob is constructed as incompetent and blurring the boundaries of the department instead of keeping them clear and definite. To be sure, I am not saying that after this dialogue, things will work out exactly as these three men have decided, although the position described is indeed the one Hans will perform at the telephone meeting, and with success. What I am most interested in pointing out is that in this conversation certain positions have been constructed that allow for/enable certain courses of action and/or conversations, which make sense in relation to them. These positions are, in other words, like bricks that have been added to the social construction of work at StrongMat, contributing to this building in a specific way.

**DISCUSSING SALES STATISTICS – LEONARD’S ROLE**

Moving in space and time, we are now in the conference room at CleanTech, where most of the sales people are gathered around the table, looking at the Powerpoint presentation projected on the screen on the wall. We are looking at sales figures and trends. They are discussing the figures regarding sales and budget for spare parts. Peter comments on the fact that Ann said if they hire one more person, the budget figure for spare parts is to be increased.
These utterances spark off a short discussion on whether they are actually actively selling spare parts or not. This discussion involves more people and is centred on what is meant by “actively selling” and what is the case for how Leonard works, as well as what potential there might be.
YOU KNOW I THINK I UNDERSTOOD MAYBE EH, SOMETHING DIFFERENT, I SEE LEONARD AS TODAY, HE’S AN ORDER DESK AGENT IN SPARE PARTS...

EXACTLY.

...I CAN SEE THAT THAT, WHAT SHALL WE CALL IT, THAT PART OF CLEANTECH, LEONARD’S PART, COULD INCREASE GREATLY BY ACTIVELY WORKING ON THE MARKET.... WE, WE RECEIVE CUSTOMERS TODAY, NOT...

...SELLING, THAT’S WHAT WE’RE TALKING ABOUT.

OUT WITH, OUT WITH A SALESPERSON TO VOLVO GROUP IN NORWAY, FOR INSTANCE, WE WILL TAKE IT, GIVE INFORMATION ON PUMPS, BECAUSE PUMPS ARE A HUGE THING.

ACTIVE...

ACTIVE...

YEAH, THAT’S RIGHT, IT WAS MORE LIKE THAT EARLIER, WHEN WE ALL WORKED WITH.

YOU KNOW I THINK I UNDERSTOOD MAYBE EH, SOMETHING DIFFERENT, I SEE LEONARD AS TODAY, HE’S AN ORDER DESK AGENT IN SPARE PARTS...

EXACTLY.

...I CAN SEE THAT THAT, WHAT SHALL WE CALL IT, THAT PART OF CLEANTECH, LEONARD’S PART, COULD INCREASE GREATLY BY ACTIVELY WORKING ON THE MARKET.... WE, WE RECEIVE CUSTOMERS TODAY, NOT...

...SELLING, THAT’S WHAT WE’RE TALKING ABOUT.

OUT WITH, OUT WITH A SALESPERSON TO VOLVO GROUP IN NORWAY, FOR INSTANCE, WE WILL TAKE IT, GIVE INFORMATION ON PUMPS, BECAUSE PUMPS ARE A HUGE THING.

ACTIVE...

ACTIVE...

YEAH, THAT’S RIGHT, IT WAS MORE LIKE THAT EARLIER, WHEN WE ALL WORKED WITH.
...proactive sales instead of sitting receiving phone calls from customers...

When we talk in our bit it sort of belongs to the customers and relations and that sort of thing, it's not really that kind of sales we're talking about now.

...and on this side I say we don't have any active sales. Membrane [another product] is different though since it's on our patch, so to speak, but on that side where Leonard is, what he's selling, we don't have any active sales there.

No, I can agree there.

And there we'll have to, there there's got to be a lot to be gained from...

I mean, hell, Leonard brings in...

...with activities and drives...

More money than any of us do.

Yeah, or at least as much, of the same magnitude.

But he, he sells a lot of pumps.

Or gets orders for pumps I would say, because he doesn't sell...

Or gets orders for pumps I would say because he doesn't sell...
While the previous conversations were centred on positions, this interaction is not focused on such a construction from the beginning. They come to talk about Leonard's position when discussing other things, in particular sales statistics and budget. In this case, we can see that while constructing a position, they are also talking about another subject: what “selling” is about, how selling is performed. As regards Leonard’s position, he is not present and does not participate to this interaction, but his position is made sense of and constructed: his present position and a desired future position in terms of which tasks should be involved. Thus, in the course of the conversation Leonard’s position became actively constructed, along with its positioning in relation to the group position Sales and the group position Maintenance and Spare Parts (the group to which Leonard belongs today). Therefore, although Leonard may remain unaware of this particular construction, the way in which his position has been constructed matters during the rest of this conversation and should matter in coming conversations involving these people; they have something to relate to now when talking about Leonard and his work, for example, when discussing a new hire, a person that will work about 50% with spare parts sales.

Direction Produced in Interactions
– A Postheroic View of Leadership

In this chapter, I have presented some examples of interactions in which positions and positionings are produced. As noted, we are talking of ongoing constructions. Such constructions are part of the structuring of relations within an organisation, if not the main element. Instead of heroic leaders heavily influencing their subordinates by showing preoccupation for the task and preoccupation for the people, we see people interacting as work has to be done and positions being constructed in such interactions. This is thus one aspect of what leadership is about according to traditional understandings, but instead of happening thanks to one single person’s actions and talks and their passive reception by subordinates, it happens in interactions among people in organisations. Leadership is therefore, in this sense, done not by a person but in interactions in which several persons take part; it is a social phenomenon.

Such understanding of leadership is supported by what I identify as a second stream of research contesting the heroic ideal in leadership, although from a different perspective than the stream I called “shared
leadership”. I choose to call this stream “postheroic leadership” even though there are many labels used by authors, for example distributed leadership and dispersed leadership (Harris, 2008). This group of contributions includes quite different approaches, but they all have in common a diffuse idea that the time of the hero is passed and that new leadership ideals and understandings are required. Even though, as in all new fields, researchers might use the same label meaning different things, and even though certain studies contain elements of both this strand and of the “shared leadership” strand described before, I would characterise these contributions as more ideological. The basic idea could be summarised, in simplified terms, in the conviction that there is something wrong with the idealisation of the leader into a hero and that we need a different kind of ideal. Moreover, the focus moves away from individuals towards the relations and interactions among individuals, the idea being that leadership is about concerted and collective processes rather than individual achievements. Therefore I group in the same stream both scholars preoccupied with normatively promoting new kinds of practices and ideals, such as empathy and relation building, and scholars proposing new conceptualisations of leadership, where the unit of analysis is no longer the individual formal leader. I see the attention to social processes, interactions and to the non-individual dimension of leadership as elements common to these scholars.

In other words, scholars are trying to question and re-conceptualise leadership. The urgent need to do this comes at times from empirical observations providing different views of what the practice of leadership might be, at times from theoretical discussion, not least the often-mentioned incapacity of leadership studies to reach some consensus, which may be interpreted as shortcomings in how leadership has been studied. These scholars share an ambition to develop leadership theory beyond the individualised notion of leadership dominating in the field and to discuss how we could otherwise understand leadership. At times, the sense of urgency in bringing up discussions on the concept of leadership itself comes from emancipatory preoccupations and the recognition of the need to be aware of the intertwining of gender, power and leadership constructions not to fail the purpose of re-constructing leadership ideals and practices differently (Fletcher, 2004).

Postheroic generally indicates more participative and democratic forms of leadership. In some more conservative descriptions it has to do with sharing responsibility, encouraging a sense of ownership among co-workers and the leader assuming an active role in that, since, for example, followers
are supposed not to take responsibility by themselves (Huey, 1994; Dutton, 1996) – something quite close to “shared leadership”. In other descriptions it is more about participation, empowerment, development, caring, interdependence and mutual growth (Eicher, 1997; Fletcher, 2004; Raelin, 2003). Relational, collectivist and non-authoritarian practices are described as characterising contemporary expert organisations (Koivunen, 2007a). A leaderful organisation may thus suit contemporary forms of work, an organisation in which more than one person can offer her/his leadership at the same time, without taking away leadership from others (Raelin, 2003). Even “mainstream” researchers like Mintzberg are embracing this new ideal. For example, he proposes to de-emphasise the role of the leader, using the expression “managing quietly” to downplay the role of individual heroes and recognise the contribution of a collective social system to companies’ achievements (Mintzberg, 1999).

Another contribution found is the problematisation of the unit of analysis taken for granted in leadership studies, traditionally the single individual or the dyadic relationship between the leader and the follower, in order to produce deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The problem with the dichotomies leader-follower and leadership-followership is that “they prescribe, rather than describe, a division of labor” (Gronn, 2002, p. 428). Leadership can thus be conceptualised as encompassing “patterns or varieties of distributed leadership” (ibid., p. 424) and defined as a “status ascribed to one individual, an aggregate of separated individuals, sets of small numbers of individuals acting in concert or larger plural-member organizational units” based on “the influence attributed voluntarily by organization members” (ibid., p. 428). Leadership is also described as a distributed practice including concerted action, rather than aggregated individual acts, which results in taking a holistic view of how things are accomplished in organisations – this often results in neglecting ambiguities and conflicts, though. Leadership may thus be thought of as emergent collective meaning-making and a constructionist approach is required to analyse the phenomenon (Ospina and Sorenson, 2006). A more dynamic and distributed view of leadership may also mean that leadership is considered a function that may be shared or performed by single individuals, different people at different times (Yukl, 1999, p. 292-293). In a similar vein, Gronn later revisited his position, shifting to “leadership configurations” as the preferred unit of analysis: an arrangement of practice best understood as hybrid leadership, where there is a place for both individual and collective understandings of leadership (Gronn, 2009). Finally distributed leader-
ship may also be described as “stretched over the work of multiple leaders” (Spillane and Diamond, 2007, p. 8). The study of leadership then focuses on day-to-day practices in organisations, rather than starting from structures or roles, and the unit of analysis is a web of actors, artefacts and situations. Leadership is therefore conceptualised as activities, not only (individual) actions but also, and most importantly, interactions. In other words, the interplay between the actions of several people becomes crucial in order to understand how leadership is stretched over leaders and followers. Interestingly, in this last case even “leadership struggles” are recognised: those difficult, at times painful, struggles often ignored when just focusing on the success side of interactions and their outcomes (ibid.). Summarising, these scholars are suggesting a more dynamic vision of leadership, acknowledging the possibility of several actors, possibly different from time to time, being interdependent and being involved in leadership activities. This is a move towards an understanding of leadership as a social and interactive process.

**What Does This Tell Us About Leadership?**

Going back to the situation at Cleantech, I concluded chapter 4 by claiming that leadership was difficult to find in practice if one searches for what is described when talking about leadership in abstract terms, practice being much more operative, contradictory and mundane. Also, shared leadership in practice is not as smooth as in the accounts provided by Cleantech people, and by the literature more in general. This should, however, not be interpreted as leading to the inevitable conclusion that leadership is an individual matter and/or that the concept of leadership does not contribute to understanding what happens in working processes (being, for example, more related to managers’ identity construction). There are also other options. Observing meetings and re-reading the empirical material, it is striking how much is going on even in daily interactions. There are no attempts at heroic influence, but still important contributions to how organising develops, to the production of direction. In this chapter, I highlighted one type of construction that takes up a relatively large amount of space and time in meetings, and that is done several times during a conversation.

Such an analysis has a place within, and can be informed by, the growing stream of postheroic leadership contributions, in which leadership is seen as a collective social activity rather than an individual phenomenon,
function or characteristic. In particular, the unit of analysis is no longer the individual formal leader. Rather, it is the interaction among people (including people not in formal leadership positions) and what happens in such interaction that is studied. Leadership is what people do together in order to produce direction, a collective achievement. It does not have to do with attempts to exert strong influence on the part of the formal leader, but with “softer” relations among people in the organisation that are vulnerable to each other, and with what happens in these relations. Also, the processual nature of leadership becomes more evident, in the sense that we have an ongoing production of direction to which different people contribute as interactions unfold:

Any member of the social system may exhibit leadership at any time, and there is no clear distinction between leaders and followers. Various leadership functions may be carried out by different people who influence what the group does, how it is done, and the way people in the group relate to each other.

(Yukl, 2010, p. 22)

The construction of positions and positioning may be seen as one leadership function, in Yukl’s terms, since it provides direction in organising. However, the risk of such an analysis is that it places a great deal of attention on positive and concerted interactions in which people seem to reach consensus about what has to be done and how it has to be done, thus somewhat simplifying the complexity of interactions at work that may be characterised by conflicts and contradictions.

There is also another risk with, at least some, contributions within postheroic leadership: by criticising— and possibly just because of such strong criticism of—the ideal of the lone hero, scholars are claiming that heroic narratives are just the top of an iceberg, that there is more going on under the surface, work that we do not recognise as leadership today, but they also, at times, construct another ideal, a “post-hero” when talking about leaders. This is a different kind of hero, somewhat more like a martyr, in the sense that we are presented with ideal leaders willing to renounce personal glory in order to foster others’ growth. Celebrating a quiet leader means also being trapped into an individualistic understanding of leadership and not making a complete shift to a new belief system not based on a masculine logic of effectiveness, which denies interdependence and celebrates individual achievement (Fletcher, 2004). Instead of moving the focus to other people in organisations and to relations among them, the risk, from
my point of view, is that it celebrates an even more special hero. This may happen if the researcher starts by analysing how the leader relates to other people, rather than more radically breaking with the leadership tradition of placing more attention on certain individuals and instead more broadly looking at interactions in the organisation. My analysis may thus be seen as a contribution to putting more focus on the aspect of interdependence.

In summary, postheroic contributions have provided an important development and they have directly challenged leadership norms and assumptions in a more radical way. Attention is given to the collaborative and interactive dimension of leadership and the question is raised of which acts are silenced and which are brought forward. Rationality has no longer precedence in description of how leadership should be exercised. The downside is the risk of reconstructing a hero, just different, and of placing too much attention on the “positive side” of leadership, since researchers are proposing new ideals or understandings in an appreciative way. The collective dimension is often underlined, leaving little space for more ambiguous relations and interactions. Moreover, focusing on what is collectively done often means focusing on how several individuals do things together, rather than on the “doing” itself.

As showed in this chapter, there are interactions at work that can be interpreted as collective acts contributing to the production of direction, in the cases presented, the construction of positions and positionings. Therefore, while the search for leadership as described in the ideal and for shared leadership, in particular, was rather fruitless, searching for the production of direction in organisations proves to be an easier enterprise. It is an enterprise that is supported by postheroic conceptions of leadership allowing for appreciating more trivial interactions as sites for leadership and enabling us to treat what happens in those interactions as leadership, even when formal leaders are not involved or are just one of the parts involved, by including more individuals in the doing of leadership. This way, we can see the situation at CLEANTECH with different eyes and appreciate the leadership work done: discussing their failure, the management group was doing leadership by producing direction for organising in the form of constructing positions. Similarly, I have also provided examples of construction of positions and positioning at the other company studied, STRONGMAT. In this way, the theoretical framework has changed from shared leadership to postheroic leadership and the focus has also moved from a more general question of organising formal leadership in practice to a more concentrated focus on the doing of leadership in practice. Nevertheless, such accounts seem not to
do justice to and to ignore a lot of what is going on in the empirical material, for example, all the situations in which conflicts are not resolved, constructions are more implicit or contradictions appear—situations that are rather common in organisations. In the next chapter I will, therefore, go on re-reading the empirical material and go beyond the assumption that the production direction is something consensual and harmonious. Are there more interactions in which direction is produced? Figure 3 summarises the steps taken so far.
Chapter 1–2

Chapter 4

Shared Leadership

Practice
Focus on how leadership is shared in actual work situations, rather than as reported in interviews and questionnaires.

Process
Leadership is not static, it develops over time.

Chapter 5

Postheroic Leadership

Practice
Focus on how direction is produced in trivial interactions at work – leadership as a collective achievement throughout the organisation.

Process
The production of direction is emergent and involves different people at different times.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Figure 3. A summary of the analysis so far.
In chapter 5, searching for the production of direction I arrived at identifying the construction of positions and positioning as an important element. The conversations reproduced provided illustrations of collective and explicit constructions of positions. But when observing people working, my interpretation is that occasions in which some form of consensus is reached are not necessarily frequent. Does this mean that the production of direction may also be a rare achievement? A close reading of the empirical material leads me to conclude that the answer is no and that direction is also produced in more ambiguous and contested ways. I therefore start by introducing some more conversations and providing my analysis of what is going on in them that has to do with constructing positions. Some of these conversations reach some form of consensus, others do not really. Moreover, all these conversations are centred on specific themes and not on the construction of positions itself. In other words, these are conversations about something else, which anyway end up constructing positions and positioning. I also analyse how, even in the interviews I made, it is possible to see the ongoing construction of positions and positionings. My reading of the empirical material thus leads me to move the theoretical framework from “postheroic leadership” to a processual view of leadership, which better informs my analysis in order to reach a deeper understanding of leadership as a social phenomenon.

**Constructing Positions and Positionings in a Less Explicit Way, While Discussing Other Matters**

While what I have discussed so far are interactions that were quite explicitly about the construction of positions and positionings, even though
the people involved would probably not use such terms, I now focus on interactions that are producing such constructions in far less explicit way. Even in this case, I give a variety of examples: people’s positioning relative to each other, the construction of the position “the other”, the contested construction of a position and competitive constructions of a position, non-construction of the position of manager, and finally the construction of the position of the organisation.

**OPENING THE MEETING – A LITTLE FLIRT**

If we look again at the meeting at STRONGMAT introduced in chapter 5 with Alexander (unit manager), David (Alexander’s subordinate) and Hans (working at the Distribution and Transports department), we can analyse the first part of that interaction. After some small talk, the three men start with the meeting.
BUT, I THINK WE SHOULD START WITH THIS COOPERATION WITH [THE OTHER DIVISION], SINCE WE’RE TO HAVE THE DEBRIEFING THERE. YOU’VE BEEN GIVEN A BUNCH OF PAPER AFTER ALL.

SURE, BUT WHAT THESE GUYS DO, I SHOULDN’T NEED TO DO. I TRUST THEM AFTER ALL [HE TALKS TO ME], IT TURNS OUT FINE NEARLY ALL THE TIME, DOESN’T IT?

WOULD YOU CLARIFY ‘NEARLY’?

WHEN IT GETS BETTER HE MEANS.

YOU SEE, IT’S LIKE THIS, THAT TIME IN NINETEEN NINETY... OH, WHenever it was, did something wrong, [...] NO, NINETY-SEVEN [...] IT MUST HAVE BEEN EARLIER. ABOUT EIGHTY-FIVE, THAT WAS WHEN I MET YOU FOR THE FIRST TIME...

Yeah, though I haven’t read, but I thought you’d have done it...

[AUGH]

STOP IT NOW, YOU’RE COMPLETELY INCORRIGIBLE!

A GOOD EXAMPLE FOR US...

But, I think we should start with this cooperation with [the other division], since we’re to have the debriefing there. You’ve been given a bunch of paper after all.

Yeah, though I haven’t read, but I thought you’d have done it...

Laugh]

Stop it now, you’re completely incorrigible!

A good example for us...

Sure, but what these guys do, I shouldn’t need to do. I trust them after all [he talks to me], it turns out fine nearly all the time, doesn’t it?

Would you clarify ‘nearly’?

When it gets better he means.

You see, it’s like this, that time in nineteen ninety... oh, whenever it was, did something wrong, [...] No, ninety-seven [...], it must have been earlier. About eighty-five, that was when I met you for the first time...
I interpret this interaction as a reconstruction of the tight relationship between the three of them, providing all three of them with self-confidence. A “we” becomes reconstructed, a tight “we” that one can also see in relation to the rest of the organisation. A “we” in the sense that they have to find a common position, but also in the sense than, joking about the fact that Alexander comes to the meeting unprepared (he has not read the draft of the report) and that this is not a problem since he trusts they have done an outstanding job, the three men flatter each other. While I am not affirming that their relation “really” is special, it becomes constructed as special in this interaction – we could even speak of flirting (Roper, 1996). Their positions are also reconstructed as senior positions: they have been working together for years.

Alexander is reconstructed as hierarchically superior and the other two as loyal and trusted, but they are also constructed as on the same level, all involved in the discussion about “how we think and how we don’t think”. In this way, in an apparently trivial exchange of words at the beginning of a meeting, the three men have been positioned in relation to each other and to the rest of the organisation. They can go on talking starting from such positions.

**Material to Publish on the Internet**

**— How the Project Managers Are**

We go back to CleanTech. It is February 2007. We are at a Marketing meeting. Michael, a young consultant hired to help the company with marketing questions, is complaining to Ann and Ellen about how few “success stories” to post on the internet he has received from the project managers. This was something that had been previously decided: since project managers are the ones with the best knowledge of the project, at the end of it they should write a few sentences to be edited and published by Michael.

**Yes, sure it is, and it’s really, it goes really slowly forward...**

[Laugh]
As I read it, here the project manager’s position is being constructed both in terms of what they should do and what they do not perform, but also in terms of how they are, as people. Thus, discussing the website of the com-
pany, this interaction ends up being about the construction of a position, Project Manager, and about positioning them as opposed to “us”, sales people, implicitly. The project manager is, therefore, constructed as not caring for marketing, not particularly socially competent, not really in control of his (they are only men) own project. Later in the conversation this position is also compared, and contrasted, to the position Salesperson.

Interestingly, the position Project Manager as different is also constructed in interviews with the project managers themselves, even though in another way – the positioning in terms of opposition is reconstructed:

I THINK THE PROJECT PEOPLE ARE MORE METICULOUS THAN THE SALESMAN, THE SALESMAN WANTS TO SELL, THEY CAN COMPROMISE ON THIS AND THAT AND I’M SURE THEY’RE ALLOWED TO DO SO, BUT IN THAT CASE WE HAVE TO KNOW ON WHAT, AND THAT WE AGREE ABOUT IT [ THAT THE PROJECT PEOPLE ARE INFORMED ABOUT THAT AND APPROVED THAT], SO THEY DON’T COME LATER AND, AND WE’VE GONE ALONG WITH THIS, BECAUSE THEN IT’LL BE, IT CAN BE A BIT HARD.

THE ORDER STOCK IS TOO LOW
– OR SOMEONE HAS NOT REGISTERED RECENT ORDERS

Spring 2007 at CLEANTECH. At the sales meeting Ann, the manager, mentions that the order stock is very low, something that has a number of negative consequences. Jesper, one of the sales persons, does not recognise what she describes. He has himself sold a few plants recently and has a number of orders coming in in the near future. The order stock in the system must therefore be wrong.
...maybe understand that, you can never have 100%, but the order stock, that has to be correct...

...otherwise the cash flow forecasts won’t work or anything.

It has to be 100% correct.

What I’ve written down anyway it’s those we’ve been given the order number of or that we’ve you know a written contract or done something.

[...] but you’ve handed it in to Ellen [working with administration] to put it into the system.

Yeah, but the -

No, I haven’t got that far yet, it’s on the way.

But you’ll hand it in to her so we get it in this week.

You know, I’m completely stuck in a load of bloody operating instructions, and that means I...

How come you’re doing that?
I don't know, it puts... the project manager.

...there's nobody else who can do it.

But then you'll have to show the project manager so he can solve it.

Yes, but they don't know the system, they can't press those buttons, they can't tell Scania how to run it [...] so unfortunately the harsh reality is that a lot of the selling time is spent on things like that.

But what this is about is that you have to hand it over and teach someone else.

I don't know who to come up with then.

The project manager.

Silence.

It's their job.

Uuhh.
A conversation about the order stock and its level ended up being a relatively moderate conflict, not about the order stock itself, but about what a salesperson is supposed to do. One could read a negotiation of the position Salesperson here. Is the priority giving the best service possible to the customers or spending time in administration? Such discussion is somewhat unresolved: there is no consensus. This is something that comes up in a number of conversations. In fact, in similar discussions one may notice how the construction of salespeople as heroic, putting the customer first and sacrificing their time and energy for the benefit of the customer, is intertwined with the construction of seniority. Alternative constructions of Salesperson, including a more active use of technology, for example, and an approach to sales less related to personal bonding with the customer, are intertwined with the construction of “the younger generations” – as we can read in next section. Again, we may see that we are talking of both practical tasks related to the position – what one should do and how – and identity aspects related to the position – what kind of person one is or one should be.

As in the previous example, project managers are constructed in opposition to salespersons. They lack motivation and they lack competence. Such constructions are not particularly contested: they may be even said to be taken for granted; what is more unresolved, and repeatedly reconstructed, is where the boundary should be drawn between the two positions.

A NEW CRM SYSTEM – OR THE FEAR OF TECHNOLOGY

We stay at CleanTech for another sales meeting. Michael, the marketing consultant, is here to present a number of things he has been working with recently. One of them is a new Customer Relationship Management system. In fact, he had understood that the sales people needed something more sophisticated than what they have at their disposal today. Therefore, he wants to present to them a system that seems to offer good functionalities without being too complicated. Michael starts by describing why the new system is needed and how it can be used.
But soon a new IT application to be used and learned is met with resistance. While Peter and Joe, two younger co-workers, are described as diligent in using the old applications, Jesper and Alec express doubts and, even, fear.
No, no, but, well, I'd go along, I'd go along with that, and I know we had Kontakt [another IT application] and we also have a little box to write events in Geeves [the IT system].

Yeah but nobody knows how to use it.

Sure we do, everybody certainly knows how to use it, but nobody does it.

No, OK then.

And now I'm wondering like this, in Kontakt I see, I know that a number of event reports were written down, I know Peter was very good at that, Joe wrote a bit too. I myself was bloody useless at it. I never wrote things down. I never took the time to get to know the system because I haven't had that kind of time to work in this system, and write down that I talked and he said such and such, because for me it's still like this that when I call after three months, I don't give a damn about whether he's had lumbago or not, I just want to sell.

Yeah, but we are different, I suppose we are different then.
And now, now we say, [...] now I'm a bit like this, now if we have to use a new system, hell, I'll shit myself, if we have to learn something new it will cause trouble.

You understand what I mean?

Yes, I mean...

I think Jesper feels that too.

Yes, because I...

You don't need to be so scared.

[...]

But then I don't understand, start to log the work in Geeves instead then. The information I've got is that Geeves is too complicated and some capabilities are missing, and that's why I was supposed to check out in parallel, like, to be able to work in a different way somehow[...]

We'll have to learn, Jesper.

If there's a need then we can start to discuss.

I understood a need, but it's possible you don't feel it, then of course it's...
Again, here we could read the construction of what selling is about and of different generations. For example, is it about the personal contact with the customer and a strong focus on selling, or is it about the systematic collection of information and its rational use? And should the salesperson rely only on himself (there are only men) or should one improve efficiency for oneself but also for the whole department by using modern tools? The construction of Salesperson is thus related to these themes and different generations are constructed as different kinds of salespeople. Thus, competing constructions are performed and technology is one issue provoking intense discussion – intense discussion since this has not only to do with tasks to be performed, but also with one’s identity as salesperson. Later on, for example, Jesper will also claim his concern about IT taking over and replacing human relations with these words: “No, but wait, I, this is how I feel, it may be that I’m old and grey and soon to retire and all that, but, I still damned well feel like this that we can’t let a program take over and control our relations to one person or company or a customer, it’s a feeling you have as, as a human being if, if you, you don’t do business with a company, with a company, you do it person to person. Isn’t that right?” In very similar terms, in a study performed by Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist and David Knights (2004), an older teacher said “I know how to teach and should that in any way be better with a machine? My knowledge is placed in my head” (p. 202). I see the two accounts as related since they have to do with the core of the occupation, and its human side, being threatened by the machines. Even in their study, older men were the ones resisting new technology, something that complicates the usual assumption of masculinity and technology being constructed in relation to each other.

In the end, which construction prevails also has practical consequences for the purchase or not of the IT application for CRM, its eventual use and how the activity of selling is to be developed (for example, should there be more than one person involved in a sales project, thanks to shared information available with the new application, or should the contact with the customer be personal and based on previous projects?). To be noticed, a construction of the position in terms of nonchalance, adversity to technology, adversity to complying with administrative duty seems legitimate (does not need to be apologised for) when combined with the construction of seniority.
SIGNING A CONTRACT FOR THE NORWEGIAN MARKET
— THE MANAGER’S ROLE

We continue to follow the same meeting. A contract for the exclusive sale of Supplier X’s products on the Norwegian market has been discussed a number of times in previous meetings. Jesper has known the owner of Supplier X for years and they have a good relationship, which is one reason for his involvement in this task. Ann, as the manager for the sales department, expresses the need of control over this issue. There had also been a problem with another company selling Supplier X’s products in Norway that had not been informed about the new situation. If this problem is solved, the contract is to be finally signed at Event Y.

**EXACTLY. ER, WE’VE TALKED A BIT ABOUT NORWAY, SUPPLIER X. AND IF WE HAVE PERMISSION TO SELL SUPPLIER X IN NORWAY OR NOT. I’VE BEEN INFORMED THAT IT’S TO BE DISCUSSED AT EVENT Y, WHO’S GOING? JESPER?**

**PETER, ME AND PAUL.**

**THEN WE’LL HAVE TO GET TOGETHER AND COME TO SOME SORT OF AGREEMENT BEFORE THAT.**

**I DON’T THINK THERE’S ANY REASON FOR THAT. ACTUALLY, THE BALL’S IN SUPPLIER X’S COURT AND I’VE ALREADY UNOFFICIALLY BEEN GIVEN THE GREEN LIGHT THAT IT, WE GO AHEAD WITH NORWAY.**

**EMM, YOU HAVENT SAID THAT TO ME.**

**NO, BUT I HAVEN’T BECAUSE IT’S IN FACT THE SAME MAIL YOU GOT FROM WOLFGANG, THAT HE SEES NO OBSTACLES, ER, AND...**

**IT DOESN’T SAY IN MY, I THINK IT ONLY SAYS THAT WE’LL TALK ABOUT THE MATTER AT EVENT Y.**

**Yeah, that’s the last but, but there is, you see, they have nothing against, there’s a, a question mark and it’s these, what are they called Peter? Companies, er [Supplier X had not communicated to another company that they would no longer be allowed to sell their products, since CleanTech has now the exclusive right].**

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**Peter** | **Alec** | **Carl** | **Jesper** | **Ann** | **Michael** | **Ellen**
---|---|---|---|---|---|---
**Patrick** | **Peter** | **Jesper** | **Ann** | **Michael** | **Ellen** | **Ellen**
Uhm, it’s good if you talk to me because in fact it’s me who’s going to tell...

[...]

But it’s important that we get a written agreement so we know that things like this don’t happen again, [...]

But in principle I say I don’t give a damn about how Supplier X solves it, we just have to have Norway.

Yes, but we must have it on paper as well.

Such problem it’s none of my business.

No, we must have a paper as well.

Yeah.

Should we have, so that we can ask for compensation next time they make fools of themselves, and do things like this.

No, but then they won’t make fools of themselves later, [...]

Such problem it’s none of my business.
Apparently, the arrangement has been discussed without Ann’s knowledge and the agreement with Supplier X has been constructed as concluded and working well even if it is not formally defined yet, something not so crucial. Therefore, Ann has not been involved in the preparation for Event Y, preparation for which she expresses a need to be involved in. This could be an illustration of how the position Manager needs to be constructed in interactions and in relation to other positions; it is not just a title that has consequences in itself, or rather not necessarily the consequences that the person to which the title belongs desires and believes is entitled to – even though the label “manager” may be interpreted as performative, for example in the sense of which kinds of behaviour one is expected to perform. In this conflict, Ann is not constructed as a manager in terms of the discursive construction of manager in our society, – she is not even asked about her opinion in the matter. The task discussed is not constructed as requiring Ann’s involvement. The task is constructed by the salesmen as appropriately performed via informal relations. A challenge to this construction is provided by Ann’s affirmations: the need for formal agreements and the need for a formal manager to be involved. Consensus is not achieved and the two constructions of what Ann’s position and the salesmen’s positions are about remain. Although a gender analysis could also help in understanding the situation, I do not conduct any specifically for this episode. Rather, there will be a special section dedicated to such considerations in chapter 8.

PROJECT FOLLOW-UP – RECONSTRUCTING SUCCESS

One last example: at Cleantech, they have introduced the procedure of a follow-up meeting at the end of each project aimed at evaluating the project in its totality, the financial outcome, the problems encountered, the potential for improvement for next time. Jesper is talking with Joe during one of these meetings and they are making sense of the outcome of a project, and in particular, Jesper talks about the meaning of the follow up.
As I read it, in this dialogue, a collective position is constructed, the position of themselves as a successful company, first by talking about follow-up...
as a way to improve performance, something that modern and successful companies do. In this way, the company is positioned in the category “good companies”. Second, by stating that projects will never run 100% smoothly, justification for the problems encountered in this project is constructed. Even when there are problems, the group may feel satisfied with its work. The group is again successful. There is a hypothetical case in which the people might be held responsible for failure, but I see such a hypothetical situation used more as a way of proving that the current project was a success after all.

**Positions and Positionings in Interviews**

Having showed how positions and positioning are also constructed when talking about other matters, when coping with daily activities and engaging in different kinds of conversations, I am now going to leave the analysis of the interactions observed and instead focus for a moment on the accounts provided by these people in interviews about their work. I start by analysing how people describe what I called positions from their point of view, the so-called “native point of view”. In this way, we can see that they themselves make sense of their work in terms of emergent positions, although some people provide a more individual-based narrative, while others highlight the interdependence between people when carrying out work. The description of positions as developing when working and interacting suggests that these people are aware of such constructions being done in explicit conversations, but also in what I have called less explicit discussions.

At both organisations, when talking about their jobs, people construct their positions as vague, flexible, developing with time and in relation to other people and to emerging tasks. No one refers to any formal description about what one’s job is about. Such descriptions might have been produced for some purpose at some point in the past, but they do not represent any foundation for one’s daily activities and priorities.
In these two accounts, positions and positionings are constructed very much as the result of individual initiative: responsibility for creating one’s own work lies in the hands of the single co-worker. In Ann’s words, too, we can see the need for finding a positioning in relation to others in the organisation, one dimension of which may be competence: one may find where to position oneself in relation to other co-workers based on one’s
own, and others’ competences. Still, the focus is quite an individualistic conception of positions. A somewhat different picture is provided by the following accounts coming from my interview with Hans.

These descriptions provide a more relational view of the production of positions and positionings. How a position develops and emerges may be the result of problems coming up in a relatively uncontrolled way or of which relationships one has with other people and how they might help in solving a task. The impression is more explicitly of people working together in order to face challenges and problems in the best way possible.

So far, I have presented how people make sense of their work, something that has, of course, influenced the path my analysis of interactions took, at
least at the most basic theoretical level of people working together and constructing positions as things develop over time. But interviews may also be treated as interactions in which leadership is done, if one considers them as instances of interactions at work. Interestingly, people from both companies describe their own organisation as special, a particular case, different from other companies, more flexible and informal. Rebecca even differentiates her own department from the rest of the organisation along this dimension. One more time, I would read such accounts as a construction of their own positions in terms of what kind of tasks are comprised, but also in terms of identity. The positions produced are of independent co-workers, responsible and willing to commit to work, even when they have no top-down order on what to do, and of people working in an organisation that expects such behaviour and that is special. These positions are also produced as changing and vague. I am not claiming that they “really” are vague, but that they are so constructed when talking about them.

Sometimes positions and positionings are constructed even more in terms of interrelatedness: they intersect.

**What’s the purpose of the project meeting [meeting about the different projects in progress]?**

**Lucia**

**Checking off. I can tell them what I’m doing, I can find out what others are doing.**

**Hans**

**Why is that important?**

**Hans**

We overlap each other, in some way, and it’s maybe the case that we can help each other or have something to contribute, you don’t know. Now we’re trying of course, you find out about the most important stuff anyway by sitting so close together and talking to each other over coffee then and all kinds of other occasions, but sure it’s important, it is indeed.
Here, positions are constructed as tightly related to each other and rather than a definite boundary between them, it is a blurred overlapping that links them. Positioning is therefore constructed as an ongoing achievement.

Such ongoing achievements are also produced as opposed to formal arrangements that are constructed as less significant, as we have already seen in some accounts and it will also be the case in some accounts below. Moreover, finding a positioning that works out well is something that takes energy and time and that is deemed important, whether it has to do with formal arrangements or not.

**LUCIA**

**HAS THERE BEEN ANY CHANGE WITH THE LATEST REORGANISATION?**

**REBECCA**

**YESTERDAY ANDERSSON, ANITA, FREDRIK AND I HAD A MEETING ABOUT, AGAIN ABOUT THE LATEST RE-ORGANISATION, WHO SHOULD DO WHAT, WHERE THE BOUNDARY GOES, WHAT YOU SHOULD DO, WHAT WE SHOULD DO AND HOW WE SHOULD DO. FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN WE OPENED A NEW WAREHOUSE, WE ARE NOT EVEN SURE ABOUT THAT YET, JUST BECAUSE IF YOU LOOK AT THE ORGANISATION, IT IS LIKE IT IS, THAT WE, OR, WE BELONG TO TRANSPORT AND DISTRIBUTION, AND FREDRIK, HE BELONGS TO ANOTHER DEPARTMENT, AND ANDERSSON BELONGS TO PRODUCTION AT THE MOMENT.**

**DID YOU FIND AN AGREEMENT?**

**REBECCA**

**YES, WE DECIDED EHM, WE WILL PRETEND THAT THIS NEW ORGANISATION [STRUCTURE] DOES NOT EXIST, RATHER WE WILL WORK OVER THE INTERFACES AND I THINK THAT WE AGREE, BECAUSE I MEAN, WE ALL WANT THE RESULT TO BE GOOD, AND YOU WILL NOT HAVE A GOOD RESULT IF WE HAVE TO WORK AS WE HAVE DONE. RATHER WE, WE, WE ARE SO DEPENDENT ON EACH OTHER, 'CAUSE I DO SOME PART AND SOMEONE ELSE DOES SOME PART AND ANDERSSON DOES SOME PART, THEN, WE HAVE TO DO IT TOGETHER.**

**LUCIA**

**YEAH, EHM, ALL WAREHOUSE ADMINISTRATION BELONGS TO SALES, ONCE AGAIN, BECAUSE, WE’RE CALLED OF COURSE TRANSPORT AND DISTRIBUTION SOLUTIONS TODAY, WE’RE NOT CALLED LOGISTICS ANY MORE, THEN, IT’S TWO YEARS BACK THAT WE WERE REORGANISED, WE HAVEN’T COMPLETED IT SUCCESSFULLY YET, BUT WE’RE CALLED TRANSPORT AND DISTRIBUTION SOLUTIONS NOW, SO WE ARE ACTUALLY SUPPOSED TO EHM, DEVELOP THE WAREHOUSES, WE’RE SUPPOSED TO FIND SMART NEW SOLUTIONS, QUICKER SOLUTIONS, […] BUT SINCE WE’RE REORGANISING, THERE HAVEN’T BEEN ANY PEOPLE AND I CAN’T GIVE ALL MY TASKS AND DUTIES TO TOMMY, BECAUSE HE WOULD NEVER, THEN HE’D DROWN. WE DID THIS JOB WITH TWO PEOPLE BEFORE, BUT THEY HAVEN’T BEEN GIVEN ANY MORE EMPLOYEES SO I HAVE MASSES OF ADMINISTRATIVE WORK LEFT THAT I’M SITTING, THAT REALLY BELONGS SALES.**
In these two accounts it is also possible to notice one element that is often present in interactions. Positions may become institutionalised with time (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), in the sense, for example, that the tasks connected to a position become more or less fixed. One could say that specialists or experts are produced. Different elements could play a role. In the case of Andersson, for example, he is continuously reconstructed as the one to talk to when there are problems with a certain IT system, although he has not been working for the IT department for years now. Of course, there are alternative constructions in the organisation as well, such as the one positioning all IT work under the IT department. But such alternatives encounter resistance when a position has reached certain “solidity”. This is what is sometimes called “old buddies” or “old interfaces”, referring to people ignoring new formal arrangements and reproducing positions.

Groups’ positions are also produced as emerging and adapting, as well as occasions for power struggles between different departments or units. While at the individual level the interconnectness is more accentuated, at the group level the focus is more on where to draw the boundary. In the following account, the boundary between what Jacob’s department and what production planning should do is brought up. A boundary also related to different opinions about what the organisation should sell, should they only sell what they can produce themselves (without needing subcontractors) or not?
Here there is a struggle about whether one department or the other should take care of a task that both argue is not within the boundaries of their own department. And institutionalised aspects of positions, such as what one is expected to do, are also present.

The importance of positioning one group in relation to other groups may also be constructed in terms more related to the group identity and legitimacy than the group’s tasks. In the following account, Hans is talking about the possibility of moving the department he works in into another unit, either production or sales. Apparently, ending up within one of these units would become problematic with regard to the construction of legitimacy, something one would have to build anew.

**Jacob**

But after that it’s then, this thing with decisions and communication channels, now we have four steel sheet suppliers in the pipeline, and Production they don’t like this, or they say Production planning, within the production unit, doesn’t like this, because they want to abandon the idea of us selling what we ourselves can’t produce, but, Sales wants to sell so very much more. So now during this year we’ve gone from two subcontracted cutters to four, so at Patrik’s [head of production planning] they think this thing is bloody terrible, now that they, when an order comes in then someone in order processing has to select the route, and there are four of them that are identical [...], but I maintain so that we got the job of arranging capacity and we’ve done that, but then production planning thinks, no, if you find a cutter in Belgium you also have to tell us what they’re supposed to cut there, and it’s also a bit this unclear role we have, so that we’ve in principle gone along with it actually, to say roughly speaking that those customers and those you can cut in Belgium, but actually Patrik should do it. Our job is as I said to purchase and get started with something and after that it’s others that take over. But it’s this old, I mean, it, this is how it works, there was the old organisation... so there’s a great deal that still lives on here. Messy, isn’t it?

**Hans**

I know more or less where I don’t want to end up or where I don’t think this sort of thing fits in, because you’ve worked with something and worked intensely with it too, so you really want a bit of respect for what you do, and you want people to respect these questions and respect too that we’re professional in what we do. And that’s always the risk if you end up in a new main organisation, that you have to start by motivating the whole whole process, ‘this is so simple’ [people would probably say], ‘Yeah, it is, extremely simple, the only thing with this that’s complicated is the number of zeros after the first number, it’s so big [I would counter]’.
In conclusion, reading these short extracts from interviews, it becomes apparent that, although the people speaking do not use the term “position”, they, more or less consciously, give importance to such constructions when it comes to being able to continue working and developing organising. Sometimes such positions can be interpreted as constructed when discussing other things, as, for example, when at a department meeting, people go through all the ongoing projects. In addition it is possible to read these extracts as showing that the doing of these constructions is something that also goes on in interviews: they are continuously produced and reproduced. Organising is thus also produced when talking about work with a person outside the organisation. Organising is a more fluid process than the rigid boundaries of what we usually call “organisation” contain. In these extracts we can also see that there are accounts of both contested and uncontested constructions of positions and positioning. When the positioning is contested, people may express frustration, but this does not mean that organising stands still, according to my reading. Rather, having made such contested positions explicit, people will be likely to talk and act from such premises, which means that certain directions of coming talk and action are made intelligible, while others become meaningless.

**Direction Produced in Interactions – A Processual View**

The interactions presented in this chapter show examples of how people talk in organisations in order to get work done or how they talk about their work. The interesting aspect that I have highlighted is the construction of positions and positionings. While more traditional accounts would see organisational roles as the premises for individuals to work, defining what they should do and how they should be, my interpretation of these interactions points to seeing positions as ongoing achievements produced while working, and not necessarily while explicitly talking about positions. I could have talked about roles, but the concept of role conveys the idea of static and formal arrangements, whereas the concept of positioning turns our attention to the dynamic and relational aspects (Davies and Harré, 2001), and reminds us of power aspects. Positions are constructed in relation to each other, not designed in isolation, a stance not controversial among scholars interested in discursive practices, like Davies and
Harré. But while a discursive analysis may mean considering the process of producing positions as leading to recognising oneself as belonging to certain categories and not to the mutually exclusive others – for example one may locate oneself as a woman and not a man –, I limit my interpretation to defining positioning as the relation constructed among positions – for example how salespersons are located compared to project managers and administrative persons. In other words, I am inspired by a discursive stance on positioning, but I limit my interpretation to the construction of the categories and their relations. Hence, analysing how positions are constructed “serves to direct our attention to a process by which certain trains of consequences, intended or unintended, are set in motion” (*ibid.*, p. 266): in other words, how direction is produced, how leadership is performed.

The interactions analysed show how work is performed in organisations as a collective and emergent achievement, a situated activity (Bruni and Gherardi, 2007). As I have described, constructions of positions and positioning are performed in very different interactions, both in explicit discussions and in more implicit conversations, and regard both individuals and groups. Moreover, people in these organisations also construct such activity as something that is done at work, rather than making sense of positions as purely formal and fixed arrangements. Hence, this is one way in which the production of direction in organising is done in everyday work. It is a repetitive way of acting and something that is consistently done over time in order to keep things working. Some of the constructions are reflective, other seem to be less conscious and not intentional. This is also a consequence of the speed and the irrational nature of interactions, in which things happen all the time, people interrupt each other and react directly to the utterances being made (Martin, 2003). Some of the constructions are consensual and explicit, others are more ambiguous, implicit or contested. Still, they all contribute to directing organising.

Such interpretation goes beyond the ideas proposed by postheroic contributions and highlights aspects that become relevant when considering leadership as an ongoing process. While postheroic researchers may move the unit of analysis from individuals to collective actions, the idea is still of several people achieving something together. In other words, privilege is not given to the single individual, but individuals are important as they interact and relate to each other. My interpretation of the empirical material in this chapter is slightly more radical. From claiming that not only individuals have to be studied but also interactions among them, to sharpening the focus on just these interactions as where to look for the production of
direction without assuming that individuals’ intentions are what produces direction (that is that the direction constructed corresponds to a conscious attempt to influence organising in that particular direction). For example, in chapter 5, I reported the construction of a new position for Jack, a new co-worker. Such a construction may be seen as the result of people reasoning on the subject “new position” with the intention of constructing what they all consider a new position. In this chapter, I reproduced interactions that may be centred on completely different themes, for example the possible introduction of a CRM system, but that end up constructing positions anyway. Hence, the interesting point to focus on is not people’s intentions as regards the position that will be constructed, but the construction itself. It is the constructions performed in interactions that are the core of the phenomenon, while individuals and their intentions are less central.

Moreover, the idea of interactive constructions is not equated to positive and harmonious results reached in an open dialogue. Moreover, it is in the repetitive achievements produced in interactions that direction is produced. The scope of my analysis has therefore become more and more specific, which means that the theoretical frame needed to understand such observations also becomes narrower than those previously introduced. The concepts of process and practice are still relevant but need to be more strictly defined. This is why the ideas of organisational becoming, practices and relational leadership are introduced in the next chapter. In this way, the researcher’s interest is more thoroughly moved from entities, such as organisations or individuals, to the interactions and processes that construct them. The object of interest is what interactions and relations do with the socially constructed reality, and how they do it.

Leadership viewed as a process or practice is not completely new in the field. One researcher that proposed such a perspective long ago is Diane-Marie Hosking who defines leadership processes as:

- processes in which influential “acts of organizing” contribute to the structuring of interactions and relationships, activities and sentiments;
- processes in which definitions of social order are negotiated, found acceptable, implemented and re-negotiated; processes in which interdependencies are organized in ways which, to a greater or lesser degree, promote the values and interests of the social order.

(Hosking, 1988, p. 147).

Although such ideas are not new, there has nevertheless been relatively little response in leadership studies: empirical studies applying such ideas do not
abound, not until recently, at least, probably due to the general interest in processes and practices in organisation theory in general. Still, “process” is no easy idea to work with. An important aspect when studying leadership, is the way in which processes are conceptualised, one risk being a translation into mechanical flows of activities with definite inputs and outputs. The opposite risk, on the other hand, is that of conceptualising leadership in such a fluid way that it becomes impossible to empirically study it. The next chapter will therefore be dedicated to integrating contributions from different researchers in order to construct a framework for studying leadership as the production of direction in interactions through practices, an important part of the ongoing processes producing organisations.
A Processual View: Organisational Becoming, Practice and Relational Leadership

Reading the empirical material in search of the production of direction has led me to pay more and more attention to the constructions performed in a variety of situations, to how work is performed, and less to the actors, their motivations and their agreement and/or collaboration (or not). A narrower and more specific conceptualisation of the idea of process and of practice may therefore help make sense of these observations. The concept of “process” is increasingly gaining popularity within organisation theory, but it is a concept that may be understood in rather different ways that lead to quite different takes on reality and the phenomenon under study. A similar consideration has to be made for the concept of “practice”. Therefore, I start this theoretical chapter by specifying how I use “process” and “practice” in order to make sense of the empirical observations. In particular, I start by discussing the idea of “organisational becoming”, which is more tightly linked to the researcher’s ontological position. After having described the large frame of reference about how reality is conceived, I will then narrow the discussion to the idea of “practice”, that is what we can study having adhered to a process ontology. Finally, I will discuss a stance within leadership study that is processual in nature, relational leadership, and I will summarise all these important concepts in the proposal of a particular processual perspective on leadership.

View of Reality – Organisational Becoming

The concept of organisational becoming is related to the debate on the shift from modernism to postmodernism, the latter being a contested concept – indeed, a postmodern attitude refuses univocal definitions. In the following argument, I will refer to Chia’s work and his way of treating modernism and postmodernism, which is heavily related to a distinction between ontologies of “being” and ontologies of “becoming” (Chia, 2003).
The most apparent characteristic of modernist thought is thus its reliance on concreteness, “misplaced concreteness” in Whitehead’s terms, a way of expressing how we “have mistaken our abstractions for concrete realities” (Whitehead 1985, p. 69 as cited in Chia, 1995). Hence, when we perform research on organisations, individuals, or technologies, we forget that these are categories applied to the world in order to make it ordered, rather than autonomous entities themselves – they exist not absolutely but as abstraction produced in order to make sense of a fluid and dense world. Disconnecting and “discretising” the world into entities is something that we do to the world; it is not the world itself. Interactions change “entities” connected in the interactions, which means that entities become in the interactions.

Reality itself is considered fluid, which means assuming that change is pervasive, not exceptional. Paradoxically, it is just when stability is assumed as the norm that change gains an extraordinary character (Chia, 2003). Thus, if change is what goes on all the time, if change is in fact what contributes to the production of stability, change is ordinary and trivial. In other words, no one claims that revolutions are a daily occurrence. Change is subtle and derives from the necessity for interaction at work, implying the inevitability of continuous attempts at ordering the flow of new experiences (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). One way of thinking about it is that “assuming the world is continuously in a state of flux, exercising continuity implies doing something different because the world around us has changed” (Hernes, 2008, p. 133).

As regards the phenomenon of organisation, it is conceptualised as attempts at stabilising in order to produce a more predictable world (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) and order may be kept only through reiteration (repetition) (Hernes, 2008). Hernes puts it nicely: “organizing implies attempts at creating a meaningful and predictable order out of a tangled world” (Hernes, 2008, p. XIV). Instead of studying how entities influence each other, the focus is on their inter-relatedness and how they transform. In Hernes’ terms, organisation is performed through acts of connecting, rather than acts of circumscribing (p. XXI), and at any time there are a number of possibilities for engaging with the world through connections that could be made in different ways (p. 3) – here the idea of connecting is inspired by Actor Network Theory, among others.

In table 3, I summarise some of the main differences between the two approaches to research and to the world at large. Although this is necessarily a simplification since the two approaches are variegated, it enables us to highlight some important differences.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Ontology</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOCUS ON ENTITIES</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOCUS ON PROCESSES</strong></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Being</strong></td>
<td>Discrete entities are real. Individual discrete particles aggregate to produce phenomena (atomism).</td>
<td>Becoming Processual, alinear, heterogeneous and emergent configurations of relations are real. Action, interactions and interlocking relationships are assumed.</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<th><strong>Epistemology</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOCUS ON ENTITIES</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOCUS ON PROCESSES</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Different aspects of human experience can be isolated, described and compared – producing knowledge means capturing and representing in an accurate way the world and explaining phenomena in causal terms (representational theory of truth). Entities are taken for granted. Tools are analytical break-up and decontextualisation.</td>
<td>Entities need to be explored and explained. Researchers should question the established categories in academia. Research reproduces the precarious and emergent processes without concealing paradoxes and uncertainties. Order and form are patterns we impose in order to understand, not structures present in the world. Attention is paid to the whole and the contextual, to the lived experience, to the unconscious.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Research questions about</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOCUS ON ENTITIES</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOCUS ON PROCESSES</strong></th>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Process</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOCUS ON ENTITIES</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOCUS ON PROCESSES</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happens within or between entities. It consists of the different isolable stages leading to an outcome.</td>
<td>Enacts and re-enacts social entities into existence. It is emergent patterning of relationships and interactions generating effects that are observable in terms of discrete states.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Individuals</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOCUS ON ENTITIES</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOCUS ON PROCESSES</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are entities characterised by definite boundaries. Their actions are moved by intentionality and they make meaningful choices. They exist prior to social categories.</td>
<td>Are web of beliefs and habits of actions. They are relatively stable &quot;effects&quot; generated by interlocking organising micropractices. They are reified entities.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Interactions</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOCUS ON ENTITIES</strong></th>
<th><strong>FOCUS ON PROCESSES</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happen between entities. They are incidental epiphenomena</td>
<td>Are what is real. They are the phenomenon to study.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

(Chia, 2003, 1995; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(Chia, 2003, 1999; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002)</th>
<th>FOCUS ON ENTITIES</th>
<th>FOCUS ON PROCESSES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organisations</strong></td>
<td>Are entities that exist even independently of the actors (although they might be seen as social products), that may act, and that possess determinate properties. They are context for action.</td>
<td>Organisation is an attempt at ordering the flux of human action, a pattern constituted and emerging from change. It is both a set of institutionalised categories and an emerging pattern when such categories are adapted to local circumstances. It is an ongoing world-making activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Change</strong></td>
<td>Is a property of organisations. It is an exceptional effect produced under specific circumstances by specific people. It is a set of episodes—stepwise change. The focus is on how and why the organisation moved from A to B ex post facto (key features, antecedents, consequences). The result of analysis is a stage model with an entity presenting different states along a chronological line.</td>
<td>Organisations are an emergent property of change. Change is an ongoing process, a stream of interactions. Change is the reweaving of actors' webs of beliefs and habits of action resulting from new experiences produced in interactions. The focus of analysis is on how change is accomplished.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Change-stability</strong></td>
<td>Two opposite states. Stability is the norm.</td>
<td>Micro-change processes sustain, but also erode, stability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td>Names are privileged. Language is adequate to express knowledge mirroring what happens in the world.</td>
<td>There is an invite to using more verbs when talking about processes. Language is an organising technology that allows for selectively abstracting from the flow of experience, by fixing and structuring.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. *Comparison of approaches focusing on entities and approaches focusing on processes.*

Chia is quite restrictive as to which theories and concepts are “truly” post-modern. For instance, not only those scholars that consider organisations as entities, but also those who avoid reifying organisations but do not challenge the atomistic view of individuals as autonomous actors are grouped under the label of modernism (Chia, 2003). One example is Weick (1979) who is described as emphasising the aggregation of individual actions into a collective effort: reality is seen as a subjective enactment and the researcher focuses on, for instance, sensemaking and individual or collective
meanings. In fact, what this means is that consciousness and intentionality are still privileged, something not necessary in an ontology of becoming.

**From a Broad to a Narrower Social Constructionist Approach**

In chapter 3, I presented my approach as a social constructionist one. Indeed, social constructionism is not easy to define since it is against the idea of social construction itself to try to fix the meaning of what this approach is about, which is instead seen as an ongoing negotiation and conversation within the academic community (Potter, 1996). It is, however, possible to say that a number of approaches go under the constructionist flag. Among others, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, post-structuralism, sociology of scientific knowledge, feminist studies (*ibid*). All these sources of inspiration have left traces in my analysis. However, as the reading of the empirical material proceeds, what assumes even more importance is the everyday talk as a site for producing direction. Putting it differently, what I focus on is the social construction of reality – which emphasises action and interaction themselves –, rather than the construction of social reality – which emphasises perception and the cognitive products of social interaction (for example sensemaking) (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010).

This means that the ethnomethodological and discursive approaches have gained more influence in how the analysis is made. As Samra-Fredericks observes, innovative and multidisciplinary approaches are necessary in order to do research on the doing of, in her case, strategy (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Thus, the combination of inspiration drawn from ethnography and ethnomethodology may be one fruitful method, since it enables the researcher to both closely observe naturally occurring events over time/space and study people’s practices and methods for doing social life – much of which is performed in talk (*ibid*). This leads to the possibility of a fine-grained analysis of the production of direction by not only observing, but also recording the production of direction as a lived experience.

In addition, a discursive approach also enables us to focus on talk (and more in general, texts) as social practices (Potter, 1996). In other words, there are myriads of perspectives gathered under the label “discursive”, but what they have in common is that “language does not mirror reality, but it constitutes it” and “human communication is also more than a simple act of transmission; it is about the construction and negotiation of meaning”
Language is thus treated as the absolutely most important resource used in order to accomplish social reality, and talk is considered as a form of action (Samra-Fredericks, 2003). Still, studies of “naturally” occurring talk-based interactions are rare within the fields of organisation, leadership and management; while the importance of discursive activities such as holding a meeting might be acknowledged, the real-time interactive efforts are yet to be deeply analysed, leaving the “how” question still largely unanswered (ibid.). Or, as Nicolini puts it:

Once we have accepted that the world is the result of an incessant process of social construction, we have only begun our task. Claiming that social structures, inequalities, power and meaning are ‘constructed’ requires that we provide convincing accounts of what this means in practice, e.g. by specifying the methods and devices used to obtain such effects.

(Nicolini, 2009)

In the next section I will more thoroughly discuss the study of interactions and talk by referring to one of the pioneers, Boden.

What to Observe – Interactions and Talk at Work and as Work

Having declared adherence to a processual ontology, the question is what such an approach means in terms of where and how to look for leadership, or, more in general, what the researcher becomes interested in as regards the study of “becoming” and with which consequences. While my attention has been focused from the beginning of this study on interactions, in this chapter I move from “interactions” as understood in everyday language, to a more theoretical understanding of the concept. In order to discuss this concept, I refer to two extracts from the empirical material.

The first is an extract from an interview with one employee working at STRONGMAT with distribution and logistics matters (already presented in the previous chapter):

**REBECCA**

Yesterday Andersson, Anita, Fredrik and I had a meeting about, again about the latest re-organisation, who should do what, where the boundary goes, what you should do, what we should do and how we should do. For example, when we opened a new warehouse, we are not even sure about that yet, just because if you look at the organisation, it is like it is, that we, or, we belong to Transport and Distribution, and Fredrik, he belongs to another department, and Andersson belongs to Production at the moment.
The second example comes from a meeting at the same company where three people are discussing many things at one time. One of the issues is the production of a document showing the results of a recent project initiated by the new Managing Director and aimed at saving money thanks to the exploitation of synergies between the two divisions of the company. The project was headed by Raymond, the manager of the correspondent department at the other division.

**DID YOU FIND AN AGREEMENT?**

**LUCIA**

Yes, we decided ehm, we will pretend that this new organisation [structure] does not exist, rather we will work over the interfaces and I think that we agree, because I mean, we all want the result to be good, and you will not have a good result if we have to work as we have done. Rather we, we, we are so dependent on each other, 'cause I do some part and someone else does some part and Andersson does some part, then, we have to do it together.

**REBECCA**

Rebecca, Lucia.

Did you find an agreement?

Yes, we decided ehm, we will pretend that this new organisation [structure] does not exist, rather we will work over the interfaces and I think that we agree, because I mean, we all want the result to be good, and you will not have a good result if we have to work as we have done. Rather we, we, we are so dependent on each other, 'cause I do some part and someone else does some part and Andersson does some part, then, we have to do it together.

**HANS**

Sure, ehm, we'll try to deliver, it's like this that this, it's important that these initiatives are rewarding, and then that they happen to have been lying around in our plans even before.

...[

**ANDREW**

And that means that work we've done earlier, can we include it in the report without it being the wrong thing to do, is it ok? But that, like, creating money that's not, not, the initiative doesn't generate, that feels wrong.

**NO, BUT WE KNOW THAT, WHAT WE DO, DELIVER, IT'S THE SORT OF THING THAT...**

I mean, I, I'm not doing it to boost Raymond, I'm doing it because it's got to be right.

**YEAH.**
Of course, one possible immediate reaction would be to feel that we need to know more about the context. And one of my points is exactly this: interactions have a local dimension, they are situated in a context – a context that they produce. Still, even though I am not providing any long description, I am quite sure that some familiar issues and ways of making sense of organisational reality are recognised. In the first example, we are presented with an organisation that has apparently gone through a number of re-organisations and where the employee makes sense of the situation by declaring that they have decided to ignore the latest formal structure in order to be able to get work done. In the second example, one may read the act of producing documents showing results when projects have to be evaluated and what kind of negotiations such an act gives rise to (should money generated by initiatives that were already going on be included as a result of the new project? And how not to give to much credit to the manager at the other division?). Such themes may be considered of a more macro-level than the micro-level interactions here reported. This is my second point. In order to explain this point I will refer to Boden (1994), as regards her general considerations on organising, talk and interactions. Boden is inspired by a broad range of scholars, four of the main sources of inspiration being Garfinkel, Sacks, Giddens and Goffman, according to herself. Hence, she sustains that there is no such thing as macro and micro, at least it is not an empirical distinction. Her criticism is directed against sociological scholars.
privileging macro-levels of analysis and ignoring people's actions and interactions. In other words, she criticises structure, defined as “some domain of orderly relationships between specified units that are regular, routine, and non-random in some systematic manner” (p. 12) and understood as solid and separate from action (an understanding often combined with scarce interest in the empirical), and she proposes that sociology should instead study “the fine, delicate, and largely hidden membrane that supports, connects, and binds social actors in a flexible web of patterned relations” (p. 2). Put differently, she reacts to those sociology scholars “explaining away” human agency and “smoothing the apparent sloppiness of daily life” (p9), relegating discrete actions to the status of “effects” of social structures, the product of social forces.

While explanation at a macro level of course may be powerful and interesting, there is a need not to forget the local and temporary, the people in organisations. By observing people interacting, one is able to study the structuring of organisations, “structure-in-action” (p. 1). Instead of distinguishing between a macro and micro level, one could consider how the everyday events are both embedded in and enacting organisations and institutions. One point of departure, following Giddens, is that social structure is “both a resource for and a product of social interaction” (p. 11). Inspired by ethnometodology, she also claims that social structure is made by people; it is not happening to people and that thus what we call society is both enabling and constraining – something similar to performativity in Butler's terms (Butler, 1990/1999).

In this way, studying what people do in organisations, in everyday interactions, is utterly crucial, and this is the third point I want to make. To limit one's analysis to formal structure, for example, is problematic. As we can see in both my examples, not following the rules may be common (if not the most common situation) and may be done as competent response to organisational issues. Therefore, we should move our attention to local everyday interactions, where collaborative activities and local adaptations are performed as people are confronted with practical matters that they have to solve together – “it is the concerted and coordinated actions of individuals that dominate organizations” (p. 52) –, rather than searching for universally rational explanations about what is going on. We should study the how rather than the why and look at “what people are “really and actually” doing as they do what they do and to discover in those actions the “structures of practical action” “(p. 44).
As it is also illustrated by the two examples given, talk is what (most) people mostly do in organisations and by talking people discover (in her words – I would say “produce”) shared goals, multiple agendas, conflicts, etc., which result in the structure-in-action, rather than just fleeting details. As Boden puts it, “talk at work is merged with talk as work” (p. 51) and talk is “the practical locus of organizational action” (p. 203). Such ordinary, everyday actions as meetings, telephone calls, gossiping, arguing, contesting, informing, planning, and so on, are not usually considered worth special attention; discrete, local, momentary interactions should thus become a topic to study in their own right. This is my fourth point. In her words,

organizations are taken to be locally organized and interactionally achieved contexts of decision-making and enduring institutional momentum, rather than entities […] (p. 1)

Such understanding is influenced by Garfinkel, who inspires her to consider social order as intersubjectively achieved. Meanings do not take form in the heads of separated individuals but are constructed interactively, often under rather pressing conditions of time and space.

As she also points out, phenomena as “decisions” are not easy to study, being empirically difficult to “find” and being moreover not solid and fixed as one usually presupposes, while a phenomenon such as decision-making is more readily available to observation (although necessarily always incomplete).

We could therefore study organisations “as they happen”, rather than afterwards via interviews and questionnaires, in order not to lose the dynamism of these interactions. In such interactions people treat each other as accountable for their actions. A good summary of these points is:

When people talk they are simultaneously and reflexively talking their relationships, organizations, and whole institutions into action. […] organizations and institutions exist through the actions, reactions, and inactions of their constitutive members, who embody and enact the history or spatio-temporally constituted set of relations we call structure.

(p. 14-15)

While inspired by the ideas she presents, I am not as concerned with the focus on agency that she brings up (as a reaction to the focus on structure in sociology). I will instead limit my attention to how things are done in “talk”, in particular transitory interactions of everyday work, and recognise that people are knowledgeable and competent as they act. In my reading, it
is in the discussion of such an aspect that Boden argues against institutional theory by stating that

institutional "isomorphism" is the local product of knowledgeable actors rather than an abstract mimetic process located in the structure of organizational fields. (p. 36)

And I also consider interviews as sites for doing organising by interacting with me, the researcher. Moreover, given her interest in ethnomethodology, she considers talk as language-in-action, a social activity and sees turn-taking (the most fundamental unit of social action creating the rhythms of daily life and the structure of verbal exchange), the sequenced structuring of action (the essential regularities of mundane interaction) and the accountability of social actors to each other (one demands and produces consistent accounts of actions) as the heart of this activity. My analysis has been on a slightly more macro level than this, but the third element is of importance for showing that what is constructed in talk has consequences, at least in terms that talk that follows has to relate to it. What I have focused on when reading the empirical material has thus been, rather than the structuring of the conversation itself, the kind of constructions produced during the conversation. That is, rather than how things are constructed, I focused on which things are constructed (for which an ethnographic understanding becomes important (Samra-Fredericks, 2003)). Such an approach is not usual. But again, studying how leadership is practiced is not usual either. One exception is a study performed by Alvesson and Kärreman, which they define as a meso-micro level study: a study taking seriously what is done in talk, thus being inspired by discourse and conversation analysis, but focusing on the development of a situated interaction rather than on the turns taken in such an interaction, thanks to a broader understanding of the context (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2003).

Therefore, rather than how talk is structured, I concentrate on the content of what is discussed and what kind of constructions that are thus produced. When I say content I do not mean exactly what they are talking about. What I am interested in is what is constructed, which means how direction in organising is achieved. These are two aspects that are intertwined. Given the accountability of social actors to each other, the development of conversations depends not only on which turns are taken, but also on which constructions are made, something that influences what becomes possible to say.
To conclude, by presenting one short example of interactions and one example of how an employee narrates for me about interactions, I want to make some statements about how I look at interactions in organisations and with which consequences. By referring to some general ideas discussed by Boden, I have therefore argued that the study of trivial, everyday interactions may provide fundamental contributions to understanding work and organising processes, since it is in these interactions that organisations are made; that one extremely important aspect of such interactions is talk (even though talk is certainly not all that is happening at work and interactions may involve non-humans); that such interactions are local and situated, but at the same not random or disconnected from other interactions, since consistency is produced and structuring is produced and reproduced. Having tape-recorder interactions to analyse becomes an important premise in order to be able to do a close interpretation of real-time conversations and study how a context that is both enabling and constraining coming actions is continuously constituted (Samra-Fredericks, 2003).

The concept of practice provides a frame for studying interactions in the way here delineated and within an ontology of becoming, but without necessarily confining such a study to the how talk is done. I will therefore devote the next session to elaborate on this concept.

**How to Make Sense of Observations**

**– The Concept of Practice**

Precisely as “leadership”, “practice” has become a concept scholars have gathered around, get excited by and found common ground in, but they have not negotiated any shared definition (cf. Geiger, 2009; Gherardi, 2009) – on the contrary, it seems to be just the vague nature of the concept that allows for joining such a movement. The concept has assumed almost a moral connotation since it is infused with the hope and conviction that it can be used in order to criticise and reform different areas of organisation studies and social science at large; and again, in much the same way as leadership, practice has a performative character, it does something with the researcher and the study s/he carries out. In this sense, I would agree with those scholars who seem not to be overly preoccupied with the concept not being narrowly defined (Miettinen *et al.*, 2009). What is interesting is what I become allowed to do by using the concept – and, of course, to acknowledge that. As discussed in chapter 4, my initial approach to this study was
to study leadership in practice, meaning how leadership happens in daily situations at work when people work together – practice in a broad meaning. As my analysis of the empirical material proceeds, a more stringent and narrower understanding of practice becomes necessary, though.

An often quoted definition is:

practices as embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding.

(Schatzki et al., 2001, p. 2)

Rather than considering practice as a way of coming closer to the empirical material only (and thus according to some researcher producing “truer” knowledge), I see practice as a theoretical concept that helps in making sense of my observations of interactions and on how actions are consistently taken. Studying “organising as it happens” is also a means for trying to bridge the distinction between the macro and micro level – an ambition shared by most practice scholars. Practices take place “simultaneously both locally and globally, being both unique and culturally shared, ‘here and now’ as well as historically constituted and path-dependent” (Miettinen et al., 2009, p. 1310). But is practice then another way of just saying “what is done” in organisations? Here again we find scholars following the “practice turn” animatedly discussing how the concept “practice” is in fact applied and used, and how such use limits and exploits respectively the critical potential of this “new” perspective (Geiger, 2009; Gherardi, 2009; Chia and MacKay, 2007).

Ira Cohen (1996) distinguishes between theories of action and theories of practice, the former type being theories privileging actor’s intentionality in pursuing a course of action, the latter type theories stressing “how conduct is enacted, performed or produced” (p. 74) – in other words, “how actors make what they do happen” (p. 84). The question is if scholars referring to “practice” are also taking the side of theories of practice.

Looking, for example, at one of the areas where the practice turn has been welcomed with most enthusiasm, the strategy field (Whittington, 2006), what does “the study of strategizing” or of “strategy as practice” mean? Whittington distinguishes between “practice” as “shared routines of behaviour”, “praxis” as “actual activity”, “activities involved in the deliberate formulation and implementation of strategy”, and “practitioners” as “strategy’s actors […] who both perform this activity and carry its practices” (p. 619).
Such conceptualisation means that practice is used to highlight the fluid nature of the phenomenon strategy, which from being an abstract category becomes a process to study (Geiger, 2009)–, a process to study not in terms of delimited stages that follow one another and produce an output, but in terms of the minutiae of strategising (Chia and MacKay, 2007). I certainly think these contributions are of importance and referring, again, to the empirical examples reported, it becomes clear that there is much of interest going on in these “minutiae”. On the other hand, “practice” may also mean much more, as both Geiger and Chia & MacKay point out. Geiger, for example, is worried about losing the critical potential against those positions in organisation studies that he defines as rationalist, cognitivist and positivist. Chia and MacKay, in a similar way, show that strategy-as-practice has not challenged the assumptions underlying strategy research (at least not strategy process research); rather, researchers position their contributions often as a complement, without taking the full consequences of what “practice” may mean.

Let me discuss Geiger’s position first (Geiger, 2009). Referring to the sociological understanding of practices – Bourdieu and Foucault, among others –, he defines practice as “a social construct that has emerged over time, which reflects, sustains and reproduces norms, values and knowledge” (p. 133), thus highlighting the normative and institutionalising dimension, instead of limiting the understanding of practice to the idea of routines. Practices become institutionalised as they are reproduced over and over again (unreflectively), and are considered as social ordering. Cognitivism is refused since knowledge and learning are seen as something people do in interaction, not as individual resources residing in people’s minds. Thus, rationality is no longer an explanation for what happens at work. It is the situated, normative, collective character of practices that is underlined. I subscribe to such a description.

Turning then to Chia and MacKay (2007), they recognise the initiative taken by strategy-as-practice scholars towards a renovated understanding of and a new vocabulary for strategy as a phenomenon, but they also notice that “the overall impression remains that practices are essentially micro-processes; the actual activities performed by individuals within organized contexts” (p. 223). Individuals’ intentionality is thus brought forward and individual agency is given primacy, the individual being considered as the initiator of activities and processes, instead of focusing on trans-individual practices. Moreover, single activities are studied and their visible aspects are focused on, but the historically and culturally produced regularities in such
activities are less immediate to observe. Moreover, the focus on the micro also implies that the distinction micro-macro is reconstructed, rather than challenged. This is in fact a consequence of the main problem that Chia and Mackay identify: scholars have not explicitly distanced themselves from what the authors call “methodological individualism”, a position presuming “that every individual is a discrete, bounded entity that relates to its environment” in ways that do not affect its nature (p. 219), which results in a sort of “social atomism” (p. 224) treating macro-entities as the aggregation of micro-entities. They instead propose the term “post-processual” to name a view of practices “which deems events, individuals and doings to be manifest instantiations of practice-complexes; ontological priority is accorded to an immanent logic of practice rather than to actors and agents” (p. 219). Activities are not interesting per se; what is of interest is the patterned consistency of action that emerges in interactions. I will follow this line of thought.

Consistency of action is thus due to an immanent (in the practices) logic of practice, what in Bourdieu’s terms is called “habitus”: a modus operandi that enables practical coping in a context so that the actions performed are understood as reasonable and sensible (Chia and Holt, 2006). This is no resource one can deploy at will, nor is it a programmed behaviour. Rather it is an unarticulated familiarity with how to go on, transmitted into practice, it is purposive action as situations unfold (ibid.).

While strategy as practice is often discussed, we should not forget that scholars in the area of gender studies were early adopters and promoters of a practice perspective, which meant a shift from gender as a trait or essence to gender as an emergent feature of interaction, something done in social interactions and negotiated and reconstructed in everyday relations, a relational construct (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Gherardi and Poggio, 2001; Martin, 2003; Poggio, 2006). This way, gender practices are also analysed as they are performed while doing work, something to keep in mind when analysing work practices.

Another point that might not be so clear is how to study practices, and the positions taken are probably influenced by the field from which one comes. Geiger claims that the level usually studied is the subjective viewpoint of the practitioner and her construction of the world, the practice from “the inside” in other words (Geiger, 2009). Gherardi (2009) also distinguishes the study “from within” and “from the outside”. “From within” a practice is seen from the point of view of practitioners and the activity being performed and is
a knowledgeable collective action that forges relations and connections among all the resources available and all the constraints present […] Performing a practice therefore requires knowing how to align humans and artefacts within a sociotechnical ensemble (p. 117)

Materiality is, in fact, also an aspect brought up by many scholars. The study “from the outside”, on the other hand, implies that

the inquiry [on practice] concentrates on their regularity, on the pattern which organizes activities, and on the more or less shared understandings that allows their repetition. (p. 117)

Therefore, it is recursiveness that enables the researcher to recognise a practice as a practice.

But if practices are patterns of saying and doing produced and reproduced, passed on, in a not necessarily conscious way, if they are tacit and immanent, if they are embodied in us and enabling us to act properly through a form of “mindless practical coping” (Chia and MacKay, 2007, p. 233), then it becomes difficult for a practitioner to articulate what a practice is. While Chia and MacKay opt for such a position, Gherardi (2009) suggests that there is intentional doings along with unintentional doing, one clear example being gender conceptualised as a methodical and recurrent accomplishment, and how it is produced in the doings and sayings. If one does not privilege the conscious part, what one may aim at is thus

a sympathetic grasping of the internal logic of this practice and this can only be done through following the apparent patterned consistency of everyday absorbed practical coping, not through retrospective reasons and meanings offered by actors themselves.

(Chia and MacKay, 2007, p. 234)

Going back to the example of strategy, treating embodied dispositional tendencies as what drives our actions, rather than conscious intentionality, strategic outcomes are not interpreted as generated by deliberate activities, but by internalised predispositions to “act in a manner congruent with an emergent situation” (p. 235). In such a way strategy exists in everyday acts. Putting it differently

strategy-making must be construed as a collective, culturally shaped accomplishment attained through historically and culturally transmitted social practices and involving dispositions, propensities and tendencies. (p. 236)
and also

strategy-making on an everyday basis takes place unreflectively, on-the-spot and in the twinkle-of-an-eye. (p. 238)

Hence, in order to study practices, one should expose “oneself to a variety of complex social life situations” and observe “the idiosyncrasies and embedded tendencies of different historical epochs, societies, cultures and institutions” (p. 237). Although one could certainly agree on such a ambitious project, producing a concrete study requires compromises as regards how large the scope may be.

**Studying Leadership as a Process – From General Considerations to Relational leadership**

The idea of leadership as a social process has been brought forward by scholars frustrated with the narrow definition of leadership as an individual matter. Such positions are still marginal within the field of leadership studies. In a harsh criticism of the current construct of leadership as an alienating social myth fostering massive deskilling and learned helplessness, Gemmill and Oakley (1992) propose the alternative of considering leadership as

a process of dynamic collaboration, where individuals and organization members authorize themselves and others to interact in ways that experiment with new forms of intellectual and emotional meaning. (p. 124)

In other words, there is a place for proactive behaviours instead of limitation to specific defined goals. Also, radical feminist views offer an alternative conception of leadership that in a similar way is based on supportive and cooperative behaviours rather than “power over”. However, we are not given more detail about how these alternative views should be understood. To me, they seem to propose something between a new ideal and a new perspective. Since the purpose of my thesis is not to promote new ideals, I will consider what this means in terms of alternative perspectives. Process is used as a way of signalling the dynamic and emergent nature of the phenomenon. But we have to be more specific about what we mean by process. For instance, Barker holds that leadership is a continuous social process (Barker, 2001, p. 472) and studying it as a series of finite events is an error based on the taken-for-granted assumption of cause-effect relationships.
Hence, instead of a reductionist study of micro-systems as parts adding up to macro-systems, one should pursue a study of macro- and micro-systems as dynamically interacting and changing at the same time, systems that are not in equilibrium and are not moving towards any equilibrium. In his words:

Leadership has much more to do with action based upon perceptions of emerging structure in systems where order is periodically breaking down and reforming than it does with the imposition of structure and control relative to an a priori configuration. (p. 489)

Thus, change, complexity and chaos are not seen as obstacles but as the force behind evolution and renewal. Leadership is conceptualised as “a process of unfolding” (p. 490). While I may agree with such understanding, Barker then turns back to ethics and values such as what leadership is about. He defines leadership as

a process of transformative change where the ethics of individuals [understood as individuals’s needs, “my needs”] are integrated into the mores of a community [understood as society’s needs] as a means of evolutionary social development. (p. 491)

As he himself declares, empirical verification of such a definition might as well be impossible. Therefore, what is of interest in order to understand the empirical material is the possibility of applying a different perspective, based on viewing leadership as a process, rather than a more theoretical discussion involving ethics, which is subject to the risk of reconstructing leadership as a moral activity and which requires the researcher to be in a position of determining individual’s “true” needs.

Process may also be interpreted as meaning that “each individual element can be seen to permeate and melt into one another without dissolving into independent parts” (Wood, 2005, p. 1103), thus stressing the interrelatedness of the world. This way, thinkers such as Whitehead and Bergson are referred to and the privilege we generally grant entities is challenged. Concrete things are effects: we give substantiality to our experience of the world by perceiving/organising the world as made of finite entities – for example, leaders and followers. This is the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”, in Whitehead’s terms; we take our abstract conceptualisations to be real entities, things (ibid.). Also, when speaking of shared or distributed leadership, scholars often claim to speak of relations, but they are still describing relations external to the related things – between things –, rather
than fully acknowledging inter-relatedness as a basic ontological concept. Not that this is an easy enterprise: being used to applying finite concepts to understand the world, affirming the indefiniteness of leadership is a real challenge. Thus, the essence of leadership is not to be found in a social actor, but it is “a relation of almost imperceptible directions, movement and orientations, having neither beginning nor end” (p. 1115). Thus one important observation is that leadership as a process means that change is to be studied – change, not things that change (p. 1116). Another important aspect is that relations are conceptualised as constitutive of entities, entities only being temporary manifestations of relations, rather than relations going on between entities. A strong process ontology is thus advocated. Again, even Wood recognises that the empirical study of leadership understood from a processual perspective is no trivial endeavour. Let me therefore introduce relational leadership as a framework from which to receive inspiration for finding a conceptualisation that is an acceptable compromise between theoretical ambitions and practical limitations.

In 2006, Uhl-Bien wrote an article for the Leadership Quarterly entitled Relational Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006), where she attempted to put together a number of perspectives or models having a common interest in leadership as a social process occurring in several directions within an organisation – a relational process –, instead of primarily focusing on leadership effectiveness. Defining it broadly, leadership is a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e., evolving social order) and change (e.g., new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviors, and ideologies) are constructed and produced. This perspective does not restrict leadership to hierarchical positions or roles. Instead it views leadership as occurring in relational dynamics throughout the organization […] (p. 655)

Under such a definition she gathers two quite different streams of thought: an entity and a relational perspective. The former is concerned with individual entities (leaders and followers) and how they engage in, evaluate and perceive the relationships they have with each other. Leadership is a multidirectional influence relationship in which individuals align with each other in order to reach a common aim (p. 661). The latter instead takes its starting point in processes and treats people and leadership as made in processes, which means acknowledging that “organizational phenomena exist in interdependent relationships and intersubjective meaning” (p. 655).
Such a distinction helps in understanding how different research on leadership becomes if the concept of process is given ontological privilege, even when starting with similar considerations. In fact, in the former stream we find those scholars focusing on the two-way influence relationship between a leader and a follower with a common goal. The interpersonal exchange and the individual characteristics brought into it are at the centre. One typical example is leader-member exchange theory (LMX) concentrating on “properties and behaviors of individuals as they engage in interactions with one another” (p. 656). Another less typical example is network theory applied to leadership, which enlarges the focus from dyadic relationships to relationships in collectivities, but is still preoccupied with individual perceptions of the ties in the network.

The relational perspective, instead, moves the focus from the individual to the collective dynamics producing organisations. This way, the complexity of social phenomena and the interrelatedness of leadership are taken seriously. Attention is really on the social, on what goes on in processes of relating. To be sure, I am not arguing that such a perspective may offer a complete picture of the phenomenon, but this perspective may add one important view of the phenomenon, one view that has been overlooked when limiting studies to individualised conceptions of leadership. With a relational perspective, therefore, processes of relating are what is studied, processes in the form of “influential acts of organizing that contribute to the structuring of interactions and relationships” (p. 662). While the largest contribution in this direction is made by Hosking, Dachler, Gergen and Morley (in relation to each other), Uhl-Bien also mentions other scholars taking similar approaches, for example, Drath (2001) conceptualising leadership as a relational dialogue in which people construct knowledge systems together. Murrell (1997), also moves towards the understanding of leadership as a collective act of shared responsibility. Finally, an important element differentiating the two perspectives is that, while the entity perspective studies phenomena when they are “already organised”, the relational perspective is instead interested in the organising process itself.

Responsibility for leadership is thus seen as lying with the collectivity, throughout the organisation, not with individual leaders, and a larger number of relationships are legitimised as having to do with leadership, as the disappearing acts in Fletcher’s terms (1998). Leadership is done in structuring processes in which the rules of organising are constructed (Uhl-Bien, 2006, p. 670), structures depending on the ongoing interactions that sustain and reproduce them.
Such relational approaches are not to be confused with other stances that also go under the label “relational” in sociology and, at times, organisation theory (Emirbayer, 1997; Mutch et al., 2006). Although they too point to the primacy of dynamic and unfolding relations, they build on realist ontology and a belief in the study of causal mechanisms producing events.

Relational Approach à la Hosking

Summarising the work done with a number of colleagues and the inspiration received by a number of contributions, Hosking (forthcoming-a, forthcoming-b) provides a picture of what a relational approach to leadership may mean. I will thus refer to her synthesis rather than to the different original sources and I will mostly quote her most recent works instead of older writings—the ideas presented are therefore not completely new; rather, they represent the result of the development of this line of thought during the years.

To begin with, there are some problematic aspects when studying leadership in an entative manner (entative meaning having focus on entities rather than relations). For example, as regards the construction of the “self”, considering the context of leadership as independent from the leader means drawing too sharp a boundary between self and non-self, which also means that one sees “separately existing individual relating to a separately existing other where “other” is everything which is not self” (Hosking, forthcoming-b, p. 2 in draft). The result is that

Differentiating self and other in these ways turns relating into an instrumental process potentially valuable for self through (a) producing knowledge about and (b) achieving power over Other.

(p. 3 in draft)

Such a conception is also related to the description made by Edward Sampson, a social psychologist, of the “Western project”

this ‘monological and self celebratory’ construction as being oriented around the notion of (i) a singular and rational self (ii) who is able to know other as other really (or probably) is, (iii) who can speak for and about other (followers, women, other ethnic groups…), and (iv) can use other in the rational pursuit of (supposedly) rational goals and interests.

(p. 3 in the draft)
In other words, as feminist scholars have also pointed out, some independent selves are allowed to define reality for themselves and for “other”. Additionally, the self is supposed to be bounded and stable, to possess individual knowledge, and to relate to “other” in order to rationally exploit “other”. Power and politics involved in such processes are often not mentioned at all, silenced behind the label “universal rationality”. With relational lenses instead power is produced in the relation of the self and other – by how they are in relation. Hosking also explicitly analyses these entative constructions in terms of culturally constructed masculinity. For example, constructions of the self and of relationships in our society are interpreted as representing masculine narratives in which domination and instrumentality is the norm:

a self-concept that depends on differentiation and social-emotional separation from others; self determination based on criteria of personal achievement and success; mastering or world structuring and; emphasizing rules, rationality, and general, value-free principles.

(Dachler and Hosking, 1995, p. 9 in the online version)

Such a construction of the self is named “hard” self-other differentiation. Relational constructionism as defined by Hosking is instead a social science perspective that “centres language based relational processes as they (re-) construct more or less local relational realities” (Hosking, forthcoming-b, p. 2 draft). Such a perspective allows for “soft” self-other differentiation.

Therefore, a relational perspective assumes the self as being a relational construction made in relational processes (ibid. p. 8), which means that there are a number of selves situated in a number of relations with particular others, and the others are thus participating in the self, making the self a social and dialogical self – compared to a singular independent self trying to control “other” typical of Western conceptions. Relational processes go on in interactions, and conversations assume a central role; under the inspiration of Sampson again: they are what people do; they are action. Conversations both construct reality and presuppose it. The self is constructed in conversations and is therefore characterised by multiplicity. Relating is a language-based process (also non-verbal language). Power is always produced in these relations, “power over”, when a “hard” self-other differentiation is constructed and “power to”, when a “softer” self-other differentiation is the case, when interdependence is assumed. Power relations are constructed since certain forms of life are constructed and others not.

Another important aspect is that the distinction between ontology and epistemology becomes blurred: “it is these ‘knowing’ processes that give ex-
istence (ontology) e.g., to individuals, leadership and organization” (Hosking, forthcoming-a, p. 6 in draft). There is not a phenomenon or entity “out there” ready to be observed and there are no entities existing separately from our knowledge of them. On the contrary, the researcher participates in the construction of the phenomenon involved in relational processes and language being a form of action rather than a tool for description. The constructions produced are always ongoing, supplementing preceding actions and being potentially available for future actions to be supplemented. Therefore, what is possible is both limited and supported by what has already been constructed as real.

As regards inspiration to relational constructionism, it comes from a disparate number of scholars, from social constructionism to postmodern thinkers, Hosking herself refers, for example, to Latour’s actants and enrolment. Defining inter-acting, she opts for a broad definition:

I use the term inter-acting (a) to speak of a performance (b) that involves a coming together (c) of ‘whoever and whatever’ thereby (re)constructing person-world relations as (d) relational realities.

(Hosking, forthcoming-b, p. 13 draft)

Many simultaneous inter-acts continuously construct social reality. This is not to mean that change is radical each time something is reconstructed and that there is no stability. In fact, not all inter-acts become stabilised, it depends on whether they are heard, seen, noticed, and so on (in Latour’s terms others have to be enrolled). And if we have a performance that has become stabilised, it will be more challenging for alternative performance to be heard, seen, etc. (an example could be dressing codes). Even if it is important to consider realities as local productions, this does not mean that broad connections are excluded, rather it is possible that inter-acts are interconnected on a large scale (for example the Western culture) and radical change is not the norm, rather the exception. Still, the idea is to point out the relational processes constructing and reconstructing those effects that we see as stable (cf. Chia and MacKay, 2007). The construction of stability is an ongoing achievement and change is what defines processes going on all the time, not a temporary disturbance to the stable state of “real” entities. But change does not mean that everything is transformed all the time; rather, everything becomes produced and reproduced. Relational processes are thus the source of both what we call stability and change.
What is leadership when a relational approach is taken? Hosking (forthcoming-a) defines it as those “contributions that achieve acceptable influence” (p. 4 draft). In this way, the relational processes are focused on rather than individuals; leadership is defined by influence contributions. Here, Hosking is arguing for a new perspective and gives no empirical example of what “acceptable influence” would look like, which might also be a consequence of the focus on the “how” rather than “what”, the emptiness of the perspective derived by relational realities being conceptualised as local rationalities, which means that the researcher should allow the “content” to emerge instead of imposing it onto the phenomenon, as she puts it. In any case, on the one hand, she seems interested in the ongoing construction of a multitude of selves, one of which is that of the leader (related to discourse and practices of leadership). This aspect is what I called the performative aspect of leadership. On the other hand, she also defines leadership itself in terms of contributions, which I interpret as achieved in interaction and relations. This aspect of the relational approach is more directly helpful in analysing the interactions I have studied.

Therefore, in view of the claim that attention should be paid not to what the correct narrative of leadership is but to “the ways in which relational processes open up or close down possibilities and what this means for identities and relations, including the space for others and to be other” (p. 7 draft), one could interpret this challenge in two ways. One could study how leadership is constructed as a performative (Butler, 1990/1999) concept and how this affects identity constructions and how power is performed, for example. Similarly, one could also refer to Meindl (1995) and his idea of studying how certain understandings of what leadership is about gain strength and stability: studying the social construction of leadership, in other words. But one could also consider relational constructionism as a social science perspective (Hosking, forthcoming-a, p. 7 in draft) and focus on interactions in organisations and look at how relational processes open up or close down possibilities, and name such processes “leadership”. The two aspects are related. The former aspect has informed the analysis performed in chapter 4, the latter will inform the analysis made in the coming chapter. But, again, this could be done in different ways. One path to follow might be that of promoting new ways of working based on this different conception of self and of relations, for example, by reconsidering the idea of dialogue and what kind of skills are involved. Hosking seems to be particularly interested in this path. She is, in fact, also inspired by more philosophical and spiritual considerations about being and relating in general.
Although interesting considerations, I will not discuss these aspects and I, more generally, draw in a pragmatic way inspiration from different sources as long as they provide fruitful elements for my project, for making sense of my interpretations, without being particularly preoccupied with more spiritual and religious consequences/antecedents of such ideas—as long as they are not vital for my use in constructing an alternative narrative of leadership. Out of these concerns, Hosking therefore proposes “to (re-)learn and (re-)construct practices of soft self-other differentiation, to (re)learn more participative ways of relating” (p. 12 draft). One idea is that of “light structuring” where space for improvisation and emergence is allowed, relational responsiveness is searched for and appreciative orientation makes everything “workable” there is no bad or good (p. 15 draft); rather, one is open to emerging possibilities. Dialogue and listening also assume a central role, allowing for multiple forms of life rather than imposing dominant rationality. Therefore, “relationally engaged leadership” is conceptualised as “ongoing practices of soft self-other differentiation” (p. 15 draft). As pointed out, this is an ideal, something to try together with people in organisation by engaging in these renewed ways of relating.

Another path might be that of being inspired by this perspective in order to study organisations. The object of inquiry becomes the relational processes themselves, “as they co-ordinate or organise activities; as they make identities and relations” (p. 18 draft). Of course, this is partly contradictory, since it means that, at least to a certain point, the researcher will assume a knowing-subject position and provide her/his claims with scientific authority, not involving the “researched” to take part in such a construction actively—although such a stance is still more interactive than positivistic stances. The researcher wants to say something about something, taking an observer position (p. 18 draft). The alternative is to do research “with others” (the researcher has no privileged position) rather than “about others”. I am aware of this and, even if my acknowledging this piece of research as a relational product—scientific only given the local, cultural and temporal reality in which it is embedded—is in accordance with this perspective, I understand that a complete adhesion to relational constructionism does not allow for this kind of research (Hosking, forthcoming-b, p. 28 draft). Still, given the contribution that such research might make (in relation to theoretical problem), I see this path as fruitful and an acceptable compromise, and I will thus “take sides” and privilege certain local rationalities of science above others, taking in this case a relatively “hard” subject-object differentiation. And I, of course, treat my research as part of the construction of
Relational à la Fletcher

The concept “relational” is used in a similar, but different, way by Joyce Fletcher (1998) when talking about “disappearing acts” in organisations. Challenging the traditional definition of work, Fletcher wants to voice what she calls “relational practices”, practices related to femininity, normally silenced, disappearing acts, both in organisations and in the organisational literature. According to this line of thought, definitions of what work is about are gendered since they are based in the gendered construction of the public-private dichotomy, rooted in the separation of the public and the private spheres of life, which is problematic due to the different characteristics attributed to the two domains and to the social discursive reproduction of the two domains as separated and dichotomous – even though subjects may be positioned in both spheres – and due to knowledge from one sphere often considered inappropriate in the other sphere. For example, rationality is associated with the public sphere, emotionality with the private; focus is on individuality in the public sphere, on community in the private; work is considered complex and skills acquired by training in the public sphere, work constructed as non-complex and skills as innate in the private sphere. Hence, caring and empathy are often invisible in the public sphere of work. Furthermore, problematic nature of the division of spheres lies also in the gendered nature of such a division – idealised masculinity being related to the public sphere – and therefore to the notion of effectiveness – and idealised femininity to the private sphere.

Fletcher uses, then, a psychological theory, relational theory, which offers an alternative to prevailing models of growth based in the public sphere and hence privileging separation and individuation. The alternative is a model of growth-in-connection emphasising interconnection and interdependence. Growth-fostering relations are characterised by mutual empathy and empowerment, acknowledgement of vulnerability and taking responsibility for growth. In our society, it is argued, women are encouraged to follow this model, men not. Thus, building on this basis and searching for relational practices performed by women at the workplace, Fletcher identifies a number of them and tells a subversive story by bringing forward such practices. Since through the lenses of organisational discourse, where
norms of effectiveness and instrumentality dominate, such relational practices disappeared as work, they were not interpreted as work—they were even interpreted as inappropriate. This also points to a problem with language: there is no way of expressing certain practices as “real” work, above all if one uses words related to the private sphere to describe them.

Summarising, relational according to Fletcher means a particular way of interacting where mutual growth is striven for. Relational practices are socially constructed as feminine and disappear in the workplace because they do not follow the masculine logic dominating the public sphere. Telling different stories is a challenge and we need to develop a language for that. There are some ideas common to the concepts developed by Hosking and Fletcher. The relational element is connected to femininity, even if in Hosking we are talking of a perspective while Fletcher searches for practices. The conception of the self and of how growth is achieved through independence or interdependence is similar, even if not exactly the same. But both scholars want to challenge an understanding of work and organisations that is limited by masculinity as the norm. Moreover, both want to promote different ways of interacting in organising more inspired by constructions of femininity and to develop knowledge about (or with) them. In this way, both are challenging current understandings and trying to tell different stories, thus constructing phenomena in new, non-traditional ways.

I will therefore take two main points with me into the coming chapters. The first is that paying attention to relational aspects means challenging masculine norms and bringing forward more feminine ones. As I have previously discussed, leadership is masculine at a profound level because of what it implies in terms of a subject-object relation. Considering relations as subject-subject is at least a first step to challenging the masculinity of the leadership concept. The second point is that a challenge to organisational discourse is to tell different stories and to name interactions and relations in order to make them appear.

Relational Leadership – Empirical Studies

If there are not so many empirical studies of leadership as practice (yet), there are even fewer applying a relational perspective. In the Nordic countries and in Australia, however, this idea has attracted attention. In particular, a number of scholars have analysed leadership in art organisations. Soila-Wadman and Ann-Sofie Köping (2009) have studied a film project
and an orchestra, respectively. Their starting point is a criticism of the hero metaphor and of an individualistic view of human beings, by adopting a relational perspective and viewing leadership as a shared phenomenon, leaders and other actors being mutually responsible for their actions. Such a view may be considered particularly radical in these two settings, where the conductor/director is sometimes elevated to a “mythical” status, the aesthetic genius. Analysing the empirical material, another picture than the heroic one emerged. As they put it, “the leader and those s/he interacts with are responsible for the type of relations and actions that they construe jointly. The differences that exists in one’s understanding of the situation, of the other, of oneself, and of the state of things in one's professional everyday practice should be noted and negotiated” (ibid., p. 16). Rich empirical descriptions are given and aspects brought forward in their analysis are collective decision making, mutual dependency between the leader and the group, and a conception of artistic expression as negotiated. While these studies make an important contribution to spreading relational understandings, I would say that the focus is still quite a lot on individuals, leaders and groups. There is a potential for being more relational than so. Moreover, in studying “special” organisations, the risk is that of constructing relational leadership as the exception, a perspective one can use to understand peculiar cases, not the norm.

A similar contribution is made by another study of leadership in orchestras (Koivunen and Wennes, 2009), where the researchers tried to understand relational leadership processes in which conductors engaged by studying the conductor in interaction with the musicians. Leading is conceptualised as a shared responsibility and the role of listening is emphasised as one fundamental process characterised by emotional, relational and bodily aspects. Interestingly, Koivunen (2007b) has also analysed construction of leadership discourses in this setting, showing that different, contrasting discourses existed — “heroic leadership” and “dislike of authority”, for example – and that traditional heroic discourses were surprisingly stable.

On the other side of the globe, one example of a study inspired by relational leadership ideas is Jennifer Binns’ and her analysis of ethical aspects of a relational conceptualisation and enactment of leadership (Binns, 2008). Relational is here to be understood in Fletcher’s terms (Fletcher, 1998). Because of the ethical preoccupation driving her enterprise, Binns assumes conscious reflective subjects that are able to act on their selves. Such an attempt may be easier for women because of the conflation of heroic leadership and masculinity that implies estrangement for feminised subjects.
creating a potential space for transgressive performance. Hence, her work is a criticism of heroic leadership and its masculinity and her focus on renewed leadership enactment by formal leaders is one typical way of applying a relational perspective (Sinclair, 2005).

Finally, I would also like to mention another Swedish study here, a study focused on interactions and thus referring more directly to ethnomethodology and conversational analysis than relational leadership (Nordzell, 2007). Nordzell concentrates on “doing school leadership” as socially constructed, instead of focusing on the principal and what s/he does. School and school organising are seen as produced and re-produced in conversations. Therefore, her analysis is centred on how leadership is produced in interaction in the management team. The aim is “to show how school organization, school leadership and school leader identities are produced, formulated and transformed in talk-in-interaction and to show methods members use to build their concepts and categories, making them socially acceptable in situ” (p. 79). Her method is conversation analysis and in particular categorisation work (how things are ascribed to category couples, as for example “teaching staff”-“other staff”). My reading is that she mostly focuses on identity work done through categorizing. In the meetings reported, they construct a “we”, but also shared attitudes to issues, problems and categories, something that she supposes have consequences on other work that these persons are involved in. Consequently, the analysis is based on very detailed and short sequences of recorded talk. Such an approach is the one I consider closest to a relational perspective seeing subjects as constructed in relations, although the interactions she analyses are limited to certain people in the management of the organisation.

**Constructing a Relational Understanding of Leadership**

In this chapter I have introduced a number of theoretical contributions that may be combined in order to inform my interpretations of the empirical material and in order to add to current understandings of what leadership is about. Observing everyday work, it is hard to find instances of leadership resembling heroic definitions of leadership, and leadership does not seem to be something apparent and readily observed. On the other hand, there is much work going on that might be considered trivial but that, after close attention, may in fact be treated as fundamental for the development
of organising. In these instances of work, direction is produced. Could we name such production leadership? A spontaneous answer to that question would be “no”, given the strong individualistic component of common understandings of leadership. On the other hand, although leadership theory has long been dominated by individualistic assumptions, there have been developments within organisation theory and leadership research that indicate the possibility of constructing alternative understandings in which individuals are not at the centre. Thus, adhering to “organisational becoming”, speaking of individuals decisively influencing the direction of organising processes is not even meaningful. Instead, what becomes interesting is to appreciate the continuous making of organisations. The interpretations provided in chapter 6 of constructing positions and positionings may add one dimension to such studies of organising in the making and reconstruct the phenomenon of leadership in a way that makes sense when change is assumed to be continuous and relations are treated as what is real. Moreover, there are also voices within leadership research that propose ideas in similar directions, even though there seems to be no real dialogue between scholars of relational leadership and organisational becoming. In fact, relational leadership offers the means of conceptualising leadership as a social, not individual, phenomenon and as the emergent construction of coordination and change in interactions throughout the organisation. Moreover, the concept of practice is also interesting in this discussion since it provides the means for understanding consistency of action in a fluid world. Although this concept is not new in leadership studies, there are several nuances of what “practice” means. I will take the idea to its extreme following Chia’s take. One can therefore re-read the empirical material and see if the constructions highlighted are practices and, if this is the case, if they are peculiar practices.

This leads me to construct my own approach by combining and contaminating such ideas. Agreeing with Hosking, I treat methodology as a theory-laden process of construction rather than as a means to generate data for hypothesis testing (Hosking, 2006).

As it may by now be obvious, taking a relational perspective on leadership means having to reflect on one’s own ontological and epistemological assumptions. The concept of practice itself has been translated in quite different ways when doing research depending on what “practice” is made to mean and “do”. While such discussions are not so usual when it comes to leadership studies, critical voices are increasingly denouncing this lack of
reflection and, ultimately, scientific attitude (cf. Barker, 2001; Drath et al., 2008).

More precisely, a processual perspective may indicate a number of approaches. As discussed, “process” is a concept that may be interpreted and used in quite different ways. One common understanding is that process represents the sum of a number of finite stages: a “linear and unidirectional process in which the present is a moment between (the now finished) past and the (yet to come) future” (Hosking, forthcoming-b, p. 18). This is not the interpretation I will refer to. The stance I take in my research is positioned within the social constructionist tradition (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and, in particular, I am going to consider the social world as made of and by processes rather than entities. Such an ontological assumption implies that

what is real for postmodern thinkers are not so much social states, or entities, but emergent relational interactions and patternings that are recursively intimated in the fluxing and transforming of our life-worlds. (Chia, 1995, p. 582)

Therefore, I see relations and interactions as what constitutes social reality continuously. Change is consequently what goes on all the time and stability is an achievement, rather than the normal conditions of the social world — but, as discussed, change is by no mean radical change. In such a view, relational approaches contribute to the conceptualisation of the production of selves and reality. As described, a relational perspective assumes the self to be a relational construction and, thus, a social, dialogical self situated in a number of relations with other selves. There is no “hard” self-other differentiation and in relational processes the world is both known and constructed – there are no entities separated from our knowledge of them.

In terms of leadership, this means that leadership is studied by observing how the rules of organising that people follow are produced by people in interactions and I can, thus, conceptualise leadership as a dynamic, emergent phenomenon taking place in those relations forming “reality” at work, a phenomenon in which direction in organising is produced in interdependent relationships. While keeping the most fundamental element of the traditional definitions, the production of direction, this construct of leadership results in locating such production in potentially each interaction at work, even the most trivial, and seeing leadership not as a grandiose activity but as an ordinary accomplishment of everyday work. Also, there is
no need to concentrate on the actors engaging in the interaction since, taking a relational approach, the actor is produced in the interaction and not the other way around.

It is to be noted that, while processes are assumed to be real, the idea of a phenomenon called leadership is an epistemological assumption. In the process of making sense of the world, leadership has been constructed as a phenomenon in both the academic world and society at large. My construct of leadership has been developed in relation to previous research maintaining one central element, direction, and by applying this construct on the social world I produce knowledge about it and reconstruct leadership and the social world in the meantime. As I have also acknowledged, while I conceptualise reality as relational, I adopt a “hard” self-other differentiation when it comes to the research process. This means that I will allow myself to continue to say “I” as the knowing subject that is doing things rather than referring to myself as constructed through relations. While I recognise that such an analysis of myself and my research may be made, from a pragmatic point of view it is easier for me to communicate my research by keeping myself as an active subject. One could argue against such a decision, but I see it as a viable compromise, one of a series of compromises made in order to write this thesis, compromises that I will illustrate in the rest of the chapter.

A PARENTHEsis ON DIRECTION

As pointed out, direction is the element present in most definitions of leadership, even though it is rarely explicitly addressed. A group of researchers that offer an exception to this trend are Drath, McCauley, Palus, Van Velsor, O’Connor and McGuire (2008), who challenge the traditional tripod ontology of leadership—leaders, followers, common goals—by proposing a different tripod: direction, alignment and commitment (DAC). Practice (understood as pattern of behaviour) of leadership would therefore not necessarily involve leaders and followers and, instead, it would by necessity include the production of direction, alignment and commitment. In a way, the basic idea is quite similar to mine, and I sympathise with the idea of not assuming a priori who is involved in doing leadership and how—questions that are open for empirical research. But one important difference is that they see these three “outcomes” as essential entities, having existence independently of the processes by which they are produced. In my conceptualisation, direction is a concept useful for making sense of social
processes and for saying something meaningful about what is going on in them. I do not consider direction as a “real” outcome, not something that can be assessed or measured, not something resulting from a completed leadership activity. Direction is not an outcome, rather it is a concept useful for interpreting what is going on in social processes. What I assume is that the social is processual and that one perspective useful for understanding what processes do is to consider leadership as a phenomenon producing direction. Leadership is thus going on all the time and there are no stages at the end of which to assess what has been produced.

A second difference requires me to explain more in detail what I mean by direction. In DAC, direction is thought of in a linear way, which is emphasised by alignment (organisation and coordination of knowledge and work), the second outcome. Although these scholars claim to be open for clusters of interrelated agreements rather than only concerted direction, in most of the text direction and alignment nevertheless signal the successful convergence of different actors on a common path to follow: “widespread agreement in a collective on overall goals, aims and mission” and on their value (ibid., p. 636). They explicitly define leadership as that which intentionally aims at producing DAC, thus limiting the range of social interactions included. But the processes I will describe are by no means so easily “rectified”. Direction is in my interpretation more a metaphor than a literal representation of what is going on. It is the moment-by-moment direction produced in interaction. It might mean different directions for different actors, depending on their interpretation of what is being constructed, and it might vary from one instant to the other. Diverging processes and unresolved conflicts are part of daily practices. The common and collective is as important as the contested. I will develop these ideas more in my analysis.

Finally, just a word on commitment, defined by Drath et al as “the willingness of individual members to subsume their own efforts and benefits within the collective effort and benefit” (p. 647). Again, the collective dimension is highlighted and assumptions have to be made on individuals’ motives and orientations, in a postheroic leadership fashion. I will not try such a enterprise and instead limit my analysis to my interpretation of what happens in interactions with regard to what is constructed.

A RELATIONAL UNDERSTANDING – HOW

There have been different approaches to the study of leadership as a relational phenomenon. In particular, there are normative and interpre-
tive approaches. While a number of scholars have opted for a normative approach and are trying to propose new ideals or models for how leadership should be performed, as described from the beginning of this thesis, my aim is to produce knowledge on the phenomenon, an interpretative approach—which in a way is, anyway, also contributing to constructing the phenomenon. But at least my aim is not to explicitly invite practitioners to do differently and test that with them. Thus, the story told so far, and that I am going to tell in the rest of the text is not one about more democratic forms of leadership or collective consensual initiatives, as may be the case in normative relational accounts.

The second choice is between studying how leadership (as concept and phenomenon) is socially constructed in relations and studying leadership as a social phenomenon from a relational perspective. One example following the first path may be Barge and Fairhurst (2008), who also have an interest in social constructionism and in the role language plays in constructing and reconstructing the social world—which they try to combine with systemic thinking. They also speak of leadership as a process, as discursive practices, as co-creation, as emergent in conversations where possibilities for evolution of meaning making are opened up or closed off. But the direction they take differs from mine. Partly because of their systemic thinking—which I find quite deterministic—, but mainly because they then privilege actors and intentionality over processes—leaders are conceptualised as co-creating meaning or positioning with followers, but they are still leaders and it is them that the scholars want to involve in the development of a practical theory (actionable knowledge that combined to reflection may lead to better leadership practices). Thus their analysis also revolves more around how leadership is constructed—how leaders and followers construct their relation, for example—than how leadership is done and performed in interaction.

As should be clear from the analysis done so far, I take the second path instead. Leadership then being conceptualised as a social phenomenon, it is studied by analysing the phenomenon as it happens and focusing on interactions at the workplace as instances of leadership performance.

**THE FOCUS ON INTERACTIONS**

Studying verbal interactions at work enables me to, first and foremost, concentrate on concrete and observable instances of relational processes. Talk is also what people do at work, not in all kinds of work, but it is still...
an important part of work even when the frequency of talk is not high. In any case, the companies where I have conducted my study are places where people talk a lot – for many people, talk may represent the largest part of their work.

Analysing interactions also helps in respecting the situated and local nature of the phenomenon of leadership. “Going micro” allows for observing how the phenomenon takes place at the local level and for appreciating the peculiarities of certain interactions and the possibly chaotic and non-coherent developments. Only relying on narratives about these interactions would, as also showed, mean analysing more coherent stories, even if far from completely coherent, even if stories already made sense of. This is even more evident if the ones to provide narratives are the formal leaders. Although scholars have denounced the gap between the ideal of leadership and what managers actually do at work, few studies have really focused on leadership interactions and the observation of how leadership is done, since most scholars have relied on surveys or interviews (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2003). I am not arguing that observations of people at work would produce a “truer” knowledge than narratives produced by them. On the other hand, it appears meaningful to add such a perspective to the ones already present, given the puzzlement provoked by this apparent paradox. And observations add richness to the empirical material enabling reflection without having to rely on assumptions about interviews providing “correct” accounts (cf. Alvesson, 1996). Of course, I am not fully able to reproduce “the messiness” of social reality since my writing imposes order on it and is, in a way, already making sense of it. But the idea is not to reproduce anything, rather it is to offer a perspective for understanding, and I deem it important to come closer to the phenomenon I want to discuss.

Moreover, every interaction should be treated as potentially producing leadership, and attention should not be a priori limited to specific interactions, for example, those involving formal leaders (cf. Alvesson and Kärreman, 2003). Leadership may thus be seen as a trivial, ordinary accomplishment. Organisations are stable yet unpredictable, busy, yet boring – this is part of their fascination (Boden, 1994). Even though interactions are specific, they are related to other interactions and thus not random. It is in interaction that those aspects that are usually considered as “macro” are produced and reproduced. I am going to develop this point in the coming section on “practice”. Hence, this means that when I interpret and analyse an interaction, I also make sense of it by referring to my understanding of
larger contexts than just that single interaction. And at the same time, each single interaction is enacting the social world. In Fairhurst’s words, “what is ‘text’ one moment becomes ‘con-text’ the very next” (Fairhurst, 2009, p. 1611).

Lack of interest in everyday mundane interactions when studying leadership may also be a consequence of the distinction between leadership and management that has become even sharper with the advent of transformational theories of leadership. Classifying leadership as dissociated from managerial activities concentrated on handling complexity and maintaining order in the present, leadership becomes per definition extraordinary and non-routine – and everyday interactions are thus discarded as non-relevant for the study of leadership (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010). In this way, the settings in which influence processes are supposed to take place have been mainly ignored when producing knowledge about such processes.

THE USE OF “PRACTICE”

The concept of “practice” is a way of organising and making sense of the empirical material I have produced. As discussed, in a broad sense “practice” enables us to make sense of and legitimise the study of the dynamics of organising as “it is done”, how leadership is produced in daily interactions. In a narrower sense, I come to view “practice” as patterned consistency of action emerging in and passed on in social interactions, reflecting and sustaining norms and knowledge – consistency that social actors are not necessarily aware of. It is important in this respect not to confound non-conscious with non-competent – actors may be competent and knowledgeable even if they act in a non-conscious way. Hence, practice is not “what people do” but “how people do”, how they relate to the world. And the distinction of micro and macro, even if difficult to get rid of, is less obvious. Leadership is thus a phenomenon that may be described as an ordinary interactional accomplishment performed through social practices related to how to work, practices that might be more or less reflectively enacted. Thus everyday practical coping is important. It is also to be noted that all practices have ordering effects (Gherardi, 2009): these practices order by producing direction.

“Practice” is also a means for bringing materiality back in. I acknowledge that, by focusing on mostly talk, I to some extent do not pay adequate attention to this aspect. This is also a consequence of drawing inspiration from Hosking’s relational perspective which is mostly focused on dialogue.
and talk (Dachler and Hosking, 1995), compared to other relational approaches more focused on heterogeneous (human and non-human) connecting and disconnecting (Mutch et al., 2006).

Once having established my conception of practice, the problem is how to study it. As described, there are different schools of thought about this issue. I think that here it is again time for a compromise. While it would certainly be optimal, as a researcher, to expose oneself to a variety of social situations and to gain an understanding of how people relate to the world in a number of different social, cultural, historical settings, such an enterprise far exceeds what was possible in my study. Therefore, a compromise has to be made. I have observed and documented a number of interactions in two companies and I tried to identify how direction is repetitively produced. In this way I identify practices “from the outside” generating “etic” constructs (Barley and Kunda, 2001) based on patterns that the people studied are not necessarily aware of. Moreover, I have also interviewed people from these companies. I treat these interviews as interactions themselves, “doing things”, but also as meaningful accounts provided by these people. As accounts, I consider them a way of gaining understanding of how people make sense of their work and thus a way of revealing “emic” concepts, the “native point of view” (ibid.). Moreover, I have also my own understanding of social norms in our society more in general, and I refer to other studies in particular areas as ways of understanding norms and practices too. In this way, I take full responsibility for constructing the practices that I describe and name them “practices”. They are not “self-evident” but it is my active interpretation based on my preconceptions and understandings that produces them.

WHAT KIND OF KNOWLEDGE DO I PRODUCE?

“The knowledge act is the human being’s most socially conditioned activity and knowledge is a pure social product. Already in the language construction there is a constraining philosophy rooted in the society; already in single words there are complex theories implicitly given”

(Fleck, 1935/1997, p. 51, my translation)

This could be a social constructionist definition of knowledge, but was indeed written by a physician long before social constructionism became a widely accepted epistemological position. This sentence can be found in the book entitled Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact where Fleck
shows with an empirical example how science (in his case medicine) does not discover facts existing in the reality, rather facts “emerge” during a collective research process. The scientific community identifies interesting problems and structures them coherently with culture, knowledge and historical development of that area of thought. Language is not just descriptive but normative as well. Even though scientists work separately on research problems, they build their work on each others’ contributions, ideas circulate and grow, and the process goes on until a fact emerges.

Joining such a take on science, what is important is to join the conversation going on in the scientific community on leadership. Hence, one first answer to the question is that hopefully I will add an understanding of this phenomenon. My analysis is performed in a systematic way and tries to give the reader the possibility to make her/his own judgements on the verisimilitude of my version of the story. This does not mean that I am going to conceal certain aspects just to produce a coherent narrative. On the contrary, I have tried and I will continue trying to be as transparent as possible about my choices and my reasons for them. To believe that I could describe every choice would be naïve.; some choices are not even conscious. But one can try. The reader should be able to form her/his own understanding of my interpretations and constructions, and thus be in a position to judge the credibility and fruitfulness of this product. Therefore, rather than concentrating reflections about my interpretations into one specific section of this thesis, I have chosen to discuss them along the way.

One important aspect to underline here is also that gender – leadership being conflated with masculinity was one element of the theoretical problem. As previously discussed, my relational conceptualisation of leadership should not be gendered per se, in the sense that it is not based on a subject-object relation as most of leadership research is. On the other hand, it is very easy to fall into gender-blindness. I will try to keep gender in mind in my analysis. Gender practices are, like other practices, ordering and their intersection with leadership practices is something to pay attention to.

A second answer is more concerned with how it could be meaningful to claim something of some kind of general value by studying single interactions. To be sure, I am not going to maintain that leadership is universally done in certain definite ways. This is no statistical generalisation to a population, but a generalisation from a case to a theoretical proposition (Silverman, 2000), an analytical generalisation to advance theory. Hence I am proposing one way of understanding leadership and I will describe a limited number of interactions and show how one may interpret them as
leadership, as producing direction. The examples discussed are therefore neither exhaustive of the phenomenon nor necessarily the most significant, but they are interesting examples of how to understand leadership differently (Fletcher, 1998). What I offer is a “novel reading” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 62), an account competing with other readings, different from the ones provided by the “voices” in the field, driven by my reading of the empirical observations and informed by my theoretical understandings. The value resides thus in the potential for increasing our understanding of a phenomenon, not in the potential for any ultimate explanation of it.

A SHORT NOTE ON LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

In the discussion so far, I have consciously decided not to distinguish between leadership and management along the line often adopted that goes: “managers are people who do things right, and leaders are people who do the right thing” (Bennis and Nanus, 1985, p. 21). Such a distinction is more accentuated in recent theories, for example transformational leadership, where leadership is constructed as concerned with movement and novelty in opposition to management, which is related to executing routines and maintaining stability. Also contributing to separating leadership from management are those studies focusing on managers and describing the fragmented, reactive and improvising nature of their work (cf. Mintzberg, 1973), a picture quite different from the one of a visionary leader.

Differentiating leadership from management has been profitable business for consultants trying to transform managers into leaders too ( Andersson and Tengblad, 2009). The consequence is also that managers started to look at management as something ugly, to be avoided, a development that may result in leadership becoming a discursive concept decoupled from practice (cf. Alvesson and Svenningsson, 2003b; Holmberg and Tyrstrup, 2009). But, as Alvesson and Svenningsson have argued, managers are the ones studied in leadership research and leadership becomes labelled as such just when managers are performing certain activities. The same activities done by co-workers are not called leadership. One of their examples is listening, which may assume a mystic connotation when managers are the ones who listen, while it would not necessarily be rewarded as an activity in the case of co-workers. Moreover, “leadership is better understood as embedded in management, rather than distinct from it” (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010, p. 160), since leadership is accomplished by doing work, in the daily interactions, and thus engagement with managerial tasks offers both a
setting and substance for leadership processes—“leadership here turns out to be about the engagement with a practical task, around which temporary identities are constructed” (ibid., p. 178). I take a similar stance and consider “manager” as a formal position linked to certain responsibilities and tasks, “management” as a set of techniques for and discourse on how to handle work, and leadership as a phenomenon accomplished in a number of practices, some of which may also be related to management.

ON A SIMILAR JOURNEY

Finally, I want to conclude this section by acknowledging two recent articles in which scholars apply similar ideas on the study of leadership. The first is by Larsson and Lundholm (2010). Inspired by a relational stance, they define leadership as “interpersonal influence” towards organisational goals emerging as “a subtle, identity relevant practice, infused with organizational visions and values” (p. 160). Starting from a position considering identification, values and visions as fundamental elements in the process of leadership, they claim that there is a lack of knowledge about how leadership as influence is then actually accomplished in the flow of daily activities, and how identification, visions and values enter such an interpersonal process—the process itself being mostly black-boxed. Even when practices are studied, the result is often a description of how formal leaders act in their roles of people with such a formal position, rather than of how leadership is accomplished. They therefore turn to the study of leadership as achieved through discursive practices. Practical work (as they call it) is then treated not only as the context of leadership, but also as the substance of leadership—it is by doing work that influence is achieved.

Such an approach is very interesting and shows quite powerfully how leadership in the sense of influence is achieved by describing how categorisation work in interactions links identity constructions to values and visions in the organisation. The interactional construction of an operational unit (a social subsystem), of which one becomes constructed as a member (or not) by categorisation (for example, we working on this project), a sort of “social identity-in-interaction”, is one accomplishment in which influence is achieved and forms the basis for action. We can therefore see that there are researchers turning their attention to mundane interactions as the site and substance for leadership. It is to this still developing stream of studies that this thesis contributes. Larsson and Lundholm, inspired by conversation analysis, focus on influence and identity constructions by analysing
a manager-subordinate interaction in which influence is co-produced (even though the manager is mainly influencing the subordinate). I contribute by referring to a more narrow conception of practice and focusing even more on the interaction rather than the actors, thus also analysing a variegated range of interactions. I also take the process perspective a little further and do not treat organisational goals as given, for example.

The second article I want to mention is by Vine, Homes, Marra, Pfeifer and Jackson (2008). Their contribution is a study of co-leadership. Co-leadership means “the process by which two leaders in vertically contiguous positions share the responsibility of leadership” (p. 339) and the researchers apply the technique of interactional sociolinguistics in order to analyse interactions taken from meetings in different organisations. In this way, everyday workplace talk is analysed by examining “both what they say and how they say it” (p. 345), and therefore not limiting attention to how talk is performed, but also taking into consideration the researchers’ own knowledge of the wider socio-cultural context and of the particular organisation – knowledge gained via an ethnographic approach. The original contribution is to make an effort to combine psychological and discursive streams of leadership research by analysing how the two typical dimensions of leadership behaviour – task-oriented and relation-oriented – are co-performed by co-leaders, rather than being what a leader alone does. Although in this particular way, this study too contributes to drawing attention to mundane interactions and the analysis of both the “how” and the “what” is said and done in conversations. As they also state, analyses of leadership in conversations are still rare.

**The Study – Further Methodological Considerations**

Everything I have written so far in this chapter may be seen as methodological consideration, since constructing an understanding of a social phenomenon is obviously intimately related to how the phenomenon might be studied. As already pointed out, from my point of view, the phenomenon exists in relation to the researcher knowing it and producing knowledge about it, not in itself. Therefore I will end this chapter by discussing more in detail some questions not commented on in chapter 3.

One legitimate question is whether studying companies in Sweden is peculiar and therefore whether the understanding thus developed is interesting only in a Swedish context. Swedish leadership has, in fact, be-
ing described in terms of a decentralised, democratic, non-individualistic 
and consensus-oriented way of handling work in companies (Edström 
and Jönsson, 1998). The cultural factor may, of course, have influenced 
this research, above all since certain questions might not be possible to 
formulate in a context where they are not intelligible. In Sweden today it 
is possible to think of leadership with a relational approach. Therefore, it 
becomes theoretically interesting to study leadership in this very context, 
where a theoretical argument can be developed. If it is practically useful in 
other contexts is another question. I would say it is, at least as an alternative 
understanding to which one could relate.

MY ANALYSIS

Similarly to Larsson and Lundholm (2010), the question I ask of the empiri-
cal material is “what is going on here?”, without focusing on, for example, 
actors’ motives or intentions. The approach I followed is comparable: a mix 
of interviews with managers and subordinates, and of observations of meet-
ings and informal interactions. As they identified everyday interactions 
as potentially important instances of leadership, they selected a number 
of them for closer attention, omitting the more informal ones not directly 
related to work, and concentrating on those in which influence was taking 
place and events would take a different turn as a result.

My analysis has followed a related development. After transcribing sev-
eral meetings and interviews, I read through the transcription of meetings 
and asked “what is going on here?” and “what is being constructed here?”. 
In this way I identified a number of “constructions” taking place and I con-
sidered if they were constructions producing direction in organising or not. 
It was my own interest in “finding” leadership in interactions that guided 
the development of my interpretations – empirical observations were 
already theory-impregnated (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 1994) – even though 
I tried to keep an open mind on what was going on – I had no defined cat-
egories to search after, for example. This way, a list of interesting construc-
tions was compiled and stored, helped by the software Nvivo. After a while, 
I could see that some constructions were present in several situations and 
I focused my attention on them. Parallel to this process and in interactions 
with the scientific community (in the form of articles, books, conferences, 
seminars) I developed my understanding of these constructions and what 
they were doing, as well as of how to make sense of them, for example by 
moving from the ideas of “shared leadership” to more stringent ideas of
processes and practices, as described in previous chapters. Not only is my analysis theory-impregnate, it is also performed from a particular position. Attention and sensibility to gender, for instance, but also to seniority, are at least partly due to the position in which I was in relation to the people studied, mostly older men, and to my previous experiences of such relations – another researcher might pay attention to other aspects (cf. Martin, 2001).

WRITING THIS TEXT

While my analysis began already when deciding which meetings to attend or when writing down notes about what was going on – I was already selecting where my attention should be directed –, the effort to communicate my analysis begins in the editing of the “voices from the field” and continues in the text explicitly dedicated to clarifying my interpretations. As author, I therefore take full responsibility for the text I produce. It is an artefact conveying certain meanings and concurring in defining reality (Bruni, 2003). As already observed, my aim is not to reproduce how reality looks, it is to offer a “novel reading”, but not an arbitrary one. In this effort, I have kept transparent that which the people studied say and that which I construct as my interpretations, what one could call first- and second-order concepts (Van Maanen, 1979), where first-order concepts stand for the concept used by the people studied in their everyday interactions, while second-order concepts are those used by the researcher in order to make sense of what the people studied do and say – corresponding to emic and etic perspectives, which at times may conflate. Moreover, in studies inspired by a discursive approach, the presentation of extended material is considered the most important way for evaluating the trustworthiness of the analysis done. It has therefore been my concern to provide, within the limited space of this thesis, a large number of transcripts of interactions. The reader is thus enabled to make her/his own judgements, something not possible in purely ethnographic accounts where interpretations are less transparent (Potter, 1996; Alvesson, 1996). My aim has thus been to be reflective about my own assumptions and to provide an interpretive, language-sensitive, local, open and non-authoritative understanding of the phenomenon of leadership (Alvesson, 1996).

Concerning the choice of the interactions to present, I have mostly chosen interactions that I found typical for the companies studied and for how certain things are handled. This follows from my effort to show what are the ordinary practices at work. Where this is not the case, I will explicitly com-
ment on that. Such interactions may be on trivial matters or reveal conflicts and disagreements. Therefore I want to point out that I treat such material with respect. Even if it might not convey the picture of work one could expect by reading handbooks, my aim is not to criticise or trivialise what these people are doing. Rather the opposite, to bring forward less heroic aspects of work and acknowledge their importance. These illustrations only convey a glimpse of what is going on, of course. It is glimpses I am offering, not a full story. Hopefully the reader will recognise similar situations or discussion from her/his ordinary world and relate what I am telling to what s/he has experienced. I have also described a typical day at the two companies in order to add some “flesh and blood” to the otherwise isolated instances of interactions I present. Hopefully the reader has been able to form an impression of the context.

As regards the language in this thesis, I acknowledge that it is difficult to express a processual view. As scholars have noticed, Western languages, at least English, are oriented to entities rather than processes, given, for example, the subject-verb-object structure (“it is raining”, not only “raining”) that accentuates the idea of discrete entities (Chia, 1995). Thus, language is not adequate to produce processual accounts. Having acknowledged that, the compromise is to try to avoid reproducing entities, as much as possible. In the text, I have used everyday language in chapter 3 when telling about typical days, while I pay more attention to which terms I use in the following chapters, which are more analysis-oriented and moving towards more specific interpretations. Moreover, I chose English to write this thesis although the interactions observed and the interviews were in Swedish. The analysis was anyway performed on transcriptions in Swedish, which I then had a professional translator render into English. Hopefully, the feeling for what is said and how it is said is not lost in translation. Finally, one word about the form I chose to present interactions. It may seem quite unusual to employ sort of comic strips. At least it is something that I have not encountered before. Anyway, I think it is a way of reproducing interactions that keeps some of the elements that are so easily lost when writing dialogues. For example, it becomes graphically apparent that conversations are not ordered, people interrupt each other or finish each others’ sequences. Quick replies follow each other. Also the spatiality of the interaction is brought out, we see that there are different persons around a table (most often) and we see who is speaking, rather than having to read names and keep track of who had spoken before. On the other hand, we don’t “see” who is speaking in terms of the particular person, since I have opted for drawing generic sil-
houettes. Such a choice was at first motivated by practical reasons: making a realistic representation starting from the pictures I took, but anonymising people in them. But this choice also reflects well the turn that the analysis has taken. What is put forward is the conversation, the interaction in terms of the words said. It is to such words that the reader’s attention is directed. And it is such words that are analysed. Hence, this form of presentation strengthens, in a way, the credibility of the analysis I produce.

**Summarising**

This chapter may be seen as a necessary pause for reflection after having read the empirical material more and more closely, which has meant realising the need for concepts to make sense of those aspects that were not completely illuminated by the literature on shared leadership and postheroic leadership. This need has led me to combine the ideas of organisational becoming, practice and relational leadership in order to produce a processual understanding of leadership to be used for analysing leadership as the production of direction beyond consensual and concerted achievements by more radically focusing on the interaction rather than the actors. Not only I have reviewed relevant theoretical contributions, but I have combined them in my own approach and commented on a number of methodological considerations that are related to the analysis I perform by adopting such an approach. After this necessary pause, I go on in my reading of the empirical material in the next chapter adopting the more narrow definitions of process and practice just discussed.
8

Practices of Leadership

Reading the empirical material, the research question has become more specific, from a search for leadership as shared practice to a search for the production of direction as practice in interactions, including interactions that are ambiguous and/or contested. Parallel to this shift, the concepts of process and practice have also been defined in a more precise and theoretically founded way. Similarly, the frame of reference has been moved from more rational ideas of shared leadership, to challenging ideas of postheroic leadership, to arrive at the more specifically processual idea of relational leadership. The previous chapter has thus been dedicated to specifying the theoretical concepts useful to take a processual view on leadership and to combining them into an understanding that may be used for studying the production of direction in interactions. In this chapter, I will apply such ideas in order to continue the interpretation of the empirical material as regards constructing positions and positionings. I will also introduce another practice that becomes evident when searching for the production of direction with these lenses, constructing issues. First of all, however, a short reflection on work in more general terms now that the concept of practice has been deepened.

Working at CleanTech and StrongMat

In chapter 3, I tried to provide some general description of the two organisations studied, CleanTech and StrongMat, and a more specific impression of what work is at these organisations. Such aspects are important to me since I am interpreting leadership as something that is done in everyday interactions at work. A broader feeling for how such interactions happen is thus relevant. Moreover, in my interpretation, the context is not a given static environment in which actions take place, but is constructed and reconstructed in those very actions. The ideal situation would, of course, be one in which analysis is both deep and broad, where single instances are analysed at the same time as the broader context is taken into consideration in its complexity at each moment, but this is more an ideal than a viable option. I opted for a focused analysis of particular instances of practices in
specific chapters and for a broad introduction in chapter 3. Hopefully this has been of help for the reader.

In this section, I would like to bring up a few observations about how work is performed at these two organisations, observations that are now possible to be understood through the theoretical lenses of the concept of practice. More precisely, I want to summarise a few important aspects, also brought up by the people studied, and to link such observations to the theoretical ideas introduced in chapter 7. This way, the context is more specifically analysed and a more processual understanding is provided, showing that the concepts of process and practice help in gaining insight into what happens at work at these organisations, and above all how work happens. This analysis also acknowledges aspects that are overlooked when analysing more specific interactions in terms of conversations, aspects such as materiality. Although, as already explained, I have chosen to focus on talk, I am aware that there is more to interactions and work than talk, and the following brief analysis gives some glimpse of that.

Even though, as we might have noticed from the descriptions in chapter 3, there are some apparent differences between the two settings, it is striking how certain elements are common. Let me start with the peculiar aspects that characterise the two settings. The most apparent difference resides in the physical environment in which work takes place. CLEANTECH is located in recently renovated buildings furnished with standard-catalogue Scandinavian office desks, chairs and bookcases. The colours are prevalently light and a harmonic atmosphere is aimed for. Some plants adorn the place and everything is kept in order. At STRONGMAT, on the other hand, the people I met sit in a dirty sooty building, darkened by decades of exposure to the harsh environment of the mill. Furniture is sober, still standard-catalogue style, but much older and less exclusive. Some attempts at creating a feeling of cosiness have been made, but only in the coffee room. The offices feel different, both conventional, but one modern and one shabby. In spite of such a difference, the main site for common discussions, the conference rooms, are quite similar. A long table and a projector are in the centre of the room. People are used to discussing together while looking at some presentation or Excel file projected on the screen. At times, they edit together the document projected.

This is indeed one common element, the role played by artefacts when people interact. Even though I do not focus particularly on such an aspect, I want to mention here that shared documents are present on a number of occasions under a number of forms. As just described, looking at the same
document, and co-editing it, is what many interactions are centred on. It could be figures about how production is going, a list of the activities that are supposedly being carried out, or the formal answer to a third party. As Barbara Czarniawska observes, people in organisations spend a considerable amount of time editing and co-editing documents (Czarniawska, 2005); by constructing such documents they also act and construct the world in which they act, and they attempt at stabilising certain aspects given the relative stability of written texts. Thus, at the very least, interactions are mediated by artefacts and/or prompted by artefacts. This might be important to keep in mind when reading my analyses, where I present extracts from dialogues, since the form of presentation I use may lead to the impression of abstract and a-material interactions.

Another common element was the social nature of work. While people were at times alone in front of their PCs tapping on their keyboards, most of the time they were talking, either on the phone or face-to-face. Talk was absolutely the main action performed during the working day (cf. Boden, 1994). A telephone call to check a detail before compiling a form in the IT system, a short conversation in the colleague’s office to make sure that the situation was under control, a large meeting to discuss how to proceed on a new market. People talked and walked a lot – particularly at StrongMat, where talking to other people might mean walking 10 minutes through the mill. Still, face-to-face conversations are apparently valued enough to make it worth the effort. We are therefore speaking of embodied interactions, not purely textual exchanges. Again, this is a limitation of my analysis, which will make transparent for the reader only transcriptions of conversations.

Work is thus social in the sense that it is performed in interactions among people (and artefacts). Such a stance diminishes the cognitive aspect of work. What is going on inside people’s minds is not that interesting, what is interesting is what people achieve together. This last observation highlights another aspect, the collective nature of work. While I am not claiming that consensus is the basis for performing work, I maintain that work is a collective accomplishment based on the more or less coordinated and connected actions of a number of individuals (cf. Corbin and Strauss, 1993). Particularly at StrongMat, an organisation operating in the process industry, it is evident that actors’ performances are connected to and dependent on those of others; it would be nonsense to work isolated from the rest of the organisation. A collective achievement also means that adjustments have to be agreed on and arrangements revised when circumstances require
it because of something having changed or not being contemplated by current agreements, which is often the case.

This leads me to my final point. It was apparent that problems, emergencies and crises were recurrent and, in some cases, dominated the unfolding of the working day (cf. Holmberg and Tyrstrup, 2009). Circumstances in which things develop as expected are seldom, very seldom, the case. Everyday work is sloppy and messy. Sometimes there is time for a relaxed and reasonable dialogue, sometimes there is hardly time for any thinking at all. Lists of “things to do” are compiled, some problems are solved, others dissolve (cf. Alby and Zucchermaglio, 2006). People are used to such developments and competently, but not necessarily consciously, are prepared to face them (cf. Orlikowski, 2002).

In conclusion, a practice perspective on work allows for making sense of such observations and understanding work as embodied, situated, social, collective, materially mediated and emergent. This is the context in which the production of direction takes place, a context that is also reconstructed as direction is produced. Thus, work may be conceptualised as engaged through a variety of practices. Furthermore, the construction of positions and positionings, which I have identified as producing direction, can also be interpreted as a practice, a practice producing direction.

**Constructing Positions and Positionings as a Practice**

Referring to the concept of practice previously introduced – socially sustained sensible and competent ways of engaging work – it is now possible to interpret the instances of constructing positions and positionings described in previous chapters as instances of a practice. One important way of performing work is, in fact, by constantly engaging in constructing positions and positionings, whether people are aware of that or not and whether they intentionally do so or not. When people construct positions, what they do is what is sensible to do in such conversations. This is not to say that people are successful and/or comfortable in constructing positions (especially those positions that they would prefer to have to deal with). As we have seen, for example, the Management Group narrates the failure of constructing the intended position for the group in relation to the others within the organisation. What I mean by competent is that, as a part of the social achievement of working, constructing positions is something that is
repeatedly done as one of the means for performing work and as appropriate to do in order to go on working. Therefore, it is by applying the theoretical lenses introduced that I interpret such constructing as a practice, a definition of practice “from the outside” as researchers would argue. On the other hand, reading the interviews with people at the two organisations, it is apparent that they also make sense of the work in quite similar terms, according constructing positions an important role. The “native point of view” points, therefore, in a similar direction too.

Norms about how to work, or about how different people are, become reconstructed in such practices, for example how salespersons are, which is a construction present in similar ways in a broader context. In other words, this is how people have learned to cope with everyday work and situations. It is also important to say that this is not one defined performance but a category of performances that belong to the same practice and may, therefore, take quite different forms, as we have seen. Moreover, not only are we speaking of a multitude of ways in which work is engaged, but this practice is going on at the same time as other practices are also being performed. This becomes evident in the empirical material when looking at the practice of gender. Finally, other practices are also talked about when constructing positions and positionings. For example, if we recall the conversation about Leonard’s role and the one about the order stock not showing the correct figures, in these interactions one of the things discussed is what I would call the practice of “selling”: what is selling about and how should selling being carried out? There seem to be different versions of the practice and the conversations reported are one occasion for making such assumptions about the practice more explicit and thus recognising different ways of engaging work when it comes to selling. Similarly, one could interpret the exchange about the material to publish on the internet as also having to do with a discussion on what the practice of “being professional” means. Other examples present in the interactions described are discussions on the practices of “communicating by using documents” (such as an organisational diagram or a written contract) or of “working by using IT solutions” (such as a CRM system).
Constructing Positions and Positionings
– Practices Performing Leadership

Having defined one practice performing leadership, constructing positions and positionings, going on at the workplace when people engage and cope with work, I now turn to elaborating the argument of treating such a practice as leadership, inspired by the ideas introduced in chapter 7. Since “every communicative action performs gestures toward the future, opening up some and closing off other possibilities for the evolution of meaning making and action” (Barge and Fairhurst, 2008, p. 235), producing positions and positionings means allowing for certain organising actions and talks and closing down for others. It is a way of ordering social reality and achieving temporary framing of how reality is constructed. Certain lines of action are opened up, others tuned out (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010). Of course, as I have underlined, positions are contested and fragmented; there is no clear and stable definition of what one is supposed to do and to be. But even local and fragmented constructions have importance for how talk and action develop, for what becomes possible and what becomes impossible. Such importance lies not in the shared understanding of utterances in conversations, which may often not be the case, but in the responsiveness characterising conversations, meaning that people produce new utterances in response to those already produced, thus building on each other’s utterances (Shotter, 1993; Boden, 1994; Hosking, forthcoming-a). Hence talks may, or may not, become supplemented, which means that constructing may develop in different ways, and “different constructions differently resource and constrain how processes “go on” and the realities that are made” (van der Haar and Hosking, 2004, p. 1023). Moreover, some constructions will be repeated over time and become institutionalised (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), they will be taken for granted and fewer discussions will be involved in their reproduction. Other positions may become contested, requiring much more discussion, for example, the construction of what a salesperson is about and its relation to IT. Given these considerations, I consider such practices as producing direction in organising processes, and thus leadership.

As mentioned, I do not consider these practices as having to do with consensus and democracy. On the contrary, I have tried to show that unresolved conflicts might be the case, that different contradictory constructions might be present at the same time, and that power is produced in the positioning constructed, for example, when senior people are constructed
as a “we” with influence – this aspect will be even more evident in the next section.

As anticipated, while one could argue that positions are produced and people take up such positions as their own in conversation, meaning that they see the world from the vantage point of those particular positions (Davies and Harré, 2001), my argument is more moderate. I take what can be defined as an agnostic view of the relation between what is said and the actual subjectivities of the people involved, that is, I do not make any assumption about what is going on in people’s minds and hearts (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). I just assume that which positions are constructed and in which relation they are positioned will have consequences for how conversations develop and for which actions are made socially intelligible and which not. The positions constructed, for example, will have to be taken into consideration, in one way or another, in the unfolding of the interaction – this is one way of understanding the ongoing creation of social arrangements. This follows from my interest in the relational constructions going on, rather than in the individual’s experience or identity. Thus, conversations move forward organising when positions and positionings are produced. Such an interpretation adds to other studies analysing leadership in similar ways.

In fact, recently, leadership has been studied in terms of interactions producing categories, categories that construct people and the organisation, and categories used in order to do something, for example, lay blame or responsibility for something on someone (Nordzell, 2007). The main focus in Nordzell’s study is how leadership is performed by constructing and negotiating categories related to identity, individual and collective. Actors orient their discursive actions in relation to the categories produced by the previous speakers; they position themselves in relation to them by either including themselves into, or distancing themselves from, the different categories produced. Nordzell focused on meetings gathering the school management group. School leaders are constructed in such conversations, along with (and often in opposition to) other school actors and the school itself. Such practices are interpreted as leadership, but Nordzell does not go beyond conversations among formal leaders, who are understood as intentional actors. Although not performing an analysis as detailed as hers, this thesis adds to such a study by adopting a similar approach and pushes the idea of leadership as happening in interactions further by including interactions throughout the organisation and by not being limited given
the assumption that how things develop depends on actor’s intentionality (thanks to the idea of practice).

Categorisation is also the focus of the analysis of leadership in interaction performed by Larsson and Lundholm (2010). These scholars refer to the concept of operational unit, a kind of social identity unit, a device for categorisation implying that some people are within the category and some not (a membership achieved interactively in talk) and that some tasks to work upon are defined as pertaining to the unit. In this way identities and tasks are negotiated. An example is, “we working on project X”. Organisational values and cultural aspects are elements drawn upon in this process of categorisation, thus constructing the operational unit in a specific position related to the rest of the organisation. In this way, the different operational units constructed are used as persuasive devices by the actors involved in the conversation. Not only is this approach therefore similar to the one I am proposing, but the authors also analyse identities and tasks as intertwined. On the other hand, they focus exclusively on the interaction between a manager and a subordinate and how influence in this interaction is achieved.

Finally, an explicit reference to construction of positions and positionings as an important instance of leadership is present in Uhl-Bien’s conceptualisation of relational leadership: the structuring of roles and relationships is one leadership process (Uhl-Bien, 2006). My interpretation provides an empirical illustration of this theoretical idea. Hence, based on these contributions and on the theoretical concept of practice, what I propose here is an analysis that does not assume actor’s intentionality as a crucial element and that focuses on the practice of producing positions and positionings without being preoccupied by how actors will take on such positions, but just acknowledging that these constructions matter as they produce direction by making certain courses of action possible, probable, intelligible, or not.

As anticipated, practices are ordering and therefore this kind of practice will intersect with other ordering practices. Given my ambition to perform a gender-aware analysis, I will now turn to analyse whether gender is practiced while doing direction.
Intersection with Other Practices – Doing Gender and Seniority

Gender constructions and their relation to leadership constructions are particularly relevant aspects of the criticism of traditional leadership theories. I therefore turn to the analysis of how gender is practised, since gender may also be conceptualised as a practice done in work organisations (Martin, 2003; Linghag, 2009; Poggio, 2006), by looking at what I, having a broader understanding of the context and knowledge of gender literature, interpret as gendered constructions produced in interactions with me in interviews. The result shows that gender is indeed related to the practice of constructing positions and positionings. This is interesting per se, but also presents an interesting example for illustrating how several practices are intertwined and performed at the same time when doing work.

I start my analysis by taking a step back and commenting on the gendered aspects of the two organisations studied. On a structural level, strongmat is a gender-segregated organisation. Vertically, no woman was present on the board of directors. The large majority of the positions high up in the hierarchy were also held by men. Horizontally, men and women worked in different and separated areas. Women were found in accounting, in invoicing, in back-office functions (meaning those taking care of sales orders to be registered in the IT system and to reach the production planning), in delivery assurance (meaning those people answering customers and salesmen's questions and complaints about where the product is in the production line and sometimes speeding up the delivery of some products), in HR and as secretaries. I would define these functions as administrative and service-oriented. They work for the men that are found in sales (a function requiring technical knowledge) and R&D. Men are also found in production and production planning. In general, men work with technical matters more than women. In the interviews, people also provide accounts defining women and men as different and as better suited for different kind of works, reconstructing quite typical ideas, for example, that women are “softer” and cope better when they are yelled at (by angry customers) than men. The Distribution and Transports department studied is an exception: the proportion of men and women is about 50-50. Still, most of the women talk of themselves as being more at ease working with men than with women, and most of the people spoke of women-dominated workplaces as possibly even worse than men-dominated, because of all the intrigues going on there, for instance.
At CleanTech, the situation is somewhat more complex. The Managing Director is a woman, the founder’s daughter, with a degree in Business Administration. The other three owners are men and with a technical background. The Management Group is composed of two men (with technical backgrounds) and three women (one of them with a technical background). Otherwise the people in the company are segregated along the usual lines, men working with sales, project management (engineering) and plant maintenance, women working with accounting, marketing, administration. Gender constructions are less evident than at StrongMat too.

Already on a structural level it is thus possible to see a pattern of relation between men and technical work, and women and administrative work. This is no special case just for these two companies. In Sweden, segregation on the labour market is a debated subject (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Knights, 2004; Holmquist and Sundin, 2002). In addition, different occupations and branches are conceptualised as gender-labelled, as associated with femininity or masculinity. Such labelling also implies a hierarchy, where the masculine is constructed as superior to the feminine (Hirdman, 1988). But gender labelling is socially produced and therefore may change over time (Sundin, 1993; Alvesson and Billing, 1999) and be different in different places (Tienari et al., 2002). Looking at what is said in the interviews, gender-labelling becomes evident. While the gendered aspect of occupations is an interesting topic that would deserve a longer discussion, I limit my point here in order to highlight how such constructing is related to leadership as conceptualised in this thesis.

There is a developed tradition of research showing that technological, technical and manual work has been treated as masculine (Eriksson-Zetterquist and Knights, 2004; Burris, 1996; Berg and Lie, 1995; Cockburn, 1983; Alvesson and Billing, 1999), which means that while women may be found in technical occupations, work related to technology is anyway prevalently constructed as masculine – for example, femininity is often constructed in terms of techno-fear – and even artefacts may be constructed as technological if they are perceived as having to do with masculinity – the example of a washing machine being one of the most obvious. Work related to caring and providing service has instead been associated with femininity (Billing, 2006; Fletcher, 1998). This is of course quite a reductive way of synthesising a number of intersecting dynamics in which, for example, even class and race play important roles. There have been, for instance, studies showing how working class lads constructed their masculinity in opposition to femininity by orienting themselves towards manual work (Willis, 1977).
While such dynamics are situated in time and place, and therefore it may not be meaningful to transfer them unreflectively to other contexts than the one in which they have been studied (Tienari et al., 2002), there seems to be certain stability in these patterns. Running the risk of reconstructing the dichotomy feminine-masculine, I will analyse the empirical material along this pattern. I interpret technical and practical work as constructed in masculine terms, while administrative work is constructed in feminine terms by opposing and subordinating it to technical/practical work. Practical work means being immersed in the operational activities of the company and arranging things and solving problems so that processes can work. I would say that in a context in which many people work in offices and not on the shop floor, and in which IT systems are extensively used in order to transfer information and coordinate production, practical work becomes the correspondent to “manual work” and hence it is constructed as opposed to working with computers and IT systems. Interestingly, managers’ work is often characterised in terms of administrative work.

For example, Hans describes his work as practical and Jacob’s (the manager’s) work as administrative (and not informed by practical knowledge):

Also at Cleantech, work done by the people in the Management Group is characterised by what I would call administration, in terms of providing the conditions for others to do their “expert work”. Paul and Gary explain in this way which questions they ask to Marcus, their manager.
People working with administrative tasks themselves construct their work in a particular way, which I interpret as not challenging the superiority of technical/practical work by constructing administrative work as complementary, not superior to technical/practical work, not even when administrative work is performed by the manager. Iris is formally the export manager at Cleantech, even though there is no “export” department, and Jacob is the manager for the Distribution and Transports department at Strongmat.

This construction in terms of complementarity and respect for the other’s competence is not present to the same extent when administrative competence is discussed. But there may also be hierarchy within technical
positions, hierarchies that I would relate to different kinds of masculinities (Cockburn, 1983). As already analysed, salespeople and project managers at CLEANTECH are constructed in different ways, also corresponding to different masculinities. Even more evident is the difference with “maintenance guys” masculinity. “Salesperson masculinity” is performed in terms of self-confidence, control, toughness, heroic behaviour, taking up space; while “maintenance guy masculinity” is more connected to “blue collar” masculinity (Willis, 1977), in this case having to do with manual work, subordinated to both sales work and project management (of course here the education level is also a dimension that plays a part). Salespeople are, moreover, sometimes also involved in maintenance; they show that if there is urgent need, they are able to do the manual work as well and get their hands dirty. One way of seeing such subordination is to look at how justification and blame for shortcomings and errors are constructed. The following accounts are provided by Leonard and Christer, both maintenance guys.

[EXPLAINING WHEN THERE ARE COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS CAUSED BY SALES PEOPLE] IT’S OF COURSE, ERRORS THAT ARISE, IT’S THAT THEY HAVEN’T GIVEN THE INFORMATION THAT’S NEEDED FOR IT TO WORK ALL THE WAY AND...IT’S OF COURSE, IT’S ALWAYS HARD TO, TO CONVEY THE RIGHT THINGS AND, SO, BUT I DON’T KNOW, IT’S PROBABLY, MOST OFTEN IT’S PROBABLY THE CASE THAT YOU...YOUR BRAIN IS ALWAYS A BIT STRESSED SO YOU’RE THINKING ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE AND THEN, YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO BE IN ON THINGS AND DISCUSSING SOMETHING, SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT MAYBE, AND IT’S EASILY DONE THAT, MOST OFTEN IT’S PROBABLY, THE ERRORS THAT ARE COMMITTED I THINK ARE MOST OFTEN WHEN YOU’RE STRESSED AND THE SALESMAN IS IN THE MIDDLE OF A NEW DEAL, A NEW PROJECTS, AND THEN HE PROMISES THINGS A BIT TOO LIGHTLY.

CAN YOU GET DOUBLE MESSAGES IN BETWEEN SOMETIMES [REFERING TO COMMUNICATION FROM PROJECT MANAGERS]?

NO. YEAH, IN SOME CASES IT MIGHT BE THAT SOMEBODY, LIKE THE PROJECT MANAGER IS COUNTING ON US DOING THIS, YOU SEE, BUT THEN AT THE OTHER MEETINGS WE’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO, WE’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO DO ANYTHING, BUT THEY’VE COUNTED ON US DOING IT. SO WHEN WE COME ALONG THEN, THIS IS WHAT I MEAN, THEY COME ALONG AT THE END AND SAY, ‘BUT YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO DO THAT’, ‘YEAH, BUT YOU DIDN’T SAY SO AT THE MEETING’. SO IT CAN, LIKE, BE IN, THEY PROBABLY, LIKE, THINK IT’S INCLUDED IN OUR JOB TO, GOOD, WE’RE SUPPOSED TO DO THIS, BUT NOBODY’S SAID WE’RE SUPPOSED TO DO IT, SO IT CAN BE, AS IT WERE, BETWEEN US, RIGHT, THAT’S HOW IT CAN BE.
Maintenance guys are thus constructed as carrying the blame for the misunderstandings and errors that might occur, and other people, if “guilty”, as justified because of a number of factors. One can read the caution and the respect for others’ jobs in these accounts. I interpret such constructions as positioning maintenance guys in a subordinated position. What I want to show with these examples is that in interactions producing positioning, gender is also performed in the form of masculinities and femininities. The two practices intersect and reinforce each other. The position “salesperson”, for example, is connected to a certain masculinity that in these context I interpret as hegemonic, which means that the positioning of “salesperson” is also constructed in relation to masculinities associated with the other positions. In the case of CLEANTECH, “salesperson” may thus become a superior position to both “project manager” and “maintenance guy”, with regards to masculinity. Moreover, being administrative positions related to femininity, their positioning is also constructed in relation to femininity as subordinate to masculinity in society, and in particular in the contexts studied. I have no ambition to generalise such interpretations. My point here is more to show that different kinds of practices may intersect in producing positions and that gender may be one of them. This is an important aspect to analyse. Simplifying somewhat my argument, one could, for example, have a majority of women managers in this context and conclude that gender is not an issue. Or one could implement a “postheroic leadership ideal” and conclude that with such a move, leadership will become feminised. What I argue is that since leadership goes on in practices, there is a need to analyse how direction is produced in practices in order not to miss other gendered as-
pects that play a part even when leadership, according to the conventional understanding, is not necessarily masculine.

But also within what I have identified as the superior positions there are differences related to another dimension, age, or better, seniority: how long one has been working within the company. This is similar to Burris (1996) observation of the importance gained by “experts” in companies in which technology and technical knowledge have a central role. In such organisations, bureaucratic rules and formal ranks are less important than technical expertise and informal arrangements. The result is a polarisation into expert and non-expert work, which is related to different working conditions, management, possibilities for career and mobility, among other things. Demonstrating expertise and speaking knowledgeable become central aspects of people’s work. I see a similar pattern in these two organisations and in the accounts that reconstruct “the expert”, as in the examples below.

**Lucia**

**WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO KNOW [IN ORDER TO BE A GOOD MANAGER]?**

**Hans**

**YOU HAVE TO KNOW THE BASIC FOUNDATION, HOW THIS WORKS ROUGHLY, HOW, HOW THIS WORKS WITH TRANSPORTS AND WAREHOUSES AND THINGS LIKE THAT. IF YOU’VE NO IDEA ABOUT IT, THEN IT’S REALLY HARD FOR YOU TO BE MANAGER OF THIS SECTOR. CLEARLY JACOB HAS DIFFICULTIES WITH IT BECAUSE HE DOESN’T KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT THIS. HE COMPENSATES FOR THIS WITH A LOT OF OTHER GOOD QUALITIES, BUT IT WOULD BE GOOD IF HE KNEW A BIT MORE, HAD BETTER BASIC KNOWLEDGE ABOUT IT. NOW IT’S NOT EASY TO GET IT, WHEN YOU’VE GOT GIANTS LIKE DAVID AND ME IN THE VICINITY, WHO, WHO, WE, LIKE, DON’T HAVE TIME TO WAIT, WE HAVEN’T REALLY GOT THE TIME TO TEACH EITHER IN A GOOD WAY, AND IT TAKES TIME, TAKES A LOT OF TIME TO LEARN A JOB, ANY JOB.

**Lucia**

**IT MUST TAKE MANY YEARS?**

**Hans**

**YOU HAVE TO WORK IN THE PRODUCTION, WITH OPERATIONS, YOU CAN’T, WE HAD A, Lasse, YOU KNOW HIM, RIGHT? THE GUY THAT WORKS AT COMPANY FF. HE WORKED HERE BEFORE FOR A WHILE SO HE WAS, YES, BEFORE THOMAS. THEN HE CAME FROM COMPANY EE, HE WAS GOING TO RE-DO THIS WORLD PRETTY THOROUGHLY, HE ALSO GOT AN ASSIGNMENT THAT WASN’T SO EASY TO DO. BUT HE DIDN’T KNOW THE BUSINESS, SO HE DIDN’T KNOW HOW IT WORKS.

**Lucia**

**YES, PATRIK [WORKING FOR PRODUCTION PLANNING] AND I HAVE PROBABLY TALKED ABOUT THIS A THOUSAND TIMES AT LEAST. BUT, LIKE, IT COMES BACK ANYWAY. JANNE [ALSO PLANNING], HE’S IN ON IT, SINCE HE HAS KNOW-HOW ABOUT THE OPERATIONS THAT’S GOOD ENOUGH, HE’S WORKED WITH MORE OR LESS THE SAME THINGS AS I’VE DONE PLUS HE WAS HEAD OF PLANNING DOWN AT THIS HOT ROLLING MILL AT ONE TIME, WHEN I WAS HEAD OF QUALITY OR RESPONSIBLE FOR QUALITY, DOWN THERE. SO HE KNOWS THIS MILL BETTER THAN I DO, AND THERE AIN’T MANY THAT KNOW THE WHOLE MILL BETTER THAN I DO, NOT, NOT DETAILED KNOWLEDGE BUT IN TERMS OF FLOW, IN TERMS OF OPERATIONS. IT DOESN’T HELP IF THEY HAVE, IF THEY’RE PHD STUDENTS AND COME HERE, UNLESS YOU KNOW HOW IT WORKS HERE IT DOESN’T WORK ANYWAY.

**Lucia**

**DAVID**

**WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO KNOW [IN ORDER TO BE A GOOD MANAGER]?**

**Lucia**

**IT MUST TAKE MANY YEARS?**

**David**

**YES, PATRIK [WORKING FOR PRODUCTION PLANNING] AND I HAVE PROBABLY TALKED ABOUT THIS A THOUSAND TIMES AT LEAST. BUT, LIKE, IT COMES BACK ANYWAY. JANNE [ALSO PLANNING], HE’S IN ON IT, SINCE HE HAS KNOW-HOW ABOUT THE OPERATIONS THAT’S GOOD ENOUGH, HE’S WORKED WITH MORE OR LESS THE SAME THINGS AS I’VE DONE PLUS HE WAS HEAD OF PLANNING DOWN AT THIS HOT ROLLING MILL AT ONE TIME, WHEN I WAS HEAD OF QUALITY OR RESPONSIBLE FOR QUALITY, DOWN THERE. SO HE KNOWS THIS MILL BETTER THAN I DO, AND THERE AIN’T MANY THAT KNOW THE WHOLE MILL BETTER THAN I DO, NOT, NOT DETAILED KNOWLEDGE BUT IN TERMS OF FLOW, IN TERMS OF OPERATIONS. IT DOESN’T HELP IF THEY HAVE, IF THEY’RE PHD STUDENTS AND COME HERE, UNLESS YOU KNOW HOW IT WORKS HERE IT DOESN’T WORK ANYWAY.
Seniority might become constructed in terms of “dominance” (Andersson, 2003). Here again an excerpt from the interview with Hans. We can also read how he is performing seniority in relation to me, the young woman, when he affirms that I was probably not even born when he started to work at the company. I am not saying that this is something intentional that he does, but still it positions me in a certain way.

HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING LONG WITH MATTERS LIKE THIS?

LUCIA

SUB-CONTRACTING I DON’T HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH ACTUALLY, I JUST HAPPEN TO KNOW WHERE THEY ARE. WAREHOUSE, THAT’S SOMETHING I’VE BEEN DOING AS LONG AS THERE’S BEEN A WAREHOUSE, AN EXTERNAL WAREHOUSE AT ALL, SO THAT’S WHAT I’VE IN PRINCIPLE BEEN WORKING WITH SINCE, WELL, THE EIGHTIES, MAYBE THE FIRST, OR, NO, IT WAS PROBABLY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE NINETIES, THAT THE EXTERNAL WAREHOUSE CAME UP, SO I’VE BEEN WORKING WITH DISTRIBUTION MATTERS SINCE 1978, BEFORE YOU WERE BORN.

HANS

Yeah, OK. Then you weren’t that big. But anyway, it’s clear that, but I’ve been working with it more or less continuously, I was away from it for less than two years, one-and-a-half, when was working at business development, just for a bit of a change. And then I was needed here... [He goes on speaking of himself and David] Then we’re, what we have in common is that we think quite practically, so when somebody comes along with a problem, the first thing we see isn’t how are we going to get this into our computers, it’s how do we solve this practically. Then there are others that worry about how to get it into our computers. What we’re not good at is information flow, but we’re good at practical solutions and there are few problems, practical problems that we can’t solve, I’d be prepared to say, with the experience we have, we’ve seen something similar before anyway, almost [...] we cover a great deal, we cover, like, the whole area as far as practical solutions are concerned, and it’s dangerous too. There are only two people that know this in fact, there are very few who come anywhere near us, and it’s partly because we, we dominate this field, we’re aware of that, we don’t let people into this process, we try but they don’t come. We tried to let Marit into this, I tried to teach her when it comes to purchasing and the like here because that’s where you usually start, it went to hell (L: in what way?) we let her do things by herself too early.
This is quite an extreme constructing of the experts, the giants, the ones who know how to solve every problem, and I am not saying that it is consensually accepted by all people at the organisation. Still, it is one of the constructions articulated and recurring in conversations, and this has consequences. On the other hand, while senior people become constructed as competent, I have also shown that there are issues around which their superiority might become threatened, for example the introduction of new IT technology. Still, seniority allows for resistance. It would probably be more difficult to resist from other positions.

And seniority also allows for constructing relations in a certain way, for certain positionings, which I interpret as related to homosociality (Holgersson, 2003), the attraction to the ones who are similar, which, in a context where masculinity and seniority are important (Andersson, 2003), may be seen as strong relations among older non-administrative men. The account below is about the relation between Hans and Alexander (who is the unit’s manager but is considered a practical person), two of the people involved in the interaction labelled “flirt” previously described. Their positioning is defined as an intimate cooperation, their conversations being treated as confidential. Here we are talking about the meeting with David previously described, in which they discussed a number of questions and how to act.

**Lucia**

**Hans**

Yes, yes, we trust each other. I’ve known Alexander since before he started at Strong-Mat, so that’s, well, more than 20 years, and I’ve probably known David since, yes, the beginning of the nineties, the end of the eighties maybe, anyway, then... there’s, there we have a close cooperation. And it’s very rarely that we write things down, it happens that someone confirms this by sending an e-mail, that this is what we were discussing and this was the result. Instead it’s rarely, you don’t take minutes, enter it into a journal or the like, we don’t do things like that.

Yeah. We’re maybe a bit informal sometimes, it’s possible it would be good to have more written down in some way, but these particular things, you can call them more bordering on a heart-to-heart talk.
Of course, seniority intersects with gender and is not constructed as crucial for all positions. Indeed, seniority itself may be considered gendered in different ways. First, since constructing technical competence is intertwined with masculinity, demonstrating technical expertise may be seen as a way of affirming one’s own masculinity, and women experts might be less visible, femininity being related to non-expertise (Burris, 1996). Second, in a more informal context homosocial dynamics may assume more importance. Third, seniority is, at least partly, related to a patriarchal structuring of relations between men in which the older man is in a privileged position, which was once more evident when young boys went through a period of apprenticeship (Cockburn, 1983; Kerfoot and Knights, 1993).

While these seem to be rather strong constructions, there are also alternative constructions being produced. In the following account, for example, the influential position is reconstructed but in a negative way.

ARE THERE PEOPLE WHO HAVE GREATER INFLUENCE THAN OTHERS? IN SOME COMPANIES YOU GET THAT FOR INSTANCE WHEN YOU'VE WORKED THERE FOR A LONG TIME...

EXACTLY, BUT YOU COULD SAY IT'S LIKE THAT HERE TOO. IF YOU HAVE, LIKE A [TECHNICAL BACKGROUND], THAT PEOPLE LIKE ME DON'T HAVE THE TECHNICAL BIT, I'M MORE OF AN ADMINISTRATOR AS IT WERE, EVEN IF I'VE WORKED HERE FOR A LONG TIME, BUT NOT IN THE SAME WAY [AND HAVE NOT THE SAME INFLUENCE], INSTEAD IT'S MORE THOSE THAT ARE ENGINEERS OR WHATEVER YOU CALL THEM.

ER, BUT THERE ARE, THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO ARE NATURAL, WHO GET PEOPLE WITH THEM, AND EVEN IF THE BOSS HAS SAID WE SHOULD DO THIS AND THAT, THEY PULL A BIT IN THAT DIRECTION AND GET THE GROUP WITH THEM. THAT'S THE WAY IT IS. OFTEN, OFTEN THEY'VE BEEN AT STRONGMAT QUITE A LONG TIME AND KNOW THEIR JOB REALLY Really WELL AND YOU CAN MAYBE SEE IT ESPECIALLY IN CHANGE SITUATIONS THAT 'NO, WE'RE NOT GOING TO CHANGE ANYTHING!' AND THEN THIS PERSON IS SO TERRIBLY STRONG THAT IT BECOMES DIFFICULT.
In a similar way, the manager may become constructed as the one who should have more influence than the senior people and that should show who is in charge.

In this last interaction we could see both gender and seniority being constructed. Hans is talking about young people that come to the organisation and how they are perceived by the seniors.

HANS

BUT SURE, I PERSONALLY AM TALKING ABOUT 27-YEAR-OLDS ON MOUNTAIN BIKES CARRYING BACKPACKS... IT’S PEOPLE LIKE YOU THEN, WELL EDUCATED THAT COME IN HERE AND DON’T KNOW ANYTHING... AND THEN IT TURNS OUT THAT MANY OF THEM WERE VERY GOOD. WE’VE GOT IN A NUMBER OF VERY CLEVER PEOPLE IN RECENT YEARS, THINK ABOUT ANITA FIRST OF ALL.

LUCIA

BUT YOU HAVE TO HAVE A KEEN EAR, LISTEN CAREFULLY AND BE HUMBLE HERE AT STRONGMAT, OTHERWISE YOU’RE REGARDED AS THE KID THAT KNOWS NOTHING BUT TALKS A LOT.

[…] AND THEN, THEN IT’S IMPOSSIBLE TO REPLACE WORKING EXPERIENCE WITH ANYTHING ELSE, BUT YOU CAN TAKE A SHORT-CUT IF YOU HAVE A GOOD EDUCATION... YOU DON’T START AT SQUARE ONE, YOU START A BIT FURTHER UP THE GAME BOARD.

HOW OLD IS SHE?

SHE’S A BIT OLDER, SHE’S 30, ABOUT 35. BUT SHE’S WORKED AT THE OK FILLING STATION AND A FEW THINGS LIKE THAT, ALL SORTS OF THINGS. SHE GREW UP ON A TRACTOR AND THAT SORT OF THING. SO SHE HAS, SHE HAS A BIT OF A PRACTICAL BACKGROUND AND IT SHOWS, THAT SORT OF THING SHOWS RIGHT AWAY. RONALD COMES FROM, HE’S WHAT IS HE, 20, 27 OR 38 OR THEREABOUTS, HE’S EDUCATED AND, BUT HE’S BEEN A UN SOLDIER TOO. IT SHOWS ON HIM. IT DOESN’T SHOW MUCH ON HIM, BUT SOMETIMES IT SHOWS, HE CAN BE QUITE DETERMINED AT TIMES. BUT IT’S OF COURSE, IT’S PEOPLE WHO HAVE EDUCATION, MAYBE NOT SO MUCH WORK EXPERIENCE, BUT THEY’LL GET THERE, IF YOU DON’T START SOMEWHERE, YOU GET NOTHING. NOBODY’S BORN WITH IT ALL. AND WE THINK, PEOPLE LIKE DAVID AND I WHO HAVE BEEN HERE LONG, WE THINK, WE THINK EVERYBODY KNOWS AS MUCH AS WE DO, THEY KNOW EVERYTHING, SO IT’S, LIKE, FULL STEAM AHEAD, BUT THEN YOU HAVE TO THINK CAREFULLY A BIT, IT’S COMPLETELY NATURAL FOR US, IT’S MAYBE A MYSTERY EVEN FOR WELL EDUCATED PEOPLE. THEY DON’T HAVE, YOU CAN’T HAVE THAT BACKGROUND.

Here seniority is reconstructed as important, although it is also allowed for other people with a university degree to be considered as competent. But again, such competence is quickly related back to being “practical”. There-
fore, a woman is given as an example of a competent person, but what is
brought forward is that she has been working in a gasoline station and that
she has grown up on a tractor. Even if we are talking of a woman, we are ap-
parently talking of masculinity (such activities being related to masculinity
in our society).

Finally, if gender practices intersect with constructing positions and
positionings at work and influence how they take form, one could con-
clude that the opposite is also the case, that is, positions and positionings
constructed at work in relation to masculinities and femininities will have
consequences for how masculinity and femininity are constructed and
performed in society at large.

Having thus provided an example of the intersection of different prac-
tices, in this case practices important from an emancipation point of view, I
now move to read one more time the empirical material with the theoreti-
cal concepts introduced in chapter 7 in search of other practices producing
direction, since obviously such an achievement is not possible to reduce
to one single practice. One other practice was particularly evident in the
interactions I observed, but also in the accounts provided by people in
interviews: the ongoing constructing of issues. Therefore, I dedicate the rest
of the chapter to analysing this practice.

**Constructing Issues**

– Another Practice Performing Leadership

While my attention so far has been focused on the constructing of positions
and positioning so far, there are other practices that also contribute to the
production of direction at work. In particular, I want to discuss construct-
ing issues as a leadership practice. In fact, not only was this practice quite
manifest in the interactions observed, but it is also related to more tradi-
tional conceptualisations of leadership. Let me introduce the idea by
reporting a short excerpt of an interview.
Rebecca is explaining what a good meeting is. She gives a practical example of one meeting she has participated in, a meeting aimed at discussing the problems that Andrea and she have experienced with the system for data transmission to and from contractors and warehouses. Jacob had succeeded in gathering all the people involved. They spoke to each other and understood the different sides of the problem, something crucial since, as Rebecca describes it, errors depend on the work of several departments and in how such work is coordinated. One first observation I would like to make is
that Rebecca is providing a picture of an organisation in which work results depend on the coordinated action of several people that are mutually dependent, a picture already seen. Moreover, she discusses the significance of meeting and talking to each other. The result is, according to her account, a common understanding of the importance of a certain matter and a commitment to solving it. Reaching an understanding of the urgent and shared nature of the problem meant that initiatives to solve that problem could be started, according to Rebecca. This is an account of what I label “constructing issues”, where an issue is a question that assumes certain importance and provokes emotional reactions—upsetting and/or engaging people. In Rebecca’s account, an issue was produced by agreeing on “the fact” that there was a problem, on how that problem could be understood and on the necessity of solving it. This is reminiscent of the postheroic approach emphasising consensus. But even more contested and ambiguous interactions can be interpreted as constructing issues when leaning on a more processual framework.

Hence, after this short introduction, showing that people at work narrate about such dynamics as important, let me show a number of different examples where I provide an analysis of how issues are constructed at work everyday. As pointed out regarding constructing positions and positionings, even constructing issues is not a distinct and univocal practice that can be defined by clear boundaries against other practices, since it comprises a whole variety of performances. Therefore, I identify a category of performances constructing issues that can be considered instances of one practice, and that are performed together with other practices. The instances described should give an idea of different kinds of interactions in which constructing happens in different ways. They are about constructing an issue, constructing an issue into a non-issue, constructing a contested issue (attention and emotions are focused, but in a contested way), non-constructing an issue, and finally constructing issue in positive terms, something that might be more rare than when issues are problems. Once I have described these examples, I will more thoroughly explain why I consider such constructing to be examples of a practices performing leadership.

THE POTENTIAL FOR SAVING MONEY – WRITING PROMISES

In December 2006 the department for Distribution and Transports has to deliver a document containing a statement about the evaluation of potential synergies deriving from working more closely together with the same
department at the other division of StrongMat. It has to be done before Christmas. We saw a glimpse of the discussion on this document in chapter 7. Such a document is the result of a project initiated at the upper management level (headquarters) in order to save money, a project directed at identifying potential synergies. According to the people working at this department, most of the areas identified depend on activities already going on. Still, it is deemed important to deliver the right document, showing that they have taken the task seriously and that they are able to show potential savings. At the same time, the project is led by the manager for the corresponding department at the other division; therefore, not constructing him as too successful is also something to take into consideration. Let us look at a meeting in which we find Alexander, the unit manager, Hans, working for the department, and David, working together with Hans but directly under Alexander. After some other questions have been discussed, it is now time to look at the document. Alexander seems dissatisfied with the first area, railway transports. The object of discussion is if, by letting this department buy the railway transports for both divisions—this division is the one with highest volume of transports by railway and has therefore negotiated very good conditions—, they can get the same low price they have today for their products for the Other Division's products as well (it is a question of different products and different volumes).

But a potential of a million [the figure they had written in the document], it's bloody well more than a million potential. How much was it they'd calculated for Italy?

In the first place, I don't really like this formulation, 'work on joint purchasing is in progress with the aim of adjusting cost level for rail transport to the present our Division's level', it's not that bloody simple, because we don't have those volumes to those destinations that they have.
I'm a bit scared to promise.

No, but here it's not a question of promising, here it's the potential, than how much of it we can execute...

But if we say a million, that's 50 000 tonnes times 20 kronor. It's a just a drop in the ocean.

Yes, it'll no doubt be more.

But what are these? 30-40-50 000 tonnes, or something like that.

They've got 20 for one destination, right. About, 20, 25.

Yeah, it was so, and there we had a price that's naturally going to drop. But they won't go down to the San Zeno level [the price to Italy]. I can't imagine that. [Since the volume is so small compared to the volume transported to Italy.]

I'm a bit scared to promise.

No, but here it's not a question of promising, here it's the potential, than how much of it we can execute...

Write like this that further, er, utilise the size advantage of our division in other division, or something like that. Don't you think? Because we're supposed to, and then don't promise so to speak any actual cost level, because it'll be a bit strange. Because obviously it's the case that, if we're to run individual (goops) wagons anywhere, we won't get the price we have, our division price level. But listen, Italy, how much did we say for Italy? Wasn't it several millions?
As we can already see, the discussion about the figures per se, how much they could lower the price/tonne, is intertwined with discussion of what a wishful level of the potential would be – when the calculation is done backwards, one million means 50 000 tonnes multiplied by 20 SEK – and of what such written potential will “do” in the future – someone may use that against them. The discussion goes on.
The Potential for Saving Money

I think, I think it'll be more.

Yes, but write then, but the potential...

One to two then.

[David laughs]

[some words not hearable] the work.

Three to five then.

No, now you're overdoing it.

Two to five.

Now you're overdoing it.

Two to four point five?

[Laugh]
No, a better bid. Two to three.

Two to four.

Two to three.

Two to four.

Final bid. Two to three.

I agree with Dan. Then we haven’t overdone it too much.

No, but now’s the time we should overdo it. You haven’t grasped what this thing with the potential is.

The potential is, it’s that you make an estimate that you then have to live up to.

No, it’s that you, yeah, well... possible savings that you can take a part of.

I think two to three...

[…], then you can say, yeah, but this turned out a bit like this, on the other hand we got more on these wagons...

Hans

David

Alexander
There is quite a vivid discussion in which a negotiation of what to write takes place. We could understand such a development by considering the text an artefact in which meaning becomes inscribed and in some way “fixed” (Czarniawska, 2005). It seems to become very important to find the right formulation. In this way, they are also discussing about the practice of “producing documents”, a way of engaging work.

I would interpret this interaction as constructing the issue of the “right potential”, what the potential is and how it is to be estimated. It is clearly a question in which different constructions compete and a question that engages emotionally, becoming the major concern during the meeting (and also in subsequent conversation related to the co-editing of this document).

For example, some minutes later in the meeting, when they come to discuss the potential for savings in the Spanish warehouse and transports, in case of cooperation with Other Division, the dialogue takes this form:

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**Hans**

**David**

I mean, distribution costs, if you imagine from the area X, it can be a matter of 100, 150 kronor a tonnes in the surrounding area, there’s not all that much to take from. But obviously there is some, but what happens...

Now you've become generous...

There must be some effect. An effect of a few million...

A few million?

But if we say 10 kronor a tonne, and altogether half a million tonnes then.

---
They'll point out, this is bad, send in somebody else to do it.

Yes, but send in somebody else to do it. That's just… just what we need.

But we have to distinguish between what we guarantee in terms of winning and what we pinpoint as the potential.

We're never going to lie, but on the other hand if there is, the rest of you don't need to analyse everything as nauseam.

No, but we should be a bit careful with what we come out with, anyway, I think.

I'm not that sure we should be so careful on this potential estimation... because this is a potential, we're not supposed to win everything, we'll still win most of it, container [one project already ongoing] is already won, as you know.

Yeah, we'll win that.

What's the risk then?

What's the risk of not overestimating anything?

They'll point out, this is bad, send in somebody else to do it.

Yes, but send in somebody else to do it. That's just like… just what we need.

But it's not altogether half a million tonnes you can do this with. It doesn't look like that. I'm trying to get at the truth, Alexander. If we're going to lie we must have orders to do so.

We're never going to lie, but on the other hand if there is, the rest of you don't need to analyse everything as nauseam.
I understand, I know what you're saying.

Sure, sure, in my careful world if I've said something that it's a potential I've of course reckoned I could win it one way or another, at least a large part of it.

Yes but that, that's not the idea of the potential [...], you say if we succeed with absolutely everything we do, then we get this. If you succeed in everything you've thought of you get 1.5 times what you say.

No, I get approximately what I've said.

Yes, but if you're 100%, you must be 100% sure that you'll pull it off.

I don't want to overestimate anything.

Yes, but that's not it.

I understand, I know what you're saying.

[SILENT]

Yeah there'll be a few million anyway.
Road transport and distribution belong with joint warehouses, you could say of course, because it's road transport out from the joint warehouses. The warehouse cost aren't affected...

Now he's taking back...

Yeah, sure...

But they must go together, these two...

Yeah.

OK, it's a deal.

Good, Hans!
Again, the discussion shifts from figures regarding SEK/tonne to definitions of what a potential is, to glimpses of what a potential “does” – another project manager might be asked to re-evaluate synergies if the result is not satisfying. As I read it, the problem is not so much about objectively estimating how much one could save by adopting certain measures and cooperating, rather the problem revolves more around the definition of how “potential” should be understood. Thus the issue constructed is “defining the right potential” and discussions will be about “what we mean by potential” rather than “how much we can save”. Defining potential also means finding the right level between promising too much and satisfying expectations, in order to handle “what the potential does” in the proper way. Therefore it becomes more important to produce the “right document” than to find out how money could be saved (even if, of course, the two things are related). As regard what the potential “does”, defining the right potential may have implications not only for how their work will develop and be evaluated, but also for how the relation to the Other Division will be constructed in the future. To conclude, this example was interesting since the production of an artefact made constructing the issue even more evident. The discussion was quite emotional at times, showing that not only attention was “rationally” focused on this question, but also emotions play a role – it is not a case of detached processing of work tasks. The issue itself is not what a rational view of work would foresee: the rational evaluation of the potential for saving money is just an aspect of a more complex issue, involving political considerations, for example. While this example is quite specific, I would guess that most of the people working in organisations have experience of similar situations.

WAREHOUSE IN TURKEY – FROM ISSUE TO NON-ISSUE

We are at STRONGMAT again. People from the department for Distribution and Transports are sitting in a meeting with people from the departments for Delivery Assurance, Maria, and Invoicing, Frank, both departments to be found under other units. This is what they call a “distribution meeting” in which different things affecting the departments participating are discussed. Jacob is the one keeping order in the meeting. He edits an Excel document that is projected on a large screen in which current issues, as I define them, are recorded and their status updated. This is quite a common way of working in this company. One could see the meeting as a site for constructing issues and the Excel document as a means of fixing them until
next meeting, where they may become reconstructed as issues, even if in different terms, or they may dissolve.

Now Jacob turns to the next point in the document, a future warehouse in Turkey.

I talked to Thomas half-an-hour ago, he called from Turkey.

He's probable found..., he's been and talked to the Swedish Chamber of Commerce or something similar, and he's found out that..., can you imagine, Thomas has found out that we should probably take things a bit easy, can you imagine that situation?

[Laugh] Yeah, he said that "no! it's because, we have to check out the place a bit and so on", because he, what he's after is to have a tax-free warehouse, and to get that then there is apparently some legislation in Turkey that says you actually have to have your own office there, with some little guy too.
In this case, the Excel document projected on the screen is, in my reading, leading the meeting by setting the agenda for what is to be discussed. Of course, when speaking of some questions, then other things may come up, so this is no strict order to be followed. But all new things coming up that are being constructed as issue – during the meeting or at the end when there is time for bringing up new questions – are inscribed in the document so that they will be on the agenda of things to discuss next time. Therefore,
as long as something is in the document, that “something” is what I have defined as an issue and particular attention is given to it. In this case, we see one question being erased from the document and constructed as a non-issue—or an issue on stand-by. In fact, as they construct it, there is no longer a need for keeping the warehouse in Turkey in consideration when working and talking, not until something new happens that would re-actualise the question. In the dialogue, they also indirectly describe how the establishment on a new market is carried out.

By this example I want to show again the dynamic constructing of issues. In order to be maintained as an issue, a question or problem has to be actively reconstructed as such time after time. In this case, an issue is actively de-constructed. This becomes even stronger given the Excel file that keeps track of the present issues. Erasing it fixes it as a de-constructed issue. Attention and emotions may become refocused and produce something else.

THE WAREHOUSE IN THE USA – CONSTRUCTING A CONTESTED ISSUE

We continue with the same meeting, the “distribution meeting”. Jacob is now reading from the Excel document, the next point is “warehouse inventory”. This is something that has been discussed previously, since it is a huge job and they lack the resources to complete such work. However, in the past days a much more worrying task has been added to that area. The USA unit has owned the USA warehouse for some years, but now, the ownership has to be transferred back to the Swedish company before the end of the year (I have previously analysed a discussion about positions that came into being because of this issue). Jacob knows it, Hans knows it, but Maria and Frank were still in the dark.
Then we have the item warehouse inventory. Ehm, we had a long discussion last time about resources, that discussion is still extremely topical, and particularly now that our Financial Director has decided that we’re to have the US warehouse back.

Are we?

Yes.

Go to hell.

[Not hearable]

What was that you said? Are we to get back the USA?

You said go to hell, I think he’s already ordered the tickets to...

Thirty thousand tonnes that’s already invoiced.

Oh!

So now it’s not possible...

Before the end of the year we’re to bring back all of the material.

A-orders [this is a kind of order to be written in the IT system], and then we’ll have responsibility for the two warehouses that are there.
Jacob explains briefly the background of such a task, a decision made by the upper management (headoffice) since there had been a remark in the audit report due to how that warehouse was financed, something that has to be solved before the end of the year. The reaction to the news is strong for those who were not aware of such a development. Therefore I would see this as potentially the beginning of constructing an issue in this conversation. The discussion goes on:
The Warehouse in the USA

How's this to be done and who's to... I knew nothing about it, I'm likely to be very much involved, I think.

But that's good, because we're still hoping that someone will wake up and ehm, take, yes.

But you're sort of a mate of Staffan's, can't you drive up and...

I've tried calling him a number of times now, he's...

Calling?

I've sent him e-mails, and he doesn't answer.

Ask [unhearsable]...

Stefan's his name.

Yes, Stefan, Staffan or Stefan - it's probably all the same.

But Fredrik's in full swing with preparing this and Terry's in the middle of drawing up masses of A-orders to bring back the material.
I wonder if Fredrik realises the magnitude of this...

No, absolutely not. And then...

Then he would have handed in his notice.

...Fredrik thinks it’s just a matter of a quick phone call presumably to these two stock keepers in the US, and saying “guys now you’ve got to register all the warehouse changes in the New IT System”.

And he’ll be laughed down.

Uhuh.

[unhearable]

Are they in the New IT System today?

No, no.

It’s the U.S. that owns it, we don’t have one.

If the U.S. has something in New IT System?

They don’t have any New IT System, they’ve got their own.

It was a giant leap changing from the old-fashioned warehouse system...

What are you thinking about? Do we need to cancel all the invoices?

Yes.

Maria

Frank

Ingrid

Jacob

Hans
Type them in once more?

Yes, and place new orders for everything.

All this for 30 thousand tonnes in stock?

Wow!

Congrats, Frank.

Yeah, you...

You know, this is so idiotic, because what’s needed is a bit of working capital... [Jacob says that one could solve the problem by moving money instead of changing the ownership of the warehouse.]

We’re talking about the Christmas holidays now.

Six months’ consumption in the U.S.

Frank

Jacob

Ingrid

Maria

Hans

Ingri
In this dialogue the situation and its implications are constructed as an issue that will probably involve many of the people sitting around the table. The issue is constructed not as a clearly defined problem, but as something that will require attention and energy, although there are different constructions on what kind of attention and where energy will be needed the most. Also, is it an issue to accept and work according to, or is it an issue to fight? That is, there is still a possibility of the issue not breaking out, if the management changes the decision made. Such aspects are unresolved; there is no consensus about how to construct the issue.

Looking at the different aspects constructed, we may see the problem of Fredrik not understanding the amount of work required, the people in the US being unable to work with IT systems, the amount of work that the people involved will have to face. Even though there is no consensus, what

But, well, with a bit of luck, then it’ll be registered, has Fredrik said it’s to go into New IT System? Then you’ll make it. Because then it’s a matter of picking from there then, there’ll be no manual invoices. At least not for everything. [After some reflection, Maria comes to the conclusion that part of the feared work will not be necessary.]
becomes constructed is that at least there is a need for more resources. After having discussed other questions, Jacob brings this issue up again.
But what, you have to know about this, hasn’t he protested upwards?

Fredrik.

The only thing, er, mother [STRONGMAT] needs to do is loosen her purse strings and increase the cash flow in, at her daughters’ [the USA unit]. Mummy gives her a bit of pocket money.

What?

Yeah, that would be the simplest, the simplest thing...

But what, you have to know about this, hasn’t he protested upwards?

Who?

Fredrik.

No, he thinks it’s great fun now.

Maria

Frank

Ingrid

Jacob

Hans
He thinks it's fun? He doesn't know what he's letting himself in for. Sure, in his – I don’t know… He thinks it’s simple, a piece of cake, it’s just a matter of… Jump into new IT system then it’s ready. [Fredrik is responsible for a department working a lot with IT solutions.]

Yeah, and in his world if there’s a bit more work you bring in new IT system and then, yes, more people are needed, so we take on more people. Like, he hasn’t worked in this line of business quite long enough to know what it is.

I know how troublesome it was to… do the contrary, you know, to invoice all of this, but now we did it all manually. I was still…
In this part of the discussion the issue is developed in terms of confusion about the “status” of the issue. For example, it is not certain whether it is already something irreversible or not, if there is room for hoping it will not happen, and it is difficult to understand what the person that is responsible for the task is thinking and if he realises what this task means. As a parenthesis, in this conversation the position of Fredrik is also being constructed and what they say about the issue is intertwined with how they construct Fredrik, as someone who has no idea what a huge problem he has just agreed on working with. Had they constructed him as a competent person with the situation under control, they would probably not have constructed this thing as an issue at all, one could assume. We recall that none of these people has been given any formal assignment or asked by Fredrik to work with something.
And then there's, then we have two hours when we're awake in summer, it's six hours' difference, that, that, OK, it'll be all right of course...

Then naturally, it's much simpler that our colleagues in the US, that they take care of...

But so far it's been quite a homogeneous group of goods we've sent there. It's only been coils, essentially.

Yeah, but we've had the same before, Hans, we've sent over coils and then we've invoiced what was cutted [sheets] or coils, most of it has been coils in fact, but everything has been done manually then, the invoicing.

Yeah, so now in comes new IT system.

But then, yeah, right, but I'm, but if we have such huge discrepancies in Rotterdam, then we'll have huge discrepancies in Cleveland and other places too. [Jacob refers to the fact that, in the warehouse in Rotterdam, which is owned by StrongMat directly, there are huge discrepancies between the material present according to the IT system and the material actually in stock.]

Yeah.

We've had this before, we've had this before.

But naturally, it's much simpler that our colleagues in the US, that they take care of...

Yeah.

Yeah, everything manually, yes.

But then, yeah, right, but if we have such huge discrepancies in Rotterdam, then we'll have huge discrepancies in Cleveland and other places too. [Jacob refers to the fact that, in the warehouse in Rotterdam, which is owned by StrongMat directly, there are huge discrepancies between the material present according to the IT system and the material actually in stock.]
Yeah, but now it's important they get everything into the New IT System too, because I'm thinking about what these lists looked like that I got then...

Yeah, and can you have...

...you have to have the Material ID for all of it. [Maria refers to how imprecise the lists she received in the past were.]

If they can make idiotic mistakes like this the way they do at regular intervals in Rotterdam, then they can do even worse things in the US, I suspect.

Exactly, and then put your trust in these fat fingers registering in New IT System [he mimics someone pressing keys on a keyboard.]

Yeah, it's...

Uuhh!

It's an obvious problem.

[A True warehouse worker, yes.

[Everyone talks and laughs]
In this final part of the meeting, we can see, at the beginning, somewhat divergent constructions of the issue in terms of how big a problem it really is. Still, at the end the problem seems to be reconstructed as indeed a problem, not a huge problem for all the people around the table, but still something that will affect their work. Different aspects are highlighted, as the problems of keeping the record of the material in the IT system updated and really corresponding to the physical material in stock (something apparently quite difficult when done remotely), problems of having one more administrative step to manage, the problem of time difference and the possibility to communicate with the USA only two hours a day, and the problem of teaching a new IT system to those working at the warehouse. Moreover, when discussing these problems, they also speak of other practices, for instance, “the use of the IT systems”: are they part of how people practically cope with work or not? Apparently, the situation is different in Sweden and in the USA.

Summarising, in this situation we can see that an order came from the upper management in the company and a task for Fredrik was created: he was to take care of moving the warehouse back to Sweden as regards the administrative aspects. The people in this meeting have not received any formal assignment regarding this task and some of them had no idea of what was happening at all. Still, what is going to happen is something that emotionally engages them – there are plenty of exclamations, irony, and sarcasm – and that they frame as something that needs to be paid close attention to. Therefore I interpret these extracts from the meeting as constructing an issue. It is something that people spend time making sense of during the meeting, but it is also something that they will bring up in subsequent meetings and informal conversations in the coming days. Moreover, looking again at the formal part of the situation, the order from the management is just to transfer the ownership of the warehouse before the end of the year. Because of time-pressure, we could assume (it was not part of my observations) that this task was constructed as an issue, since in order to be able to comply with the time limit, Fredrik and the co-workers working for him would have to put aside all other tasks and just concentrate on this one. But the issue constructed top-down is still quite limited; there is a need for focusing on an administrative change. The issue as constructed in these dialogues is more articulated, wider and contested. They are constructing an issue related to their work and situated in it. The way these people frame their attention to the situation has only partially to do with the original order. Finally, even the original order may be thought
of as emerging from an issue: at some point of time towards the end of the year, the remark in the audit report attracted attention and became an issue to be solved. It is a speculation, since it is not something I have observed, but I think it is reasonable to conceptualise the emergence of the order in these terms.

While I would claim that there is the construction of an issue, I do not claim that it is a clear and definite one. There are competing aspects brought forward and it is not resolved which of them deserves most attention and how to cope with them. The difference with the “definition of the right potential” described at the beginning of this chapter is that what was contested there was what to write in the document, but the problem of “defining the right potential” was constructed as a shared concern. In the example just presented, what is contested is the construction of the issue itself, “the USA warehouse” may be an issue or not, and what such an issue is about is a contested construction, where no consensus is reached, at least not in this meeting. Still, attention has been focused and this has made certain actions and talks possible, and other less probable. Some of these talks have been previously presented, when I discussed constructing positions done by Hans, David and Alexander. Direction is constructed, leadership performed.

THE SITUATION WITH LIQUIDITY – AN ISSUE?

We move now in space and time. February 2007 at cleantech. The Management Group is in a meeting. After having discussed for a while about what the organisational diagram should look like and about how the policy for overtime should be written, Christine, responsible for accounting, starts talking about what she labels liquidity problems.
In this first part of the dialogue, no agreement is reached on whether liquidity is a problem or not, since this is recognised as something that happens at the beginning of a new year and many business proposals for new plants have been sent, there should be projects in the pipe-line. Let us see how the conversation goes on:

"Right now, in spite of us having lots of quotations and things."

"And we started the year with a poor order stock and what, what we notice now in terms of liquidity, is that we have no [unhearable]..."

"It's just the same as last year."

Christopher, Christine, George, Ann, Marcus

"Uhuh, and it's not a problem, so in terms of profit this will certainly work out, but the problem is going to be with liquidity. So, from the middle of March to the middle of April nothing will be delivered out and therefore we don't invoice anything, so it's going to lead to huge..., it's going to be tough then, and therefore it's important that we get in a little advance payment now, so that we can send out invoices."
Arguments and counter-arguments are presented. The low order-stock, the good result from the previous year, the difference between economic profit and liquidity. One more element is described here below: the problem of customers not paying within the period of time allowed. As Marcus counters, they were aware of that when they allowed a particular customer to delay quite a large payment: it was a special situation.
The Situation with Liquidity

But, well, the problem is that we have a difference of 750,000, or, well, that we act as a bank for and that costs money.

It costs incredible sums of money and it's more that I think we should be aware of it.

Yes, yes.

But we've really been aware about it, but it turned out that way anyway, owing to the supplier's delivery assurance isn't completely...

Listen, I'll find out what it costs every day that we have to play bank to the customers, that costs...

But, well, 5% interest on 750,000...

Yes, but well...

And we should be able to borrow at 5%.

But the problem, the problem isn't this.
The discussion goes on and it becomes accepted that there might be lack of money, but it is still contested if that is a problem or not, if it is something worth paying attention to or not, and what the problem exactly consists of.
Sure, sure, but – in terms of liquidity it’s a crisis, not in terms of profit, in terms of profit...

And then it’s a case of going to the bank and borrowing money.

[...]

I don’t know if I properly understand that it’s like that, but it...

In any case, it looks grim, let me tell you.

Although can there be a crisis in a company that’s lived for 35 years...

Well crisis.

...and that’s made a decent profit during the last few years at least.

In terms of liquidity there may be a crisis.

In terms of liquidity it’s a crisis, not in terms of profit, in terms of profit...
At the end, the lack of money is not constructed as something upsetting and to be worried about. This is why I would interpret such interaction as not constructing an issue. Potentially, the situation with liquidity could have become constructed as a major and serious problem, as something requiring attention and common effort. This is a small company and,
although it has been rather successful during the years, resources are still limited. But alternative constructions are instead produced, constructions denying the urgency of the problem, and liquidity is thus not allowed to take up space. At the end of the meeting, liquidity is not an issue, it is not something to be upset or nervous about, it is something that “will eventually work out”. To be sure, I am not saying that Christine is also convinced that liquidity will not be a problem. What I am claiming is that in this room liquidity is interactionally constructed as a non-issue. One could also put it in terms of the problem being “dissolved” rather than “solved”, since attention to this topic decreases rather than being maintained (Alby and Zucchermaglio, 2006). Moreover, even in this interaction other practices are discussed, in this example “the use of economical figures” as a way of engaging with work.

This is again an example of the social and dynamic nature of issues: it requires an active and to some extent co-orientated constructing to make something into an issue. While attention has been focused for the duration of the conversation, how reality has been produced allows coming conversations and actions to build on a reality without liquidity problems.

A NEW BUSINESS – A “POSITIVE” ISSUE

We stay at CleanTech. This is the first sales meeting after the Christmas holidays and many of the sales people are gathered to discuss what is going on and what is coming up. It is Carl’s turn to tell about his projects. He starts by describing how things have developed with a project implying a new line of business for CleanTech. This is a business that requires the company to cooperate with two other companies, Firm X and Firm Y, and a Funding Agency. Given the confidentiality of the project, I will not give any details here. What I am interested in is showing how people show interest, contribute to constructing a picture of the project, and construct it as an important opportunity.
Yeah, the big thing that's happened is still Firm X, but I suppose everybody's updated after the Monday meeting, right, we don't need... to go on about it once more, ehm,...

I don't know everybody is aware that we [use a different way of working].

Uhm, I can just quickly repeat the plan, so it's, the plan is that [he explains it]. So it's, it's concrete plans and there's, it seems that there's money, it seems there's an end customer who wants this too, so it looks, it looks really promising.

That's great.

And Firm Y has an end customer they believe in now.

They have two end customers, er, one of whom is preferable since the geographical situation is much better, you don't have to drive for five six hours.
But it seems to be extremely good that we’ve got to such concrete terms, I mean, have got so far in concrete terms, that’s what I’m pleased about at least.

What’s new about this, as I see it, is that we don’t need to take any technical risks, right?

[...]

But how, how’s the budgeting, the calculation, how on the one hand what did the calculation look before this and what’s the calculation that’s being presented to the Funding Agency?

Well, as far as I can judge a realistic calculation.

There are good points.

It’s not Customer U but...

It’s not the one in the south west, it’s this one that’s...

Is it Customer V then?

Yeah, it’s the one that’s at City P.

But it seems to be extremely good that we’ve got to such concrete terms, I mean, have got so far in concrete terms, that’s what I’m pleased about at least.

What’s new about this, as I see it, is that we don’t need to take any technical risks, right?
Yes, but in my opinion we also know how things went with Customer BB, right, er, how many delays this, how many problems there are on the customer’s side [lists different problems], and so on and all the shit that happens, right, that, that in some way maybe isn’t a technical risk associated with the equipment but that is still a technical risk in a project like this, or a problem with a project like this.

Well, it’s a great position.

But what gets the ball rolling, as it were –

A board meeting at the funding agency like one in the middle of February and one in the middle of April, the plan is to make it by the middle of February, but there the ball is in Firm X’s court.

Yes, but in my opinion we also know how things went with Customer BB, right, er, how many delays this, how many problems there are on the customer’s side [lists different problems], and so on and all the shit that happens, right, that, that in some way maybe isn’t a technical risk associated with the equipment but that is still a technical risk in a project like this, or a problem with a project like this.

But what gets the ball rolling, as it were –

In engineering, for this. Ehmm...
Even though there is still a risk of problems along the way that might delay the project, and the discussions regarding the practice of “handling risks” will probably go on, optimism about how far the project has come and what potential it implies dominates. In this sense, I would interpret this interaction as constructing an issue, the organisation is constructed as having to spend time working with this project in the coming months and they are emotionally engaged in terms of high expectations, hope and optimism.
While the examples previously given were more related to problems that had emerged or arisen, in this case we have a “positive” issue, something that is constructed as going so well that it deserves more attention than other things. Therefore, even though I would say that, in the settings that I have studied, problems and crises dominate the development of daily work – people are mostly faced with events or things to handle more or less urgently –, issues do not need to be problems or negative per se. As I have shown in this case, attention and emotions might be focused even by circumstances that are constructed as particularly favourable.

**Constructing Issues as a Practice**

My interpretation of the instances of discussions just presented is that, when working, people construct events, problems, opportunities, and construct them into issues. I have given my own definition of what an issue is: a question that assumes specific importance and emotionally engages people. But the idea of issue is not new. Let me discuss some research taking issues into consideration and how I build my reasoning on these ideas, then moving the concept towards a more processual understanding. There are researchers subscribing to a moderate (I will explain the “moderate” in a few moments) processual view, who have spent years doing research on issues: Jane Dutton and Susan Ashford, for instance, together with a number of scholars (cf. Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 2001; Dutton and Duncan, 1987). Their research interest is directed toward strategy and organisational change. Although it is claimed that, for example, strategic issues are socially constructed (Dutton and Duncan, 1987), I read such a claim as affirming that alternative meanings of events are negotiated in a certain context. This is what is socially constructed – the meaning of events, not the events per se –, which is why I label such an approach as moderate processual, to be compared to processual views as discussed in this thesis. In fact, these researchers conceptualise a process of “issue diagnosis” in which some kind of objective stimuli from the external world trigger certain responses in terms of recognising and isolating issues. While the older articles are focused on strategic issues at the upper levels of an organisation, later the researchers’ interest has turned to, for example, issue selling by the middle management toward the organisational top levels. In such studies, issues are recognised as not important or strategic per se, but a result of competition for top management’s attention within the organisation,
which individuals intentionally try to sell certain issues as deserving more attention than others through a number of mechanisms – in a political game. Which issues “win” attention is considered as an important element for which kind of change will be initiated. In this kind of studies then, middle managers, interesting because of their position relatively close to operations (Dutton and Ashford, 1993), are asked about their strategies for selling issues (Dutton et al., 2001).

Issues are thus recognised, in research, as an important aspect of how organising is directed. Hence, I build on the idea of an issue being committing time and attention and an issue being the result of an interpretative process concerned with producing both opportunities and problems, but I then add another perspective as a consequence of different assumptions about reality. In the mentioned studies, problems and opportunities are conceptualised as something to be processed and diagnosed as an issue or not (Dutton and Duncan, 1987) and the focus is very much on individuals and their intentions and strategies. These are thus interesting studies contributing to the adoption of a process perspective in strategy research, but they provide entative conceptualisations. What I try to propose is a relational interpretation of constructing issues, in which reality is constructed rather than framed. Also, I have presented examples of issues constructed in a fragmented and contested way, not based on consensus on what the issue is about, but still constructed as requiring attention and emotionally engaging.

As the examples show, issues constructed may be very different. What they have in common is just the described focusing of attention and emotions. As I see it, it is not only a way of coping with work, it is a way of constructing work itself – it is a situated way of performing work. That is why I name constructing issues also as a category of work practices. As also shown, while these practices are performed, other practices are being discussed, like “the use of economical figures” or “the production of documents”.

**Constructing Issues – Practices Performing Leadership**

Having said that constructing issues is a practice, the question is why I consider this practice as performing leadership. Indeed, the relation between producing direction and constructing issues has been highlighted by some
leadership scholars, even though the labels “direction” and “issue” may not be used. Most famously, in 1982, Linda Smircich and Gareth Morgan (1982) defined leadership as the management of meaning:

Leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others. Indeed, leadership situations may be conceived as those in which there exists an obligation or a perceived right on the part of certain individuals to define the reality of others. (p. 258)

Such a definition has influenced leadership research to a great extent and is also related to the then growing, interest in culture in organisation theory at large. Let me discuss how such a take on leadership is both similar and different from the one proposed in this thesis. Leaders and led are conceptualised as taking part in a process of negotiation in which some, the led, surrender their power to define what is going on to others, the leaders. What leadership does is thus to create a common interpretation of reality thanks to the action and utterances of leaders, which transform a complex and ambiguous reality into something more discrete, to which certain meanings are given (p. 261). In other words, attention is channelled. In such a conceptualisation Smircich and Morgan are inspired, as they claim themselves, by Schutz (1967), Goffman (1974) and Weick (1979).

As they argue, the action of organisational members is grounded in their interpretations of leadership actions aimed at framing experience in a certain way. Such interpretations are situated in a context and may be quite different among co-workers. Hence, the challenge for a leader is to manage meaning so that people orient themselves toward ends that are considered desirable. In this way, leadership is studied as symbolically performed by individual formal leaders, those who occupy roles that have become institutionalised as the ones who should do leadership. Unlike other scholars, leadership is conceptualised as happening in interactions, which means that even “the led” are included in the process and the process is a social one. However, from the researchers’ point of view, it is important to recognise that formal leaders are in a position allowing for a frame of reference to be provided for others, where the leaders’ sensemaking activities are given priority. This reflects power relationships embedded in the situation – “leadership is a process of power-based reality construction” (Smircich and Morgan, 1982, p. 270), which may lead to a situation of “trained inaction” in the led.
As mentioned, the conceptualisation of leadership as management of meaning borrows from Weick’s idea of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is a concept that has gained large popularity among researchers. It highlights the need for creating and maintaining shared understandings that enable collective action (Maitlis, 2005). It is often assumed that there is a need for creating order and for retrospectively making sense of what has happened, which results in producing accounts that enable people to understand the world and to act collectively. Maitlis reviews a number of studies and identifies two main streams. One is represented by those researchers focusing on extreme situations, in which time pressure often plays an important role in the sensemaking process (cf. Weick, 1993). These are peculiar situations not corresponding to what is most commonly going on in organisations, according to Maitlis. The other stream takes a path similar to Smircich and Morgan, investigating how certain groups influence others’ understanding of issues (cf. Gioia and Chittipiedi, 1991). Sensegiving is a concept at times used just to express these attempts to influence. Issues are, thus, understood as “already in place”, and the object of research is how the meaning attached to them is created. As Maitlis puts it, it is has to do with “constructing ordered relationships among sets of entities […] in ways that enable people to act or at least to decide to act” (Maitlis, 2005, p. 23). In other words, the main focus is on entities rather than relations and processes. Simplifying, there are entities making sense of the world, rather than interactions constructing entities and the world. Even Dutton’s and Ashford’s research mentioned above may be classified in this stream.

Concluding, sensemaking is a constructionist concept in so far as it implies, as Weick puts it, “authoring as well as reading” (Weick, 1995, p. 7), compared to the concept of interpretation. In this sense my conceptualisation is indebted to Weick’s ideas. But while sensemaking has to do with selecting what to treat as “things” in a certain situation and putting them in a certain frame of reference (Weick, 1995), my stance is even more constructionist since I consider interactions as constructing the “things” rather than merely selecting and then enacting them—with enactment meaning that people create their own environments and these environments will constrain their actions. The difference is quite subtle and it is more obvious when one looks at how the concepts are used to interpret the empirical material. I see studies often using sensemaking as conceptualising what happens in terms of “bracketing” certain aspects of the environment, based on, for example, surprise or shock, aspects that are often rationally made sense of by independent individuals and therefore become “real”, while my
idea of constructing issues implies more of an organic, at times contested, accumulation of attention and emotion that thus produces certain aspects of “reality” (cf. van der Haar and Hosking, 2004). The difference is probably best exemplified by the fact that Weick may speak of deficient sensemaking (Weick, 1993), which would not be an appropriate expression as regards constructing issues – it is not possible for me to argue that the wrong issues have been constructed. Of course, such a difference also originates from the different setting in which the study takes place, Weick observing a major crisis, but it gives an idea of his slightly more realistic position. Moreover, sensemaking is essentially a retrospective activity: people make sense retrospectively of the situations in which they are and therefore attention is given backwards. In this respect, my idea is quite the opposite. Even though I agree on the importance of sensemaking as a retrospective process, I also see constructing issues as something going on in the present and providing possibility for action, a constructive practice. Metaphorically speaking, one could see it as the possibly still unclear beginning of a story rather than the end of it (the point at which we construct its meaning). Finally, the social nature of sensemaking is sometimes downplayed by scholars using this concept, for example, if individuals’ strategies are studied, while I am not concerned with mental models and cognitive aspects, as some researchers are, Weick himself at times (Weick, 1995). Having discussed the similarity with the concept of sensemaking, I want to say something more about the study of leadership in terms of sensemaking.

Going back to Smircich and Morgan (1982) and their application of similar lenses to leadership in terms of management of meaning, one important aspect is that they have directed the attention of leadership scholars to a social phenomenon. My argument is similar. I have tried to show examples of the practice of constructing issues, which also has to do with focusing attention. Direction is thus produced since certain aspects become important and others not: reality becomes constructed in “certain directions”. As also commented on in the discussion of constructing positions and positioning, direction is not necessarily produced because people have reached some shared common understanding of what is important and thus univocally constructed reality in a coherent way. Rather, it is responsiveness characterising communication and interactions that makes the constructions produced important for which actions and talks may become actual and which not, important for which talks become possible to supplement, which means going on in constructing reality in certain ways and not others (Boden, 1994; van der Haar and Hosking, 2004; Hosking,
forthcoming-a). As for constructing positions and positoning, I may have showed the development over time of some issues: how they came back and became reconstructed. The US warehouse is something, for example, that kept a high level of attention and emotions for some time. Instead, I have chosen to limit the scope of my analysis to the local constructions and their local production, which may be considered as the necessary base for more stable constructions, and a process seldom analysed in some detail and with empirical illustrations. In other words, my focus is on the constructing-as-it-happens rather than on the longer term effects of it.

Moreover, studying leadership in a hierarchical organisation, Smircich and Morgan chose to continue studying individual leaders. In their description, leaders’ framing attempts are the ones providing direction to the organisation, something even signalled by the word “management”. As I have tried to show, such activity may also occur in daily working interactions. Therefore, while they allow for different interpretations of what reality and meaning are about, I would go even further in emphasising that people are not only framing reality and acting from such a premise, but they are performing and constructing reality, opening up for certain courses of action. In this way, direction in the organising process is produced, leadership performed.

As regards the important aspect of power, does including a larger number of interactions, independently of the actors involved, mean that power is a less relevant aspect? There is certainly a risk of depicting situations in which people agree on issues, conveying the idea of some kind of democratic workplace. I hope to have avoided this simplification by showing the contested and fragmented way in which issues are constructed (or not constructed). Of course, emphasising the relevance of formal leaders’ framing actions, as Smircich and Morgan do, enables us to criticise structural power relations in organisations. By focusing, as I do, on what is being constructed in local interactions, and not on the actors, it is not possible to highlight such aspects in the same way – I am not analysing who has precedence in interpreting reality, for example. On the other hand, power is produced when issues are constructed, if one defines power as productive force. Since work is being constructed, power is being produced. To be sure, I am not arguing that power relations in organisations do not exist. I am just claiming that by making the analysis that I am presenting, power becomes visible only in certain aspects. I have talked about positioning in the previous chapter, and I am saying that constructing issues itself may be considered an exercise of power. While with other perspectives it is the activity of for-
mal leaders in framing reality that is being emphasised, with my interpretation I bring out the constructive actions taken by more individuals than just formal leaders in shaping and constructing work and direction, in doing leadership. Each perspective privileges one aspect of the phenomenon.

A parallel might be drawn to Mary Parker Follett’s (1924) “power with” and “power over” distinction. In a time characterised by Tayloristic ideals, Follett distinguished herself by taking a more democratic stance in which the grassroots level of society as well as of organisations assumes importance.: democracy defined as productive interrelatings (Follett, 1919). Her view is relational in the sense that individuals develop by relating to each other. Conflicts are inevitable but may be productive. People that work together are able to do things in concert with others and are therefore capable of coactively constituting power which is legitimate to them, “power with”. In a similar way, constructing issues is one way of doing “power with”. On the other hand, this parallel should not be interpreted as an ideal situation in which every voice is heard. This is not the reality I reproduced in this thesis. But the idea is that power may be thought of as done in interactions and producing reality. As a contrast to “power with”, “power over” means, simplified, that people are made to do what they otherwise would not do (Clegg et al., 2006). Referring to political scientists, Clegg et al. identify issues as one element in “power over”. First, as they observe, some things never come to be inscribed in the political agenda. Political elites sanction what is to be discussed and only issues conforming to current norms and myths will be accepted. Therefore, in order to analyse power, one should go beyond what the political agenda is and look at how some issues are included and others not. One way of pursuing such a path is to investigate intentions behind the choices made. This is a take similar to the one Smircich and Morgan propose for leadership. What I have tried to show is, instead, how issues that are not sanctioned by the official agenda emerge in trivial interactions. It is a complementary view about how organising develops.

One could therefore analyse which norms are being reproduced and which challenged in the issues constructed. For example, expanding one's businesses and growing, in particular in the Eastern markets, is reproduced as something positive at CLEANTECH. At STRONGMAT, informally – by including the “old guys” – producing figures to present to the higher hierarchical levels is reproduced as how the upper management requests are answered. Resisting demands from the upper management that are considered meaningless is constructed as a possibility, but a possibility not embraced collectively, in the end. Studying norms may be one way of
analysing power relations within the organisation. Another way might be to look at how issues are constructed: in competition (corresponding to a hard self-other differentiation in Hosking’s terms) or in collaboration (corresponding to a soft self-other differentiation) – which would mean studying how “power with” is done. I have chosen not to proceed with such analyses in this thesis since the patterns that I could superficially observe were quite diversified and they would need another study specifically focused on them in order to produce a meaningful analysis. The same applies to an analysis with a gender perspective. In the case of constructing positions and positioning, the pattern was more obvious and consistent, which is why I have decided to illustrate such aspects in that part.

To conclude, constructing issues is another example of a practice producing leadership. In these performances, attention and emotions are focused and construct reality at work in some way and not in others, thus producing direction in organising. Such ideas are similar to the definition of leadership as management of meaning, which is based on the concept of sensemaking, but, as discussed, there are important differences, since the interpretation I propose advances a more social, not necessarily intentional and a more radically constructionist understanding of leadership.

**Summarising**

In this chapter, I continued my re-reading of the empirical material. Having come to the conclusion that it is not necessary to have intentional and consensual interactions in order to produce direction, and having constructed a theoretical approach to leadership based on the concepts of organisational becoming, practice and relational leadership, the interpretations made in previous chapters are thus deepened. Constructing positions and positioning is now conceptualised as a practice and I discuss in which sense this is a practice performing leadership. Furthermore, this practice is not a discrete entity but intersects with other practices. I analysed the example of the practices of gender and seniority, and how they may be seen as being done while constructing positions and positioning. After that, I went on to present another practice producing leadership evident in the empirical material: constructing issues. Different empirical illustrations are provided. This is also a practice that is quite closely related to some accepted definitions of leadership. I have discussed how and in which sense my understanding
is more processual and constructionist. Figure 4 summarises the journey made to come to this understanding.

Having now identified and analysed two practices producing direction, I will discuss what is particular about these practices in the next chapter, a discussion that will lead me to provide a more general conceptualisation of leadership as an ongoing achievement. Given the limits of this thesis, both in terms of space and time, and given my ambition to develop my argument to some depth, I have not pursued the search for more leadership practices than the two described. But, of course, there are more practices producing direction. Future research oriented to continuing, developing and deepening such analysis is therefore necessary in order to more thoroughly explore this particular understanding of the phenomenon of leadership.
Chapter 4

A summary of the analysis done in this thesis.

Given the theoretical and empirical problem, the purpose is to add to our understanding of leadership as a social phenomenon and contribute to developing a vocabulary for talking about it.

Contradiction between the ideal and the practice of (shared) leadership.

Is leadership an empty concept?

Is leadership an individual matter?

Is there no production of direction at CleanTech?

Risk of reductionist accounts by highlighting the collective dimension.

Is consensus necessary for producing direction?

Can direction be produced, ambiguous and/or implicit ways?

Chapter 4

Shared Leadership

Chapter 1–2

Practice

Process

Focus on how leadership is shared in actual work situations, rather than as reported in interviews and questionnaires.

Focus on how direction is produced in trivial interactions at work – leadership as a collective achievement throughout the organisation.

The production of direction is emergent and involves different people at different times.

How work is engaged in sustained, purposive, sensible and competent ways.

Processes of relating are what is real, not actors.

Organising is ongoing, change pervasive and direction is continuously produced.

Chapter 5

Postheroic Leadership

Chapter 6–8

Processual View

Leadership

Process

How is leadership shared in practice?

How is direction produced as a distributed practice?

Are there more interactions in which direction is produced?
Leadership as Clearing for Action

Recapitulating

After re-reading the empirical material, helped by different theoretical traditions within leadership research, I arrive at adopting a relational perspective on leadership (Hosking, forthcoming-a), combined with the concept of organisational becoming, both privileging processes over entities, which implies assuming the social world as existing in terms of emergent relational interactions and patternings recursively constructed. This is one perspective among the possible perspectives to adopt when studying leadership: there have been some attempts at taking such a stance, but theoretical treatments and empirical research are still in their infancy. My contribution is located within this small but active field. Hence, a process view on social reality combined with the idea of practice has helped in making sense of the empirical material. Accepting that there is something providing direction, leadership, how can we understand such a phenomenon? Where and how does it happen at work?

I thus come to conceptualise leadership as an emergent and dynamic phenomenon, taking place in interactions at work. Leadership is a phenomenon in the sense that social reality may be made sense of by interpreting what happens in terms of a phenomenon in which direction for organising processes is achieved. Hence, I do not grant leadership any ontology – I am not claiming that leadership “exists”, rather it is an epistemological assumption: we can gain knowledge about the social world by assuming that we can understand it in terms of a phenomenon that provides direction. As I explained, “direction” is the element common to most definitions of leadership, implicitly and/or explicitly. Not the only element, but the one that, reading how leadership is defined and clarified, characterises, according to me, what this phenomenon is about. Thus, I maintained the production of direction as what the essence of leadership is. But I do not see direction as some kind of “real” outcome, nor an effect of a leadership activity. Direction is a useful concept for understanding what happens when people work together, it is a sort of metaphor to express that there are some interactions
in which the ongoing development of organising processes is produced. Direction is therefore not a single direction implying a linear process. It may include diverging processes and unresolved conflicts. It is an array of possibilities. Hence, the production of direction is what leadership is about, but with a reservation for not interpreting direction in a deterministic way.

This way, studying leadership assumes the form of turning the attention to daily interactions at work, considering all interactions as potentially performing leadership. Producing direction is usually not something exceptional or heroic, but a rather ordinary and trivial achievement, something done at work while working. The focus is not on the actors at work and their intentions, but on relations and how actors and entities become constructed. Practices are the elements providing continuity in organising and acting. In fact, a practice may be defined as a patterned consistency of action emerging in and passed on in social interactions, reflecting and sustaining norms and knowledge— it is “how people relate to the world”. This is what one could call a processual view of practice (Chia and MacKay, 2007), as I have explained in chapter 7.

Therefore, in this thesis, I come to see work as done in fields of interconnected situated practices. This makes sense when one understands the social world as “a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings” (Schatzki et al., 2001, p. 3). Work is considered as a situated social activity and working means engaging in a number of related practices. Work is social since it is performed in relations. Studying work means therefore to analyse the practices in which work is done.

As I have described in chapter 8, work at CLEANTECH and at STRONGMAT is a social and embodied performance. People interact with each other, mostly by talking, often face-to-face. Work is emergent. People cope with changing circumstances that they construct as such. Work is performed knowledgeable in a situated way. People are prepared to face the world in this context. Work is a collective achievement. People need each other in order to accomplish their tasks and to keep on going. Work is materially mediated. People interact through and around artefacts, often documents.

My attention has been focused on two particular practices producing direction and thus performing leadership. I am going to develop this argument further in this chapter. The practices I have analysed are constructing positions and positionings and constructing issues. Starting with the former, constructing positions and positionings is performed in a variety of interactions at work everyday. By positions I mean the construction of
a person or a group in terms of what one is supposed to do and how one is supposed to be, two interrelated aspects. By positioning I mean how positions become related to each other. Even though this aspect is implicitly included in the idea of “position”, at times I choose to underline it even more by using the label “positioning”. Such constructions might appear to be rather stable, but I see them as ongoing achievements, local and temporary, but repeated. When working, discussions might explicitly be centred on positions, but positions may also be constructed in unreflective exchange of words. In order to work, people engage with work by producing such constructions, which is why I interpret them as a practice.

The other practice I analysed was the construction of issues. By issue I mean a question that assumes importance, draws attention and provokes emotional reactions. Events, problems and opportunities are constructed into issues when people work. Attention and emotions become committed in order to perform work. Again, this is a way of relating to and engaging with work, therefore my interpretation as a practice.

Hence, in this thesis, I organised my understanding of the empirical material along two practices: constructing positions and positionings and constructing issues. Although the concepts of positions and issues are not new, they have seldom been studied in the form of practices done in interactions. One could also wonder, why these two and not others? Partly because of the theoretical understandings that informed my analysis, for example, a gender and power interest led me to pay attention to positions; partly because of the question I asked, “what is going on here? What are they constructing?”, which led me to focus on recurring emerging constructions; and finally, partly because of how the people I met talked about and reasoned on their work, which led me look closer to how they did things together and how positions emerged. Of course, one could slice the empirical material along other lines. This could be problematic if my aim had been to reproduce how reality is – a preoccupation typical of modernist projects (Chia, 2003) –, but what I want to achieve is to propose one way of understanding the world in which we live at work, one of several possible.

Moreover, these two practices have been interpreted in terms of production of direction, *i.e.* In terms of leadership. In fact, I consider what they do as opening up for certain lines of action and tuning down for others – constructing and constraining the possibility for action, in other words (*cf.* Taylor and Robichaud, 2004). Thus, on a first level, these practices perform leadership since through them, organising unfolds in certain ways and not others, which means that direction in organising is produced. On
a second level, one could also compare such categories of practices to other work practices. In this chapter, I am therefore going to develop my argument further and to tentatively argue that these two categories of practices belong to a peculiar form of practices, something that enables them to produce direction.

**Different Forms of Practices**

The study of practices at work is a growing field within organisation theory. As is the case when leadership has been conceptualised as a practice, and also when work is considered as performed in practice, the label “practice” may mean different things, from simply “what people do” to more theoretically grounded definitions. In this section, I am going to give some examples of what scholars studying practices are analysing, what kind of practices they are describing, in order to make a point about the nature of the practices I have described. The examples come from a number of studies and are not always labelled as “practices” by the researchers themselves, but I interpret them as providing instances of what the definition of practice I have chosen to follow implies, that is, how we engage with the world when working.

- Coordination centres are one site of organising often studied by those scholars interested in how work is done collectively and in interaction with artefacts (Bruni and Gherardi, 2007). One example of practice found here is the one named “scaffolding”, which indicates the situated support provided by a senior person to a newcomer while working, a sort of co-piloting in which instructions are provided as needed but there is not much time for explicit explanations of why things are to be done in a certain way (*ibid.*).

- Studying decision-making in a company working with an internet portal, one example of practice that can be identified is “collective diagnostic processes” when a urgent problem emerges, a practice the researchers characterise as “expert”, in which by working directly on the website different options are sequentially evaluated by linking the actions the actors are performing to products that are visible on the screen and the other way around, products are linked to actions (Alby and Zucchermaglio, 2006). Another example from the same study may be “solving first, then understanding”. What is sensible to do in a situation presenting an urgent problem with the site is
to first solve the problem as soon as possible, then to dedicate time afterwards to understanding what the problem was about and how it could happen. Understanding the problem is thus less of a cognitive effort and more of a social effort embedded in the actions taken to solve the problem.

• In a clothing manufacturer, Rouleau (2005) studied interpretation and selling of strategic change as performed by middle managers. One practice identified was “overcoding the strategy”, which means that words and actions about the strategy are inscribed “in the appropriate professional and socio-cultural codes of the interlocutor” (p. 1426). This could mean than one could “do gender” in order to reinforce the meaning constructed around a new collection of clothes when interacting with clients.

• Management of meaning in order to make a wind farm development project gain acceptance is the subject of a study by Corvellec and Risberg (2007). Looking at the first-order analysis of the activities performed, one practice identified is “selecting backgrounds – contextualising”. Looking at the different applications presented, for example, one could see how the project is placed in different contexts by relating each text to other texts. For instance, referring to the Kyoto protocol places the project in the context of climate change, referring to municipal plans for tourism places the project in the context of the local economy (p. 313). Contextualisations are multiple and dynamic.

• Finally, coordination of activities is also the focus of a study in a company working with web-based interactive marketing solutions and how boundary-spanning coordination is performed in a context of high-paced project work (Kellogg et al., 2006). Such organisation is described in terms of a heterarchy, i.e. an organisation characterised by flat structures, decentralised decision-making, horizontal interdependent relations, improvised and participative work processes. One example of practices in such context is what the researchers label “display practices”, which means that current work is regularly made available for other people working in the same project, and time commitments and work assignments are made transparent to others (p. 29). Another example is “representation practices”, that is, expressing ideas and concepts so that they can be used by other people (p. 30), for example, by making work legible through articulation that others can observe and read.
All these practices are examples of how to understand how people carry out their work in a collective and coordinated effort, how the world is being engaged in order to work. The examples come from different types of studies; sometimes the actors and their intentionality are focused more, sometimes less. However, I read these studies as providing instances of practices as defined in this thesis, independently of the researchers’ original purposes. They give an idea of what kind of practices have been analysed and in which terms. My reading is that there is a difference between them and the two categories of practices I have described in this thesis – with the exception of the last example provided which may be more similar to the kind of analysis I am performing. Before explaining what I mean, I want to point out that I am not claiming that the practices I have described are the only two that have to do with producing direction. One may find others, of course. But I think these two are particularly widespread and pervasive, which makes them interesting and worth analysing. Moreover, practices are not discrete entities, they are relational achievements intertwined in other practices, which means that while performing one practice people are also performing other practices. Finally, as I have discussed, I see practices as a way of understanding what is going on in the empirical material. Therefore, other constructs of practices providing direction are fully possible. These were the ones I produced by my situated reading and interpretation of the material. That said, I want to explain how the practices I described are different, and thus related to leadership.

In this thesis, I have described two categories of practices: constructing positions and positionings and constructing issues. In my reading, they are peculiar since the “how we engage with work”, or “how we cope with work”, becomes more explicitly articulated. By saying that I am not claiming that people consciously sit down and discuss “how we do things here”. As I have tried to show, assuming that we are dealing with competent and knowledgeable actors does not mean that the actors intentionally and consciously do what they do – and this aspect is outside the scope of my research. What I mean is that when positions and issues are produced, the focus of the practice itself is right on the “how to engage with work”. In other words, not only these two practices are ways of “engaging the world when working”, but the constructions they produce are related, in general terms, to how work is carried out and, in more specific terms, to “how to engage with work”, rather than being, for instance, related to learning how to perform a task, the solution of a problem, acceptance of a project, or the enactment of a strategy, as in some of the examples described above. Constructing
positions and issues means, in fact, constructing to a certain degree “how to engage with work”. Other practices, for instance, the practice of learning is, instead, to do with how learning is performed. Even though the result may be related to direction, when one learns how to carry out a task, it is not through the practice of learning that such a result is achieved. Rather, it might be through the intersection with practices as constructing issues and positions and positioning. Thus, leadership practices are more closely related to articulating how work is engaged, compared to other practices.

If we look at constructing issues, when issues are constructed, attention and emotions are committed to a certain question, problem, or opportunity that is being (re)constructed as such. In my interpretation, such gathering of attention and emotions depends on the need for re-assessing “how to engage with work” in the situation at hand. This is also done by articulating, more or less explicitly, other practices and, at times, relating them to each other in certain ways. The concept of “articulating” should be interpreted as a metaphor thus indicating the effort to utter with clarity and distinction the different parts of a whole— not necessarily intentionally, but in a knowledgeable fashion. Even if it might be more obvious when speaking of issues, also constructing positions and positionings may be interpreted as a practice having to do with articulating of “how to engage with work”. This may be done by relating different understandings of practices to each other and by constructing “how to engage with work” in terms of either co-orientation— meaning somehow oriented in a similar way, although not absolutely and consensually—or divergence. While some scholars put the accent on co-orientation as the glues of organising, in terms of alignment of how work is dealt with, the basic idea is that there is no need for dissolving difference, what is needed is to give expression to differences in order to sustain action (Taylor and Robichaud, 2004).

I will briefly re-read the empirical examples through these lenses in order to clarify my point.

**Re-reading Constructing Issues**

In the first interaction presented, I interpreted “defining the right potential” as the issue being constructed, when discussions developed around what one should mean by “potential” and how to find the right level, not promising to much but not deluding expectations either. Hence, there is a need for making explicit one way of engaging the work, “defining the right
potential”. In such an interaction, one could also see how different ways of
going about the practice of “producing documents” became articulated and
related to each other. After some discussion, I interpret what happened in
terms of co-orientation, since the different constructions became expressed,
constructed as different, and then a negotiation was produced on what to
do in this case. In this way, what I would call “awareness” about different
ways of proceeding was produced. Therefore, even though I am not claim-
ing that consensus was reached, I would say that awareness was. Of course,
I am not analysing what each actor thought and how they interpreted what
happened and what was said, but socially, awareness about contested prac-
tices was constructed in that they were expressed. This is something that
one could assume will play a role in the coming interactions producing “the
right potential” and inscribing it in a document.

Looking at the interaction about the task of moving the ownership of
the US warehouse, something that had upset the participants in the meet-
ing who could see their activities as probably disturbed by this unforeseen
task, there is articulation of how work is carried out: how things were done
in the past, which problems this had caused, what problems they have now
with other warehouses, which problems could become topical in the future
and who would be involved. More specifically, one practice such as the use
of IT systems — they are the obvious way of handling warehouses in Sweden,
while in the US this is not the case — was also articulated. As I interpreted it,
the issue was not constructed as a clear-cut problem, since there were dif-
ferent constructions competing as regards, for example, what the problem
implied and how it should be handled. However, all these articulations
would probably be considered in the coming discussions. Attention has
been directed to them, at least.

I also showed an interaction that I read as constructing a non-issue,
the liquidity problem that the responsible for accounting at CleanTech
brought up and that became constructed as non-worthy of attention. In
this case, attention was focused on the problem during the period of time
in which the conversation took place, and therefore some practices – for
example the use of financial figures – and, again more in general, ways of
working were articulated, but then the discussion ended up construct-
ing this as a non-issue, which means that attention and engagement were
redirected. I would interpret this as implying that, even when the ongoing
construction ends up with a non-issue, attention having been focused for a
period of time, some articulation has taken place. The difference with the
previous examples is that it is more probable that such articulation will not be re-constructed and focused on in the coming interactions.

Finally, I also provided an example of a positive issue, the opportunity, regarding a new business to be developed at CleanTech. In this last case, my interpretation is that if the issue becomes reconstructed in coming interactions as worth attention and engagement, discussions constructing and reconstructing practices related to this opportunity— for example the handling of risk—will probably continue and develop.

Although the short episodes re-told above are just brief illustrations of practices in organisations, still, they help us understand the peculiarity of leadership practices.

**Re-reading Constructing Positions and Positionings**

Let me also comment on some of the examples I provided about the construction of positions and positionings. The Management Group meeting in which Monica, the coach, also participated: as we may remember, the discussion constructed the Management Group as failing in its effort to take charge of the company. As I read the meeting, one of the practices articulated was the use of artefacts to make things visible and understandable. I am not claiming that they succeeded in communicating with the rest of the company; their own construction of the result is, in fact, quite the opposite. What I am saying is that the competent way of relating to the rest of the company in this context is to produce Powerpoint presentations and organisational diagrams: it is so one “engages with work”. This is in a way reminiscent of the practices identified by Kelloggs et al. (2006) described above. In some of the other interactions, while positions and positionings were constructed, other practices that became articulated are “being professional”, “the use of technology”, “what selling is about”. Moreover, as I tried to show, in constructing positions and positionings, even practices such as gender and seniority become articulated. They were not articulated in the sense that the people talking use such labels for what they are talking about and doing, but articulated in the sense that assumptions about how to engage with work are expressed, assumptions that I interpret as constructing gender and seniority.

So far, I have analysed the articulation of different practices. But what I find more evident in the case of the practice of constructing positions is the construction of the “how to engage with work” in terms of either co-
orientation or divergence. At times, positions are constructed in a way that expresses a sense of co-orientation. For example, when Jacob, Ingrid and Jack discuss Jack’s position, I interpret what they are doing as constructing a similar way of engaging work based on a somewhat shared understanding that things should work in certain ways. Again, I do not intend to say that they “really” share the same picture of what has to be done and how. I am just saying that the construction develops toward a similar construction of how to face work. In the same way, what I called a “flirt” between Alexander, Hans and David constructs a sense of co-orientation on how they relate to work, based on their knowledge, long acquaintance with each other, masculinity, and so on. Other examples show the opposite situation, that is, it becomes articulated that work is engaged in different ways. One such situation is found when sales people at CLEANTECH discuss the low order-stock and discover that it is due to Jesper not having registered recent orders. In this case, how work is engaged is constructed in very different terms depending on if work is engaged from the position salesperson or project manager. This is not necessarily the same as saying that different positions are constructed. Different positions might be constructed, in terms, for example, of different tasks, but they could be constructed as engaging work in similar ways. What is specific in the case salesperson – project manager is that two different ways of engaging work are spelled out.

In other words, what becomes articulated is not only how work is engaged, but also whether there are different ways of engaging work or if work is constructed as engaged in a similar way.

Articulating Practices

In this thesis, I see conversations as the site of organising, of the organisation-in-action, of the unfolding of relational processes. Therefore, even when I am analysing the empirical material through the concept of “practice”, my attention is limited to one aspect of practice – the one that is often privileged by scholars. Other aspects, like material practices in which the body performance is of high relevance, are not analysed. Thus, having stressed what is done in talk, I also consider talk as the basis of action, of sustained action that continues unfolding organising (cf. Taylor and Robichaud, 2004). Articulating then becomes crucial since sharper focus is brought to certain practices, and more in general to how work is carried out. While one could analyse such processes as reflective enterprises
in which human beings immersed in the practice and sensible to it may change how life is engaged (Spinosa et al., 2001), my take is more social. Articulating means spelling out assumptions on practices and on work, more or less reflexively, more or less explicitly. Thus, I do not refer to intentional reflection as what allows for the unfolding of organising and change. Rather, in interactions organising is constructed in certain ways, constraining and enabling ongoing processes, thus producing direction, leadership. Referring to practices, what is articulated in the two categories of practices analysed in this thesis is, to a certain degree, the habitus, the normative and socially sustained modus operandi enabling practical coping. To be sure, I am not arguing that precise accounts of what a practice is about are produced. On the contrary, what I am talking about are contested, fragmented, not necessarily reflective articulations of practices. Nonetheless, once spelled out, they are made relevant in the here and now and they more explicitly enable future action by constraining it, having made certain actions and talk meaningful, urgent, intelligible, real, and others not.

Concluding, my point is that by having articulated work practices, constructed awareness about them, constructed co-orientation or divergence, and reconstructed “how we engage with work” through the practices of constructing positions and positionings and constructing issues, these interactions have created a clearing for action, a bounded aggregate of actions and talks that become possible, while other become less probable and some probably impossible. Let me elaborate on this argument.

Leadership as a Clearing for Action

Clearing for action is a metaphor that suits what I am trying to describe much better than other expressions such as space of action. It has taken time to come up with the proper expression. For that, I am indebted to a friend, David Payne. Clearing is a word with two meanings: it is both a space, a bounded space with neither trees nor bushes in a forest – thus a space where one can move more freely – and an action, since as a verbal form it expresses the idea of making or opening up space. Therefore it suits a relational perspective in which there are no stable entities, by suggesting a more dynamic view, at the same time as it also conveys the idea that we are talking about a bounded space. As anticipated above, I define clearing for action as an emergent bounded aggregate of actions and talks that become possible, making others impossible or less probable. As previously pointed
out, I see talk as action, but I choose to say “talk and action” to acknowledge that not all actions is necessarily talk, but that, anyway, even (non-talk) action can be made possible by talk. In other words, actors and their world are constructed in certain ways that expand or contract the space of possible action (cf. Holmberg, 2000, p.181). Different constructions resource and constrain how processes unfold and which space is created (van der Haar and Hosking, 2004). A landscape of enabling constraints relevant to a number of next possible actions is created (cf. Shotter, 1993). In this way, producing clearing for action means also producing direction in organising. Again, direction should be thought of as a metaphor: no single direction but an array of directions that become possible in the here and now of interactions. This is an active ongoing achievement performed by engaging the world in competent ways when working.

All practices are ordering the world (Gherardi, 2009) and these practices are ordering in the sense that they allow for developing organising in certain directions by opening up for certain alternatives and closing down for others, as I have hopefully shown.

Let me first comment on other ways in which the similar concept of space for actions has been used, in order to clarify my own interpretation. Then I will discuss how such a conceptualisation of leadership assumes a different character than previous ones.

Space of action may be used to express the situated intentional striving of a subject for freedom, autonomy and personal interest (Daudi, 1986 as in Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). It is the space for choice and reflexivity (Carroll and Levy, 2010). In leadership research, the concept has therefore been used in the context of leadership development programmes with a constructionist approach in order to express the idea of a space for identity work on the part of leaders (ibid.). Such conceptualisations have some elements in common with what I want to express: it has to do with something that is situated in a specific space and time and it is an “opening up” for acting. But what I am talking about is not something that has to do with individual choice or intentionality. It is something that is socially constructed in interactions while working. Acting purposively is different than acting with a purpose in mind (Chia and MacKay, 2007).

Thus, I want to point out that the idea of “clearing for action” is indeed a novel reading of what leadership is about. Compared to the studies adopting a relational perspective reviewed in chapter 7, the implications of granting primacy to relational processes in which organising happens are taken one step forward. In this study, leadership is analysed as happening
in relations–although I limited the scope of my analysis to relations in the
form of interactions. Leadership is understood without resorting to actors.

Compared to the leadership studies adopting a practice perspective
reviewed in chapter 4, this conceptualisation of leadership in terms of clear-
ing for action gives even more relevance to the social aspect of the phe-
nomenon, coming closer to the definition of practice as mindless coping
(Chia and MacKay, 2007). Not only leadership is understood as performed
in practices, rather than as practices performed by intentional actors, but
those practices are also understood as common and ordinary ways of en-
gaging the world, going on all the time while work is carried out, thus not
being limited to formal leaders. Leadership is part of doing work through-
out the organisation. This is also allowed by analysing practices analysed
in their unfolding, rather than in the narratives provided by the people
studied.

Finally, compared to traditional definitions of leadership, there is one
aspect that becomes even more evident. The conceptualisation proposed
here highlights the social and constructive aspect of leadership. In interac-
tions, bounded possibilities for action are produced. Reading traditional
definitions of leadership, like the ones reported in chapter 2, claiming that
leadership is about an individual influencing a group towards a common
goal, we may see that the possibilities for action are considered as some-
thing to be limited. While in my interpretation a clearing for action (even
though bounded) is something actively and socially produced, with a tradi-
tional perspective a clearing for action is something that an individual (the
leader) has to limit and to control. Somewhat simplifying, one could say
that it implies two different way of thinking about how to produce order:
the traditional view is that there is the leader’s idea of how the ordered ar-
rangement should be and what has to be done is to force collective course
of action into such a template, while my view is that order is an ongoing
social construction based on producing clearing for action in a chaotic and
changing social reality. To be sure, clearing for action, as I see it, is also
bounded, only some actions are made possible and probable, there are no
infinite possibilities (something that could result in impossibility to act, in
the end). But the boundaries are actively constructed and reconstructed.
The focus is more on the productive aspect of leadership, rather than on the
constrictive aspect. This is the main difference in terms of how to interpret
the production of direction in organising processes; the purposive “bound-
ed opening up” rather than the purposeful “closing down” (cf. Follett, 1924).
Moreover, given the analysis I made, the conceptualisation produced here is of a dynamic temporary phenomenon, an ongoing social achievement. Direction is not something static that can be decided about by formal leaders and then implemented. While my conceptualisation might miss some relevant aspects that other perspectives are more apt to capture, for example, the structural dimension of power, it adds a novel point of view on the phenomenon of leadership. It also adds to the understanding of organising as a collective achievement and of how it is accomplished. How is it possible for people working to be able to act and to continue to act? Scholars referring to the concept of sensemaking consider a retrospective shared understanding of the world as the basis for action (cf. Maitlis, 2005). I suggest adding a similar, although radically different, idea: the moment-by-moment sustained production of clearing for action in interactions may be what directs action in a fluid world. One could say that this is what produces momentum in the sustained reproduction of organisations.

There is one metaphor that could help in clarifying what I mean, I think: the jazz metaphor. Mary Jo Hatch wrote a detailed article in 1999 showing how this metaphor could help develop our understanding of organising, above all in those situations that require some form of improvisation and creativity. It is one aspect of her analysis that I want to mention here:

> on any particular occasion, a tune can be taken in multiple directions; the directions in which it will be taken are only decided in the moment of playing and will be redetermined each time that tune is played.

(Hatch, 1999, p. 85)

One could read this description as an illustration of the idea that there is a need for continuously creating a clearing for action, in order to go on playing. That is, put crudely, either you slavishly follow a script time after time, which is seldom the case in modern organisations (often characterised as operating in a world in constant change and characterised by high uncertainty), or you create the possibility to go on playing in the moment-by-moment performance of what you are playing. And even when on a macro level things appear to be done in the same way repeatedly, on a micro level there may be a number of more improvisational arrangements. Or better, it is just in these adjustments that the appearance of stability at the macro level is maintained, according to a process ontology. Clearing for action is actively, sensibly and competently created.
Of course, the production of clearing for action may be analysed in a number of ways, depending on where the focus is placed. My analysis is limited to two practices. There is surely need for further studies focusing on other aspects.

Summarising, the analysis produced in this thesis makes use of the concept of practice to understand the production of direction at work. This way, the phenomenon is made rather trivial and ordinary, and the production of direction is seen as a not necessarily intentional ongoing social achievement in which possibility for action is constructed in constrained terms.
Discussion

In this final chapter, I start by discussing the consequences of the analysis performed in this thesis. After that, I summarise in a table a number of aspects concerning the study of leadership and describe how the understanding produced in this thesis is different from the traditional way of studying leadership. Finally, I end this text by commenting on how the analysis done addresses the theoretical and practical problem, and on what the proposed conceptualisation of leadership may “do”.

Leadership Practices

During the course of this study, the term “practice” has assumed a more theoretically precise meaning as the reading of the empirical material proceeded. Only considering what more than one formal leader does at work as leadership did not prove to be satisfactory, since a close reading of the interactions observed revealed that there is more to the production of direction than that. Therefore, moving the focus to micro-activities, to what happens in organisations, to the “messy” world, is important in order to add to our understanding of the phenomenon of leadership (Denis et al., 2010). This way, the processual nature of leadership is also underlined. Processual is used in the sense that things develop from one situation to the next and that actions performed by an individual are studied over a period of time (ibid.), rather than considering leadership as something static. But leadership as practice and as distributed may also lead to including followers and even artefacts and may be studied as it happens, as a situated phenomenon taking place in the execution of specific tasks (Spillane et al., 2004).

Hence, recent empirical studies certainly bring the reader closer to the doing of leadership in concrete situations, to how things are handled when working. Some researchers focus on micro-processes, others on processes over a longer timeframe. What is common to all these studies is that they grant actors intentionality and individual motivation. Actors are conceptualised as separated from the context in which they operate, even if the context is accredited with importance as regards how acting is undertaken.
Actors choose which practices to deploy and the effects of such practices can be observed and classified. These studies are also a step towards a relational perspective, acknowledging that leadership is not only a matter of an individual leader directing a group according to a consistent vision, but of relations between people, although mostly between formal leaders.

A different approach is used by Carroll, Levy and Richmond (2008) when they refer to “practice” in order to challenge the so-called competency paradigm in leadership, competency understood as individual characteristic causally related to superior performance. Practice then allows us to turn to everyday actions, to how actors do their work of leadership. Individuals and collectives are not separated entities but “fields of relationships” (Cooper, 2005) or “bundles of practices” (Schatzki, 2005). This way, participants in a leadership programme (underpinned by a practice perspective) are interviewed and asked to reflect on the meaning of such an experience. The analysis reveals that the value of the programme seems to be more related to the advance in the state of awareness about something than on having learned something new. Therefore, participants seem to reflect on leadership as disposition and as “modus operandi” rather than as a trait, which leads the researchers to interpret leadership in terms of practice, of a way of relating to the world. They thus refer to a narrower concept of practice, similar to the one adopted in this thesis, but it nevertheless turns into quite an individualistic conception of practice, in which the actors actively reflect on their own behaviour and seem to be able to control it; the practice seems to reside in people’s minds rather than being socially sustained and situated. Agency is given to actors – the researchers speak themselves of growth in the agency of this set of people, of the flourishing of a latent potential. To be sure, this is no absolute problem, it is just problematic when referring to “practice”. Thus, there is clearly a contribution in conceptualising leadership as a way of being and approaching the world, which happens in quite ordinary circumstances and situated activities, but the question is if there is more to such an idea than the individual focus of increasing one’s awareness. Indeed, the researchers end their article by proposing yet another path to take, by redefining who is engaged in leadership work and including more sites in organisations as potential sites for leadership, and paying more attention to the non-deliberate coping mentioned by Chia and Holt (2006). This is how much leadership is done. Therefore, while these researchers focus on bringing more of the unreflective into the domain of the conscious, what my study has done is to follow
the other path and bring forward the not necessarily deliberate coping that 
can be made sense of, thanks to the concept of practice.

Leadership practices mean, therefore, those practices at work in which 
direction is produced and practices are how work is engaged in situated, 
socially sustained, competent and sensible ways. Taking such a view means 
that one can make sense of how organising develops thanks to practices 
rather than individuals’ intentional initiatives. Clearing for action is thus 
reconstructed through the practices used. Practices provide an element of 
continuity in how the world is engaged. When they become articulated and 
when awareness of them is socially produced, there is the possibility for 
adjustments and novelty. Producing clearing for action means, therefore, 
producing both continuity and novelty in the same interactions.

**A Different Understanding**

The contribution of this study is, therefore, the development of the idea 
of leadership as practice and as a social phenomenon in a direction that 
takes the concept of practice and social to the extreme, thus adding one 
more perspective to this complex phenomenon. As already pointed out, 
my ambition is not to come to the conclusion that this perspective should 
replace others, since I think that a multitude of points of view is beneficial 
when discussing something that is so complex and accorded such impor-
tance as leadership. Therefore, my claim is limited to the addition of one 
understanding, one understanding that is different and has a number of 
consequences.

Leadership becomes, in fact, a truly social phenomenon rather than an 
individual one, social not only in the sense that more individuals than a 
single leader are involved, as “shared leadership” scholars suggest, and not 
only in the sense that leadership is distributed through the organisation, 
involving even “followers”, as suggested by some “postheroic leadership 
scholars”, but social in the more profound sense that the notion of “indi-
vidual” as separated from other individuals, as a discrete entity acting on 
other entities, loses relevance. Rather, these entities, individuals, are in 
the process of becoming all the time thanks to the relations and interac-
tions they have in which they are interdependently constantly constructed. 
Leadership is, therefore, not about an independent subject conditioning 
the development of dependent objects, but it is about the production of a
common clearing for action, a process in which people and reality are also socially constructed.

In other words, what I describe is leadership-in-action at the micro level, some of the ways in which direction is produced – instead of polished versions of successful leadership and/or of ideals of what leadership should be about, not good leadership, but leadership. Traditionally, leadership is named leadership after the results have been evaluated as positive and morally acceptable; otherwise what has directed action is not leadership. In my case, I look at leadership as it happens, as clearing for action is constructed, independently of how the researchers and/or practitioners judge what kind of clearing for action has been produced.

Although there have been movements toward social understanding of leadership going beyond the individualised conceptions that have dominated in the field, as discussed in chapter 4 and 5, few studies have really abandoned individual actors as the object of study. Compared to the previous studies of leadership from a practice point of view (cf. Knights and Willmott, 1992; Denis et al., 2010; Holmberg and Tyrstrup, 2009; Spillane et al., 2004; Carroll et al., 2008), the result of this study is a more explicitly relational conceptualisation of leadership, not centred on individuals and their intentionality. Also, the idea of practice means more than “what people do”, just as processes are more than sequences of discrete states. Compared to the studies performed under the label “relational” (Koivunen and Wennes, 2009; Soila-Wadman and Köping, 2009), my research develops the relational aspect even further by focusing even more on interactions and adds the idea of practice as a useful concept to perform analysis with. Compared to the studies on leadership in interactions, in the form of conversations (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010; Vine et al., 2008), my research contributes by focusing on different aspects of the phenomenon of leadership. Finally, this study also performs an analysis similar to Nordzell’s (2007) analysis of school leadership, adding to such insights the theoretical dimension of the concepts of relational leadership and practice, which results in the idea of clearing for action. It should also not be forgotten that gender-blindness dominates among the mentioned studies. While my study has not been centred exclusively on gender analyses, I have tried to take gender practices into consideration. I have also argued that it is possible to see the production of direction as performed in a number of interactions in which direction is not produced in terms of one clear and accepted direction, but in terms of an evolving, at times ambiguous and contested, clearing for action. Metaphorically, one could say that it has more to do with an organic space
than a static arrow. This way, multiplicity, ambiguities and conflicts do not need to be silenced as in many other conceptualisations of leadership.

A Processual Understanding
– And the Development of a Vocabulary

This study contributes to a processual view of leadership by offering possible instruments for thinking of leadership in process terms. Hernes (2008) makes a distinction between two of the philosophers promoting a processual view: Bergson and Whitehead. While the former maintained that we should try to improve our ability of thinking processually, the latter assumed that we have to deal with the fact that such ability is limited and instead focus on analysing how the categories applied to the world in order to organise it are constructed—categories usually treated as static but that, too, are made and remade. Therefore, on the one hand, one could analyse how leadership becomes constructed as it is, as a performative concept—a stance similar to the one Hernes attributes to Whitehead. On the other hand, one could investigate leadership in terms of a processual and relational phenomenon. I do think that this study can be said to contribute to this second possibility. But since doing research is traditionally constructing categories, this second stance is pursuable only to a certain point. Compromises have to be made. In particular, two compromises are clear in this thesis. One regards the language I use and the analysis I perform. The other regards the “I” in the previous sentence. Let me start with the text I have produced. While my analysis has leaned towards re-producing leadership in less static terms, in relational terms, as ongoing practices, nevertheless I had to use categories in order to communicate my analysis, thus “entifying” the practices that I describe, although they should be understood as ambiguous and intertwined with a myriad of other practices going on. I also tried to keep the language as processual as possible. From chapter 8 onward I have consequently mostly spoken of “constructing”, rather than “construction”. But most importantly, I think that the concept “clearing for action”, with its double meaning, helps in keeping in mind that it is not an entity we are speaking about. This effort adds to an enterprise most often attributed to Weick, who urged researchers “to stamp out names” (Weick, 1979). As regards the “I”, in order to perform and communicate this research I have chosen to adopt a “subject-object” relation towards those people I studied. This is not to say that I have not exchanged ideas with them, nor that I am
isolated within the scientific community and society at large. Of course, the analysis presented here has developed in interaction with people at the companies, my colleagues, other researchers, and people outside academia and is constructed in the context I am part of. But still, one could go even further and adopt a subject-subject relationship in which knowledge is produced in dialogues with people in organisations. In this respect, I opted for a more modernist stance and, in writing down this thesis, I have chosen to make myself the privileged subject in order to open up such research for the reader.

A Different Kind of Empirical Material

Arriving at a different understanding has also been possible thanks to the empirical material I have analysed. Starting by observing leaders sharing leadership, the focus has been directly on leadership as practice (in the broad sense of the term), as something to be studied as it is performed. But the analysis has then not stopped at interactions among leaders, as it became clear that there was more production of direction going on. Therefore, a whole range of interactions at work is included in this study. This is something rare in leadership research. Whether scholars search for answers in questionnaires, experiments or interviews, traditional (and non-traditional) studies do not pay particular attention to interactions at work (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010). Although mostly limited to meetings, the empirical material produced for this thesis is therefore an important contribution to the field since it brings forward everyday situations, the sites where leadership happens while work gets done. Moreover, the time spent at the companies, and the space available in a thesis compared to an article, also enables me to provide a setting for these interactions, thus hopefully not reducing them to abstract acontextual texts. My hope is that the reader got more out of these pages than just mere descriptions – not only a picture of the situation, but a feeling and an impression of what is going on, also based on the reader’s own experience in similar situations.

A Different Reconstruction

Doing research on a phenomenon means reconstructing the phenomenon too. As discussed at the beginning of this thesis, most research on leadership has constructed this phenomenon as important and decisive for the
faith of an organisation. Leadership has thus come to mean a grandiose and extraordinary achievement, a heroic endeavour.

Therefore, it could be argued that one should question whether leadership matters (once one has defined it), rather than just assuming the alleged impact on organisations that is mostly taken for granted and seldom questioned (not to say tested). It may be argued that leadership is a questionable construct since the ontological assumptions sustaining it are not usually openly discussed.

Leadership is typically portrayed as something fairly robust, stable and coherent

(Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003a, p. 96)

Should one thus start from the assumption that leadership exists or should one do an empirical research first in order to ascertain that one can find leadership and only after that provide respondents (in the case of quantitative studies) with a frame for making sense of reality classifying a number of aspects under the label “leadership”, instead of directly constraining their accounts in that direction without any reflection on it?

Subjects in experiments and respondents to questionnaires are forced to subordinate themselves to expressions of the researcher’s assumptions and design (Deetz, 1996), [...] Through such procedures leadership can be produced as an empirical phenomenon.

(Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003c, p. 364)

Moreover, leadership is also an ambiguous construct in terms of what distinguishes leadership from other situations: it is seldom discussed how effective leaders are different from effective managers and effective persons in general (Barker, 2001, p. 478). Not only that, but the subjects usually studied in leadership research are managers and it can be argued that what managers do becomes constructed as leadership, and thus becomes a grandiose achievement (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b). Problematising the idea of leadership as a defined, relevant and important phenomenon, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003b) use the example of how managers talk about listening, chatting and being cheerful as a central leadership act – something also referred to in daily talk as “management by walking around” – in order to show how seemingly mundane activities – although one could discuss whether “listening” is trivial (Koivunen and Wennes, 2009) – would be raised to grandiose acts just because it is managers doing them, rather than
because of the activity itself. That is, the same activity done by someone else is not attributed the same impact on the organisation. Activities such as listening or chatting are hardly considered work if employees undertake them, but they become critical activities when a manager is involved. It is thus not the activity per se that can be said to be crucial: it becomes crucial depending on who is performing it.

But listening is not an activity that often appears in texts on leadership, in particular not when leadership is depicted as grand initiatives and as the exercise of strong influence. On the other hand, the description of practices aimed at giving attention to subordinates, involving them, providing a sense of belonging, creating spaces for participation, showing that managers care for their employees, and so on, is a description that might fit with recent postheroic ideals of how to exercise leadership and might give examples of feminization of leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b). Although there may be a tendency in the discourse to make the acts themselves important when it is a manager performing them, thus disconnecting the act from the content of the act, which may of course be considered problematic, I would also argue that the fact that managers are talking in these terms is telling itself in other ways too. Bringing forward these acts may means not only that this is what one is expected to do, but also that this is what usually has not worked in an organisation, which makes those apparently trivial acts actually crucial. Moreover, this could actually mean that leadership practices are more in line with postheroic descriptions than with grandiose narratives, even though the grandiose stories are the ones to be retold when speaking about leadership in more general terms (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b, 2003a).

Such an interpretation may be supported by the work of feminist scholars who have problematised what a feminisation of leadership would mean. Both Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003c), and Fletcher (1998) use the label “disappearing act” in fact, but in quite different ways. The former consider significant leadership as what is difficult to find in organisations, while the latter describes how relational skills and behaviours traditionally interpreted as feminine collide with gendered norms of appropriate workers and therefore disappear. Therefore the question becomes: is there something wrong with leadership discourse because it has no correspondence in what people are actually doing or because the actual practices do not find a place in the discourse due to gendered norms? Of course, both approaches are important, but, depending on where the attention is focused, we will have a different agenda. Although I certainly agree with the former criticism, this
thesis contributes to the reconstruction of leadership is such a way that its triviality and mundane character is highlighted. In such an endeavour, the analysis of how gender is constructed has become an integral part in studying how leadership is practiced. Thus, in this thesis I bring forward disappearing acts in Fletcher’s terms, but I do not make them grandiose; rather I recognise that they are both trivial and important.

In fact, in this thesis, I have kept the definition of leadership rather general, “the production of direction”, and assumed that it is a useful construct in order to make sense of what goes on at work (not directly a phenomenon real per se). In other words, I position myself within the field of leadership studies and therefore start from the assumption that leadership 1) may be seen as a phenomenon and 2) is worth studying. Of course “may be seen as a phenomenon” does not mean that I claim that leadership exists “out there” in absolute terms. What I mean is that leadership has gained acceptance as a concept explaining what is going on in organisations and people have provided it with an ontological status.

But leadership, as it has been reconstructed in this study, is not a grandiose achievement. This means that, although based on the assumption that leadership matters, this study arrives at a completely different understanding of “leadership” and of “matters”. Leadership is a social achievement performed in trivial and ordinary interactions. Nevertheless, it is important for the development of organising. Therefore, the result of this study is that the trivial and ordinary is also important, it matters.

Thus, while one could conclude that it is meaningless to go on talking of leadership, since it just makes extraordinary whatever managers do (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003b), what I have done in this thesis is instead to challenge the idea that leadership is extraordinary by showing that ordinary interactions also contribute to the production of direction, without celebrating them and elevating them to an exceptional status.

Such an alternative construction of leadership may be seen as a challenge to organisational and leadership discourse, since it tells different stories than the usual ones and names interactions and relations as leadership, thus making them “appear”. In traditional discourse, such interactions would not be intelligible in terms of leadership. As Fletcher would put it, this results in the creation of a discursive space, where new ways of thinking are allowed and may be produced. The examples discussed are, therefore, neither exhaustive of the phenomenon nor necessarily the most significant, but they are interesting examples of how to understand leadership differently (Fletcher, 1998). What I offer is a “novel reading” (Czarniawska,
an account competing with other readings, different from the ones provided by the “voices” in the field and informed by my theoretical understandings. The value resides thus in the potential for increasing our understanding of a phenomenon, not in the potential for any ultimate explanation of it.

Thus, the result of this thesis is one construct of leadership, a construct to add to the many previously produced by scholars over the years, and hopefully contributing to challenging and contaminating them. It is a construct that, because of the focus on ordinary interactions rather than extraordinary individuals, may be considered a different reconstruction of what leadership is about. Different does not means arbitrary, though. My analysis is performed in a systematic way, trying to give the reader the possibility to make her/his own judgements on the verisimilitude of my version of the story by not concealing certain aspects just to produce a coherent narrative. On the contrary, I have tried to be as transparent as possible about my choices and my reasons for them. To believe that I could describe every choice would be naïve: some choices are not even conscious. But one can try. The reader should be able to form her/his own understanding of my interpretations and constructions, and thus be in a position to judge the credibility and fruitfulness of this product.

An Aspect of Organising

While it is possible to see a parallel in the development of leadership theory and organisation theory over the years (for example the focus on first contingency and then culture), leadership is then often studied as a phenomenon per se, separated from “organising” – one notable exception being Pye’s discussion on leadership and organising as related to the idea of “moving to” the future (2005). Also, when it comes to the new developments in the two disciplines that I have used in this thesis, even though theories of organisational becoming, of working practices and of relational leadership share some important sources of inspiration and some central interests, the possibility of combining them has not been fully explored yet. For instance, common preoccupations that would suggest there should be a dialogue between these researchers include the focus on the social aspect of the phenomenon rather than individuals’ meanings or superindividual structures, and the refusal of what has been called “methodological individualism”. But such a dialogue does not seem to take place.
The interpretation of leadership that I have developed in this thesis, on the other hand, is indebted to both fields and results in seeing leadership as an aspect of organising processes, not as something separated from them. Producing clearing for action is something that goes on continuously in order to keep producing direction, which may be considered necessary in order to go on acting and talking in a fluid world. It is not something done once and for all or only in special occasions. Rather, it is an important part of organising. It may be compared to identity construction. Identity construction may be considered something that may more intensively happen at specific times, but that is above all continuously done and re-done, an aspect of what happens in interactions (cf. Lindgren and Wåhlin, 2001; West and Zimmerman, 1987). The practices highlighted in this thesis are intertwined with other practices; they are not performed in isolation.

One might wonder whether it is possible to have interactions without the production of direction. I would say that, since we go on acting and talking, direction is always produced in interactions. On the other hand, in some interactions this aspect is more evident and crucial, in others less.

One could wonder whether leadership then becomes everything that is done in interactions. I would say no. Leadership is an aspect. Other things are also done in interactions. Leadership is the aspect that more strictly regards the production of direction. Other achievements may also be related to producing direction, but in a looser way. In fact, the two practices analysed in this thesis are directly related to “how to engage the world” in the sense that the constructions produced in these practices re-construct the “how to engage the world” in terms of available positions and positionings, and present issues. Other practices have other effects, for example, learning how to perform a task or selling a strategy, as discussed in chapter 9. Although these practices are also related to the production of direction, it is not the practice itself that is producing direction but practices as constructing issues and positions (or other leadership practices) with which it may intertwine. That is, the practice of learning, for instance, has to do with how learning is performed, not with producing direction; rather, learning how to do something will have an impact on organising through the construction of positions and positionings and the construction of issues, for example. In this thesis, I also tentatively suggest that leadership practices are more tightly related to the articulation, to some degree, of other practices, of their normative and socially sustained modus operandi. In other words, one could argue that practices, in general, are ordering the world, certain practices by making work more predictable, repetitive and
accessible, stabilising work in other words, as inple the practice of produc-
ing documents. Others, as the leadership practices presented in this thesis,
do so by contributing to producing the modus operandi and to a certain
degree articulating it, thus more directly producing direction in organising.

Some researchers would probably argue that the construct becomes too
to broad. For example, discussing traditional definitions, Alvesson and Sven-
ingsson (2003c) claim that leadership should be more precisely delimited
and not considered as equal to any influence process in order to allow for
interesting studies. In their opinion, the broad and quite imprecise defini-
tions mostly used do not limit the phenomenon properly. It is enough just
to think that leadership might mean both formal and informal influence
processes. The question I pose is why this is a problem. I would argue that
it depends on what one wants to say about what is going on in organisa-
tions. In my view, I came to treat leadership as something ordinary and
pervasive, in the same way as culture or identity are phenomena that to
different degrees and in different ways are present in interactions in the
work place. Thus, I have not tried to narrow down what leadership is about
in order to be able to provide a deep and focused study, for example, by
limiting leadership to significant and intended influence process (Alvesson
and Sveningsson, 2003c, p. 375). While such criticism of how leadership is
defined is certainly motivated, I am sceptical about the assumptions about
intentionality and significance present in the argument. As they observe, it
is at best difficult, if not entirely meaningless, to assess the effect of leader-
ship practices, since there are no “simple mechanic cause-effect patterns”
(ibid.) in organisations. How should one then assess when an influence
process is important or not? Why do they go back to “heroic” conceptions
where intentionality is privileged and where the trivial – and most com-
mon – aspects are deprived of importance? This is, of course, one possibil-
ity, which leads to the conclusion that such processes are, at least, very rare
in organisations – if they are there at all – and that one should consider the
possibility that what managers and leaders do is not always so different
from what other people do at work, which means that leadership might be
more related to the mundane than to grandiose acts. The process I followed
is quite the opposite: starting from the observation that there are interac-
tions constructing direction, I came to see that this is the “normal state
of affairs” in an organisation and that the actor’s intentionality does not
necessarily play any crucial role. This leads to considering leadership not as
something special, but as something common in organisations and to view-
ing every interaction as a potential site for leadership, along with the site for
a number of other constructions. Instead of proving that grandiose leadership does not exist outside discourse on leadership, what such analysis does is to “mundanise” leadership, in other words, and, of course, to recognise that we are not facing a separate phenomenon that stands alone distinguished from other phenomena, like culture or identity. Rather, leadership is one aspect of what is going on and is interconnected with other aspects of what it means to work and relate to other people at work. To complicate things, leadership is a strong, performative concept, which itself does things with “reality”.

Therefore, organisational becoming may be seen as a theory concerning the understanding of the phenomenon “organisation” at large. As described, inspired by process theorists and philosophers, there is a growing movement of scholars within organisation theory turning their attention from stable and discrete entities to fluid and ongoing processes. Change is thus understood as pervasive and continuous and working means attempting at ordering the flux of the world. Hence stability is an achievement, not a fact. Since the world is in constant change, ordering attempts are going on constantly. Since entities are the product of processes rather than their source, single individual's intentionality is not conceptualised as what produces order. One way of addressing the question of how order is produced is to refer to the concept of “practices”. In this thesis I follow Chia and colleagues’ conceptualisation of practices: how the world is engaged at work in sustained and socially transmitted ways (Chia and Holt, 2006; Chia and MacKay, 2007). Ordering attempts thus shape and reshape practices, at the same time as they are based in practices. Practices are, in a way, situated micro-structures always in the making.

Summarising Chia and colleagues’ ideas, an organisation is the ongoing accomplishment of emergent patterning of relationships and interactions that have an ordering effect. One question that could be posed is then how action at work is sustained, if one understands organisations in this way. My way to answer such a question is by referring to clearing for action. In a world in which change is an ongoing process and in which what is real are relations and interactions, in which entities are becoming all the time, the ongoing construction of clearing for action opens up for certain actions and not for others, providing direction to such a process of becoming. In this thesis I have produced two categories of practices that may be seen as constructing clearing for action.

They provide order in the flux. My suggestion is that one could identify different categories of practices, some of them being practices in which
other practices become to a certain extent articulated and awareness about them is created. Such particular practices enable us to produce a space of possibilities for action, thus producing direction in organisational becoming, or leadership. Leadership in this sense is relational: an emergent and dynamic phenomenon taking place in processes of relating. In this thesis I have limited my attention to relating in the form of conversations. Therefore, I propose the combination of organisational becoming, working practices and relational leadership as a promising framework for studying leadership further. This way, the concept of leadership is still relevant, even when adopting an organisational becoming stance (while the traditional conception of leadership would lose its meaning with a process ontology). Leadership gives the possibility to understand and talk about the production of direction in the continuously ongoing processes of change. One area that might be addressed is to continue in the study of practices and of what different practices perform in order to expand our knowledge of such dynamics – in this thesis I tentatively propose the distinction of those practices producing leadership, something that could be studied further. Another aspect worth more attention is the intersection of problematic (from a critical point of view) practices, such as gender, in the production of leadership.

This way, studying leadership and studying organising are two aspects of the same effort, rather than two distinct disciplines. Leadership is a phenomenon happening while organising happens. I thus propose an even more integrated development of the disciplines in which studying leadership without studying work and organising loses its meaning. The concept of practice is here pivotal, I believe.

**Re-naming and Re-constructing in Terms of Leadership**

Having said that leadership as analysed in this thesis becomes an aspect of organising, one could ask: why use the term leadership at all and not frame the entire study in terms of organising? Given that these practices have to do with producing direction, I think it is more than legitimate to use the label “leadership”; thus showing that direction is not only produced by single leaders or by a number of leaders together, but also in other forms of interactions in which constructing positions and positionings and constructing issues are performed. This could be an important contribution to
those streams of leadership research that are trying to direct the attention
to other aspects of the phenomenon than the individual leader.

Not only that, but this kind of analysis also could become important giv-
en the aspect of performativity related to the leadership construct discussed
in chapter 2. Referring one more time to Butler's take on performativity
(Butler, 1990/1999), accepting a performative view of leadership would
mean believing that there is no substance in the phenomenon of leadership;
rather it is merely a performative construct. Without acts named leadership
there would be no leadership at all. Therefore, the study of the performativ-
ity of leadership could mean the study of how leadership is constructed and
performed as it is and what consequences this might have, in terms of mar-
ginalisation and exclusion, in other words, to reveal the concealed genesis
and the process of repetition of the construction of leadership. On the other
hand, I read Butler (1990/1999) as also saying that one way to subvert the
current order is to do it from inside that order (in her case the gender order
in which heterosexuality is the norm):

The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition
enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of inter-
vention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition
that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility
of contesting them. (p. 188)

Looking back at what I have done in performing the analysis of leadership
presented in this thesis, where I started by accepting the core element of the
concept of leadership – the production of direction –, but then I came to the
unusual conclusion that leadership can be studied also without paying at-
tention to individuals, one could consider this to be a subversive repetition.
While repeating the act of constructing leadership as an important matter
and something worth studying, this also means contesting how such acts
are repeated, by combining other sources of inspiration and other consid-
erations into a different approach. This might be a way of re-describing
what is already going on in organisations, a possibility already existing but
“designated as culturally unintelligible and impossible” (ibid. p. 189).

That is why it may be of importance to maintain the label “leadership”,
to make other performances than what has been traditionally considered
leadership intelligible in terms of leadership, given my discussion at the
beginning of this thesis about the construct of leadership as problematic
for a number of reasons: its narrow focus, an individualised conception of
leadership, the consequently segregating and “hierarchising” nature of the
construct, its masculinity and, finally, its performative character. Since leadership has come to be one central construct in organisations, and society at large, such reconstruction might have more effect than a criticism refusing the relevance of the idea of leadership at all, or showing the emptiness of such an idea. In fact, I do believe that it is difficult to imagine that it would be possible to make the concept of leadership irrelevant in ordering and explaining what is going on, since the concept has such strength. Hopefully, studies such as the one presented in this thesis may instead contribute to re-constructing the concept in a less problematic way (considering the problems identified). An apparently solid construct inflated with importance and relevance is thus challenged, hopefully in a constructive way that could enable us to downplay the grandiose aspect of leadership and highlight instead the ordinary social achievements going on in organisations. The reconstruction performed in this thesis may therefore also have an emancipation effect, allowing for thinking and talking about leadership in a different way. This may result in “making a difference by doing differently” (Calás and Smircich, 1992, p. 234), that is, not only adding new knowledge, but also adding new knowledge by doing the analysis in an unconventional way and recognising its consequences, being aware that we produce organisations when we write about organisations. Hence, this thesis also produces a “socially constructive” social construction of leadership, hopefully (Grint and Jackson, 2010) – that is, not only a critical analysis of the situation today but also a contribution to offer alternatives. Nevertheless, in order to make an impact on practitioners a different kind of communicative tool than this text is necessary. This will be my next step.

The Role of Intentionality

One important aspect that I have mentioned but not really commented on yet is the question of intentionality. While the actors involved in the interactions analysed may have intentions (and I do not make any assumption about that), it is not intentionality that is essential in order to understand how direction is produced. In fact, direction in the interactions analysed is produced not only by intentional efforts originally aimed at influencing the course of action and/or talk in specific ways, but also by what is constructed in interactions apparently chaotic, contested and often on the surface about other themes than explicitly positions and issues. Direction is produced thanks to the repetitive engagement in the practices of construct-
ing positions and positionings and in constructing issues, which is more or less conscious.

In a similar way, I could have shown more in depth how an issue, for example, is constructed and then comes up repeatedly in other interactions throughout the organisation. This is certainly the case for some of the issues and positions showed in this thesis. But I chose to limit my analysis only to the direction-in-the-making, the momentary production. Although it is easy to see that what is constructed in conversations matters, claiming more mechanically that the momentary constructions I have described have determined effects in the long term requires making a number of assumptions, most importantly that people remember what has been said, remember “correctly” what has been said and behave accordingly from one day to the other. This also means that it is, in a way, in people's mind that continuity of action resides. I consider such assumptions to be quite strong and problematic. Although we certainly have memory, it is a completely different thing to assume that we behave coherently based on a stable consciousness of what has happened yesterday (cf. Czarniawska, 2000). Therefore, I opted for interpreting my observations with the help of theories of practice, in which continuity resides in the social practice rather than in individuals’ memory. In fact, referring to practices, the psychological aspects of action are overlooked: the subjective meaning of action to the actor is not taken into consideration: the subjective meaning of action to the actor is not taken into consideration. As Cohen (1996) points out, one could distinguish between theory of action and theory of praxis, the former relies on subjective meaning while the latter stresses the way in which “conduct is enacted, performed, or produced” (p. 74) – praxis refers, in other words, to “how actors make what they do happen” (p. 84). The researcher's interest is thus either focused on what we mean when acting, or on what happens when we act. I have chosen the latter alternative. Although I can see that people can be reflective and consciously try to influence each other, this is no premise needed in order to understand the production of direction. In other words, I focus on purposive rather than purposeful activities (Chia and MacKay, 2007). Or rather, I focus on a level in between, since the practices that I name leadership are practices in which other practices are articulated. They are instances of practical coping “about” practical coping.

Moreover, keeping the focus on the momentary interactions also means not having to demonstrate that the researcher has been present at all possible interactions on, for example, an issue. That is, one could always claim that the issue is discussed in different terms in official meetings and informal conversations, the latter being much more difficult for a researcher to
access. What I have analysed is instead the “how” in the moment, which can be supposed to be quite similar in different kinds of settings, which means that even in the most informal conversations, one way of producing direction is by constructing issues.

In conclusion, the construct of leadership that I propose contributes to prompting us to think outside heroic conceptions of leadership that limit the researcher’s attention to intentional superior individuals, instead of opening up for the complexity of a social phenomenon. In particular, I turn the attention to the processual and social aspects of organising, the micro-doings at work, those aspects often overlooked. Trivial and not necessarily reflected upon interactions like the discussion of a new CRM system or an exchange of joking remarks at the beginning of a meeting construct positions, positionings and issues, thus producing direction. Direction-in-the-making is analysed and the fragmentation of such constructions highlighted. It is when doing work that leadership is produced. This is important not only for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of leadership in terms of clearing for action, but also for gaining knowledge of how possibly problematic, from an emancipation point of view, micro-doings are intertwined. In this thesis I had gender performances in mind when doing my analysis, and I showed how the practice of gender intersects with the practices producing leadership, reinforced by the practice of seniority: masculinity and seniority contribute to constructing certain positions as superior to others. These other practices are not necessarily intentional either, and they often happen in a quick and unreflected way (Martin, 2003).

The Power Aspect

In traditional definitions, leadership is related to surrendering the power to define which direction is to be taken. Such a conception is based on the assumption of a division between subject and object, in which the subject is able to control the object. Often, the power given to the subject is also legitimated by assumptions of morality, as discussed at the beginning of this thesis. Leadership discourse is thus political in that it mainly privileges the interests of those who become defined as subjects over the interests of the rest of the people in the organisation. Such a discourse may also be used by those in formal leadership positions in order to justify claims to everything from the right to decide for others to higher wages for themselves. Hence, the understanding constructed in this thesis can be used as a means
for contesting such claims since it recognises the social nature of leadership rather than the individual dimension. It may help in opening up a discursive space in which leadership is no longer a question of the dichotomy subject-object. Leadership is achieved in subject-subject relations in which subjects are multilogical: they are constructed in a multitude of dialogues. Such understanding may corrode some of the formal and symbolic power held by formal leaders.

But, although the construct of leadership proposed is not per-se based on a subject-object distinction, this does not result in the leadership told in this thesis being produced in democratic processes in which all subjects participate to the same extent. Rather, the micro-doings are important sites of power performances.

Thus, even if power aspects are not analysed in terms of someone having more power than someone else, power is still an important element. This also means that more structural dimensions of phenomena are not the focus of this interpretation. However, the analysis made in this text assumes what Reed (2003) calls a conflationist stance, as regards the conventional dichotomy structure-agency. In a conflationist stance such ontological and analytical dualism is refused—typical examples of scholars adopting such a stance are Giddens and Bourdieu. What the researcher sees are therefore “constraining and enabling conditions” for social action. Structure is thus conflated into action and exists only through social practices on which actors draw in order to go on acting. Social practices are what social sciences study. What is denied is the existence of structures external to practices and causally influential. Of course, such a stance may be problematic if a researcher is moved, for instance, by an emancipatory interest and devoted to the analysis of power relations. While I have tried to point out how such aspects are visible even in the practices analysed, it is clear that other important aspects are lost out of sight. For example, the hierarchical form that many organisations rely on surely plays a role in the production of direction in organising, social relations being constrained by that. Structural conditions may also help to understand the lack of women, and more in general people belonging to a minority, in the upper levels of such hierarchies (Kanter, 1977/1993). Also, work organisation might be understood as an exploiting mechanism in which disciplining of employees is central, as in critical management studies (cf. Alvesson and Deetz, 2000), which would give another twist to the concept of leadership; such power struggles are difficult to take into consideration when using the concept of “practices”. On the other hand, what is made visible is the everyday structuring
going on at work, which is also of importance. Constructing positioning means, for example, performing power since positions are thus placed in specific relations. Not only that, but different practices may reinforce each other, for instance when doing masculinity, seniority and leadership intersect. This is also something to take into consideration when trying to change the leadership construct and, for instance, making it less masculine in order to facilitate for more people to be leaders. Only changing the ideal may not be enough, given how the practices producing direction (and not directly related to the ideal of leadership) are intertwined with other practices. Attention should be paid to both aspects. Otherwise, the risk is of having a more feminine rhetoric but still producing masculine positions as superior in practice.

Comparing the Constructs of Leadership
– The Entative and the One Produced in This Thesis

After having discussed the consequences of the analysis of leadership performed in this thesis, I want now to summarise in a relatively concise way the differences between the construct of leadership presented here and the entative construct. In table 4, I therefore list some aspects in which an entative approach differs from the processual stance taken in this thesis. It should be underlined that an entative approach may take different forms depending on which theories are used and which elements are focused on. It thus includes everything from traits studies to distributed leadership research. Therefore, it might be problematic to put all these studies into one category without acknowledging the differences among them and the range of nuances in the approaches that different researchers take. On the other hand, my aim here is not to give a comprehensive picture of what leadership research is about, but rather to put the focus on what a study such as the one presented in this thesis may contribute. The entative stance presented in the table should thus be considered an “ideal type” of entative stance, representing more the core of what entative studies are about than particular instances of leadership research. Hence, although summarising decades of research in one table means inevitably to simplify and not to do justice to all the studies done with an entative approach, it may still be useful in order to highlight the main differences between a typical entative approach and a processual one.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entitative Stance</th>
<th>Processual Stance in This Thesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is studied?</strong></td>
<td>Entities or entities in a relationship: individual leaders or the relationship between a leader and followers. Processes of relating producing entities. By focusing on everyday interactions at work in the form of conversations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How is it studied?</strong></td>
<td>Isolating and describing crucial aspects or factors leading to more effective leadership. Looking at what is being constructed in interactions in order to analyse how direction is produced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Is leadership “real”?</strong></td>
<td>Leadership is a real phenomenon. Leadership is a way of making sense of the organising processes at work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is leadership?</strong></td>
<td>A process of influencing a group toward a goal. A subject-object relation. The construction of clearing for action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is leadership about?</strong></td>
<td>An active, intentional and visible influence attempt by an individual aimed at restricting followers’ possibilities for action – a constrictive individual action. A social phenomenon in which a bounded aggregate of actions becomes possible moment-bymoment – a constructive social achievement opening up for certain courses of action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Which aspects may be studied?</strong></td>
<td>Traits, behaviours, at times relationships. Peculiar forms of practice in which articulation of the habitus characterising other practices is performed to some extent. Examples in this thesis: constructing positions and positionings, and constructing issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the researcher interest?</strong></td>
<td>Often normative. Adding to the understanding of organising and producing novel, possibly subversive, accounts (emancipatory interest is allowed).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How are power aspects taken into consideration?</strong></td>
<td>The leader is assumed to be the one able to and required to exercise power. Segregation and hierarchisation are taken for granted and legitimate (with the exception of critical studies that highlight these aspects, instead). At times, the follower is recognised as an actor able to resist. At times gender is taken into consideration, other aspects as ethnicity, sexuality, race, and so on, are seldom discussed. The production of clearing for action is a contested and fragmented process. Practices producing clearing for action intersect with other ordering practices, for instance gender and seniority. While power is seen as constructive (rather than constrictive) in the social and interactive creation of clearing for action, this does not mean that such practices are harmonious and producing equality. Power relations are produced for example constructing positionings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How does the researcher proceed?  
Questionnaires, interviews, experiments, at times shadowing.  
Immersion in everyday work and interviews.

Which accounts does the researcher produce?  
Representations of the real phenomenon. Language is adequate for this purpose. Models are proposed.  
Impressions from and reproduction of reality, together with tentative alternative constructions of the phenomenon. Language is not adequate given the difficulty to produce movement with words (language is already organising by fixing entities).  
Empirical illustrations of interactions in which leadership happens, while it happens, are central elements.

The role of theory?  
Explaining the world by mirroring reality, making it predictable.  
Incomplete (Law, 1994) useful instrument to make sense of the world.

Table 4. A summary of the differences between an entative approach and the approach taken in this thesis – the main points made in this thesis are highlighted.

**Back to the Theoretical Problem**

Leadership is a phenomenon that has been granted large explanatory power, both in research and in organisations, at the same time as knowledge about leadership has been produced in a way that I constructed as problematic in chapter 2. Let me go through the problematic points I identified there and explain how this thesis addresses them. To be sure, I am not arguing that the proposed analysis is an answer to all concerns we may have regarding leadership theory. Rather, it is an attempt at contributing to developing theory in a way that takes such concerns into consideration.

The first point regarded the narrow focus of leadership theory: researchers have concentrated on effective leadership, intentional influence processes, direct influence, dyadic relations (leader-follower). With such narrow focus, it should be problematic to account for the destiny of large organisations. The understanding I propose does two things in this regard. On the one hand, the focus is widened to include potentially all interactions in an organisation. On the other hand, leadership is also “de-grandiosised” and made into a more ordinary phenomenon; the explanatory power is, in other words, reduced. What is crucial is that leadership is produced
while working, in those same situated interactions that we call work. As described, in discussions about sales statistics, in interactions around a document, in conversations on a warehouse, it is possible to identify two practices that produce clearing for action, that enable relational processes to go on along certain directions.

However, one could argue that my claims in this thesis are still strong: I offer an understanding of how direction is produced, and I too narrow down my focus remarkably, analysing two types of practices. The difference is, as I see it, that I try to be aware of the limitation that the understanding I propose implies and my purpose is to add one understanding, not to replace current ones.

The second point was concerned with the individualised conception of leadership that prevails in the field. Individual leaders are considered as separated from a context that they are supposed to consciously master. Heroes are created – something that is problematic if one considers the social world as characterised by inter-relatedness and complexity. In this thesis, I adopt a more social understanding of leadership – in the sense that leadership is conceptualised as exclusively social phenomenon – and, through a relational perspective, pay more attention to how the social world is a web of relations where individuals are interdependent rather than independent. Leadership as clearing for action means that direction is interactionally produced by making some actions possible and others not. As shown, it is a contested and fragmented construction, in which practices become partially and not necessarily consciously articulated. Thus, the analysis I make does not end up seeing leadership as a shared activity among two or more individuals rather than being confined to the leader – it is not the case of individuals helping each other to lead (as in shared leadership). What I arrive at is putting individuals into the background and focusing on how action is made possible in interactions, for example, when the channelling of emotions and attention constructs issues, work “reality” is expanded in certain directions and not others. It is not much about leadership as a collective (consensual) construction, but leadership as an interactional and practical production.

An individualised conception also leads to the third point I identified: the segregating and hierarchising effect of leadership notions. Leadership discriminates people into subjects and objects, intentional subjects that are able to manipulate lesser objects. This is problematic for a researcher moved by emancipatory interest, as I am. The analysis I make treats all people as subjects, subjects made in relations and interactions. In Hosking’s
words (forthcoming-b), it substitutes a hard self-other differentiation with a soft one, in which selves are interrelated and dialogical. But, as you may have noticed, the interactions reproduced are not instances of democratic situations in which people are constructed as equal. Quite the opposite, gender and seniority are two relevant constructions produced and reproduced, for instance. What becomes interesting is to analyse how segregation may be constructed in the same interactions in which leadership is constructed.

The fourth point was also motivated by an emancipatory interest and concerned the masculinity of the leadership construct. The construct I suggest is not masculine per se; on the contrary, having to do with relationality and interdependence it might be characterised as feminine. But relationality also means that it is possible to study how gender practices intersect with practices producing direction, how such ordering dynamics are intertwined. In other words, gender is still a relevant category in the analysis of leadership even with the proposed understanding of the phenomenon. In organisations apparently espousing ideals of equality, promoting what one could consider postheroic leadership ideals, and having a rather high number of women in managerial roles, it may become even more important to study how gender is performed when leadership is produced. The official discourse does not need to correspond to the gender practiced (cf. Lindgren and Packendorff, 2006; Tienari et al., 2002). As in the case of CleanTech, gender constructions may still play an important role when it comes to producing direction.

Finally, the last point I brought up was the performativity of the leadership construct, which combined with the aspects above mentioned becomes problematic since it disciplines people, allowing only for a limited range of identities. The subversive account that I produced could make “different” interactions understandable in terms of leadership, thus broadening how leadership may be conceptualised and performed. Proposing the idea of leadership as clearing for action means turning the concept upside-down. It means making trivial interaction constructing positions, positionings and issues intelligible in terms of leadership, thus opening up for other performances of leadership than the ones related to heroic masculinity.

Summarising, this thesis contributes to addressing the theoretical problem I sketched in chapter 2 by developing an alternative understanding of leadership which takes such problematic aspects into account and, therefore, by providing a novel reading of leadership in terms of clearing for action produced in practices at work, a reading that might help in adding to
the understanding of the phenomenon and to the questioning and renewing of leadership norms, as well as of how research on leadership is done.

**Back to the Empirical Problem**

Last but not least, let me spend some words on how this work addresses the empirical problem. As I showed at the beginning of this thesis, the phenomenon of leadership may be considered curious due to its status as taken-for-granted at the same time as it is difficult to speak about it. Since it is possible to see the presence of an idealised and individualised idea of what leadership is, it becomes difficult to describe the phenomenon, while it is easier to speak of individual leaders and/or idealised images of goodness. To describe leadership as something that is going on at work everyday is much more difficult. Hopefully, this thesis is a step toward the development of concepts to be used in order to discuss leadership as a phenomenon in which people at work participate. By introducing new ways of thinking of leadership, it is my hope to contribute to opening up for the possibility to interpret leadership at work in new ways. For instance, the concepts of constructing positions and positionings and constructing issues could be discussed with practitioners. This would mean moving from understandings in which positions and issues are given premises to understandings in which they are active and contested achievements. As pointed out, to some extent people already speak in such terms, but they also tend to link that to their organisation being particular. Thus, it would be interesting to see not only if they recognise themselves in what is described, but also how they might be affected by considering what is done in interactions as work and leadership. In other words, practitioners would be provided with means for tracking, analysing and making sense of complex patterns of interactions in terms of leadership and production of direction. And by practitioners I mean all people in an organisation, of course, not just formal leaders. Leadership seminars and education should therefore include more people than managers.

One could argue that after having stressed the non-intentionality of practices it might be contradictory to promote a common reflection around the concepts generated. Of course, having written a thesis, I am not alien to the idea that people might consciously reflect on their experiences; it is just that such an aspect is not what my analysis highlights. Hence, I believe the largest contribution this thesis could make is increasing awareness of
how direction is produced and, at the same time, “de-grandiosise” what leadership is about, thus allowing people to recognise their contribution to the construction of clearing for action outside the boundaries of identities/roles prescribed for leaders and followers. A manager may re-think what happens at work without having to compare her/his actions to those of a masculine hero. A formal subordinate may re-think what happens at work without having to conform to learned helplessness. What kind of talk and action may this lead to? Could it help in understanding how certain processes have developed (or not) in certain directions, for example, by reflecting on how attention and emotions have accumulated to construct (or not) certain issues?

Moreover, given narrations of our world as dynamic and ever-changing, to a larger extent that has been the case for past generations, providing practitioners with less static concepts may help them in making sense of their work and how it develops. Not only that, these concepts may also make sense within similar narrations of our era as the knowledge workers’ era, in which people expects less hierarchical arrangements.

What might be the consequences of an increased awareness of how direction is produced? Such a question would be extremely interesting to study. For instance, what could it mean in terms of responsibility taking by people at work? Would it be possible to construct issues, positioning and positions in a more reflective way? These ideas lean towards other relational understandings of leadership, in which dialogue is suggested as a means for improving how leadership is performed by making it more reflective, inclusionary and collective – and are thus to be studied with different lenses than the one provided in this thesis.

But it would also be interesting to see how such reflections may come into life in everyday interactions and in how the world is engaged. For instance, one could discuss what kind of positions are being constructed in our organisation and what such positions imply in terms of clearing for action. One could, furthermore, observe which talks are initiated by the understanding of positions and positionings as dynamic, as constructed and as sustaining action. Since language is performative, what would such conceptions of leadership do with work?
So What?

Leadership is a phenomenon deemed important. At the same time, frustration seems to be a constant companion of discussion on leadership, whether it is scholars arguing about contradictions and/or problematic aspects, or practitioners bothered by failures or delusions. What seems to be taken for granted over the boundaries of theoretical streams and over the boundary to practitioners’ world is the need for direction. Without direction it is not possible to go on acting in coordinated and meaningful ways. Such a need is translated into other assumptions. Most often, it is that we need an individual providing us with direction and that emergent forms of organising are, at best, something that may play a role and needs to be managed, in order not to interfere with the direction the individual leader works on. As discussed, such a reduction of the phenomenon to individuals may be constructed as problematic and has been contested. The individual having been loaded with increasing importance and an aura of extraordinariness, challenging the meaningfulness of the concept of leadership itself becomes more legitimate. For many people it may be easy to recognise that a truly transformational leader and their manager are two quite different persons; not least managers themselves may feel the burden of such incongruence. What I want to argue is that such arguments do not need to lead to treating leadership as a non-phenomenon – or to treating leadership as mere aspects of managers’ identity constructions (on the part of themselves or of followers). Rather, I propose another way, building on similar research interested in studying the organisation-in-action. Instead of taking for granted that there are too many possible courses of action and that the leader is needed in order to limit them – or on the contrary that inertia is the normal status and the leader is needed in order to promote action –, the researcher could assume that the possibility for action cannot be taken for granted; rather, it is something that people have to work on in order to construct it. Thus, leadership has to do with micro-grained production of clearing for action, an effort necessary in order to go on acting in a fluid and changing world. Leadership is therefore an utterly interesting and important phenomenon. It enables us to understand how action is socially sustained. Thus, whether we conceptualise organising as becoming or we talk about our world as changing at an increasing higher pace, the concept of clearing for action would provide us with a meaningful way of understanding and of discussing how direction is produced. Leadership may thus become something relevant to each of us as a phenomenon, rather than as an abstract con-
struct having more or less to do with what we experience. A deeper understanding of how clearings for action are produced should be important and meaningful. This thesis provides just the beginning of it, by singling out two practices, but there are certainly more practices in which clearing for action is produced. Today such dynamics are mostly black-boxed, which is even more curious considering that we all participate in such achievements, while few of us are formal leaders. It is in the ordinariness of such productions that we can learn more about how organising is directed. Not only that, we can also learn more about how other ordering practices interact with those producing direction. The concept of clearing for action allows such dynamics to be taken into consideration through another form of analysis compared to more traditional analysis of leadership and, for instance, gender.

On another level, this thesis provides clearing for action in this sense.


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