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Towards process studies of project leadership

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0. Abstract

In this paper, we draw on current research in the general field of leadership studies in order to suggest that process perspectives are relevant and rewarding for inquiry into project leadership. Departing from a process ontology we argue that project leadership can be studied as series of social activities and events in which actors, projects and organizational contexts are all in constant an mutually interacting flux, rather than as traits, styles and competences of individual project managers. From such a perspective, project leadership is seen as the ongoing social production of direction through construction and re-construction of actors' space of action. This involves processes of continuous construction and re-construction of (1) past project activities and events, (2) positions and areas of responsibility related to the project, (3) discarded, ongoing and future issues to be dealt with in the project, and (4) temporal rhythm and pace. Drawing on an in-depth ethnographic case study of an organizational change project, we show how the space of action and hence the

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direction of the project is in constant flux and becoming. This way of analyzing project processes thus offers an alternative way of understanding project leadership beyond institutionalized Project Management notions of unitary command, linearity, formal planning and entitative notions of projects.

1. Introduction

Within general leadership research there is a growing critical debate on the tradition to study leadership in terms of solitary (extraordinary) individuals. Recent literature suggests that attention should instead be directed towards leadership processes and practices (cf Knights and Willmott, 1992, Dachler and Hosking, 1995, Crevani et al, 2010, Denis et al, 2010, Larsson and Lundholm, 2010, Raelin, 2011; Denis et al, 2012). Such a view presupposes that leadership is emerging in social interaction, and that traditional leader-follower distinctions should be problematised. What all these contributions have in common is the effort of bringing the “-ship” back in leadership studies (Grint, 2005), thereby paying attention to the interactional and social aspects of the phenomenon. Such a movement is born out of dissatisfaction with and/or criticism to what leadership studies have accomplished and parallels the growing interest in process perspectives in organization studies at large - referring to a worldview that sees processes as the basic forms of reality, thus depriving substances and entities of the ontological priority usually given to them (Hernes and Maitlis, 2010).

The basic reason behind the dominating view that ‘leadership’ is to be found in the qualities and the doings of individual leaders is the modernist notion of stable, distinct material entities as building blocks of reality and hence objects of scholarly inquiry. Such an ontology of being (Chia, 1995) leads us to search for concreteness in any abstract phenomenon – a search that may well result in “misplaced concreteness” in Whitehead’s terms – i.e. that we end up having “mistaken our abstractions for concrete realities” (Whitehead 1985, p 69 as cited in Chia, 1995). Hence, when we perform research on organisations, individuals, technologies – or indeed projects - we forget that these are categories that are applied and re-applied to the world in order to make it ordered (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Hernes, 2008),

not autonomous entities themselves. They exist only as reified abstractions (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2007) produced in order to make sense of a fluid and dense world – and can therefore be discussed, challenged and rejected. The same goes for the abstract notion of ‘leadership’.

Process organisation studies in general take the fluidity, interrelatedness and complexity of life and work into consideration. Some of them employ what we call a *process perspective* by which the world is still seen as consisting of stable, enduring entities that have qualities that change over time (Langley et al, 2013). In leadership studies, this would e.g. imply studies of how leaders develop and learn over time or how leader-follower interaction patterns change in the course of organisational renewal. The limitation of the process perspective is that it still tends to sustain the ‘misplaced concreteness’ of leadership into individual leaders, and that alternative notions of the phenomenon are mobilised out of the picture. In this paper we will instead depart from a *process ontology*, i.e. that

...“the world itself is viewed fundamentally as made up of processes rather than things. In this view, entities (such as organizations and structures) are no more than temporary instantiations of ongoing processes, continually in a state of becoming...”
(Langley et al, 2013: 5)

In this paper we apply the process ontology in the study of project leadership and we talk of ‘leadership work’ rather than ‘leadership’, a concept that more clearly refers to an ongoing achievement. Scholarly inquiry into leadership work in project settings tends to be hampered by the same limitations as much general leadership research. Most of this research builds on well-established theoretical schools in leadership studies such as situational, transformative, authentic and charismatic leadership, applying them to projects and project-based settings in order to construct theoretical links between leader characteristics and project outcomes (see for example the extensive overview in Turner and Müller, 2005, 2006). Thereby, current research reproduce traditional leader-centric notions of individualism, heroism, masculinism, specific competencies and unitary command – without reflecting upon the ensuing image of project leadership as exercised by a strong, single, heroic, omnipotent project manager, surrounded by followers not taking part in the management of the project (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009, 2011). By making the abstract

phenomenon of project leadership concrete through such personae (cf Wood, 2005), important aspects of project leadership are ignored or even defined as irrelevant. Instead of studying how leadership is practiced in everyday work, researchers become preoccupied with the characteristics of the individuals who have been formally assigned project manager responsibilities. Moreover, the dynamics and fluidity of project leadership practices over time is usually overlooked, in favor of approaches focusing on snapshot images of project managers' abilities and competencies.

In this paper we thus suggest that a process ontology applied to project leadership studies can enable researchers in the field to gain new insights into leadership work in project-based settings. With some exceptions (cf Cicmil et al, 2006; Linehan and Kavanagh, 2006; Söderlund et al, 2008; Maaninen-Olsson, and Müllern, 2009; Blomquist et al, 2010; Sergi, 2012), the process perspective is new to studies of project management in general and project leadership in specific. Departing from a growing strand of process studies in general leadership research, we will in this paper inquire into methodological, theoretical and practical consequences of such a perspective as applied to project leadership.

The paper is organized as follows. Initially we discuss the theoretical implications of a process ontology as applied to project leadership, outlining an analytical framework in which the ongoing construction of action space and project direction is seen as involving constructions of project stories-so-far, positions, issues and temporal rhythm. We then apply the framework to a process study of an organizational change project in which a U.S. management control regulation is implemented in a Swedish subsidiary of a multinational chemical firm. The paper is concluded by a discussion on the consequences of such a framework.

2. Towards process studies of project leadership work

2.1 Leadership studies: Towards process studies

The field of leadership studies has traditionally been leader-centered, i.e. focused on the individual leader and his/her traits, abilities and actions. This was part of the modernist thought informing management sciences during the early 20th century, where the best leaders were to be identified and chosen out from their suitability and formal merits rather than from pre-modern bases such as kinship or charisma. The problem was still to determine what constituted a suitable leader, and this question gave rise to a series of different theoretical schools (cf the overview in Parry & Bryman, 2006).

One stream of thought was psychological, trying to identify personality traits that distinguished successful leaders from other people. Against this, others claimed that leadership was about interaction between leaders and followers, and that different interaction styles (e.g. autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire) implied different group atmospheres and hence different group productivity levels. Another stream of research instead advocated a situational perspective, according to which leaders are only effective if they adapt their style to the situation at hand; very simple or very complicated situations are best handled through task-oriented leadership, while most other situations are better handled through socio-emotional leadership styles. The situational perspective became very influential, but it has also been subject to recent criticism for focusing too much on the leader and not enough on the group interaction.

Under the diverse heading *The New Leadership Approach*, Parry & Bryman (2006) argue that several current streams of thought present a perspective on leadership as the articulation of visions and management of meaning. It is today often emphasised that the leader is a member of a group, albeit with specific possibilities to influence the group, and that leadership is actually a series of interaction processes where leaders inspire followers by creating common meaningful images of the future. Central to the argumentation is the distinction between transactional and transformative leadership, i.e. the difference between leadership as a contractual relationship between leaders and followers and as a social

relationship where the aspirations of followers are raised to those of the leaders themselves. For example, the old concept of charisma has been revisited from this perspective, and new concepts such as authentic leadership has been suggested to overcome the risk of manipulation inherent in the transformative ideal.

During recent years, there has been an emerging debate in the field of leadership studies on what has been called post-heroic leadership (cf Fletcher, 2004; Crevani et al, 2007), a debate emphasizing leadership as a collective activity rather than as the doings of formal leaders. From a scholarly perspective, the post-heroic perspective thus points at the need to study leadership in terms of activities rather than individuals – i.e. viewing leadership as something that is co-constructed in a team rather than exercised by one single person (Gronn, 2002, Uhl-Bien, 2006). To advance such a perspective, it is not enough to say that leadership is about interaction between leaders and followers – which is a stance taken by several scholars in the past, a stance actually often maintaining rather than dissolving the leader/follower distinction (Collinson, 2006). If we want to take leadership research beyond the leader-centered heroic tradition, we must also try to redefine leadership into terms of activities in between people in interaction, and study what is being accomplished in that interaction without becoming preoccupied with what formal leaders do and think.

2.2 Project leadership work within a process ontology

If we attend to generally accepted definitions of leadership, it is actually most often defined in terms of processes and of a social, rather than individual, matter. The following quote is an example of the conceptualization of leadership in terms of processes of social influence which is at the base of most leadership studies:

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)

Moving from definitions to actual empirical studies, scholars often turn to individuals, though, and leadership becomes an individual matter as previously discussed. Frustration with such a lack of attention to the processual nature of the phenomenon and with the

narrow study of leadership as an individual matter has lead scholars to trying to more thoroughly articulate leadership work in terms of processes. For example, Barker holds that leadership is a continuous social process (Barker, 2001) and studying it as a series of finite events is an error based on the taken-for-granted assumption of cause-effect relationships. 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). 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. Hence, 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).

Several recent streams of leadership research explicitly or implicitly adopt a process perspective. One such stream of contributions has been gathered under the label Relational Leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006) – joining a number of perspectives or models having a common interest in leadership as social processes of relating instead of primarily focusing on leadership effectiveness. Moreover, the idea of leadership as practice has also informed empirical studies that contribute to processual understandings by conceptualising leadership as socially constituted and as a negotiation process regarding interpretative schemes (Knights and Willmott, 1992), by examining in a fine-graded manner micro-levels activities and their effects (Denis et al, 2010), by highlighting the time dimension when accomplishing work (Holmberg and Tyrstrup, 2010), by trying to perform leadership development programs promoting leaderful practice (Raelin, 2010) or taking into consideration everyday actions as leadership and seeing individuals as “fields of relationships” (Carroll et al, 2008), and by analysing leadership as stretched over leaders, followers and the material and symbolic artefacts in the situation (Spillane et al, 2004).

Hence, leadership studies have gradually shown increased interest in ideas of processes, practices and performances. Scholars have shown how it is possible and mostly relevant to study leadership as ongoing processes, involving a number of people and taking place while doing work. However, most studies rely on a “soft” process perspective in which leadership is still seen as the result of intentional action and the notion of process mainly signifies a longitudinal research ambition. Therefore, in this paper we aim to add to these studies by assuming a process ontology in which actors and reified projects are granted no primacy and in which the central focus are the interactions going on at work and what they achieve.

The process ontology implies a number of re-positionings in the study of project leadership (cf Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009). First, project leadership should be studied as activities emerging in the social interaction in the project team, acknowledging the leadership work done also by other team members and opening up empirical inquiry for a multitude of potentially differing views of the same processes (Crevani et al, 2010). Second, leadership work should be studied in terms of the everyday activities that constitute project leadership (Cicmil et al, 2006; Blomquist et al, 2010; Sergi, 2012). It implies acknowledging mundane, collective and ambiguous aspects of leadership, instead of the current preoccupation with heroic actions and linear relationships between intentions, interventions and performance. Third, focus should be on interaction processes as such rather than on in which formal organizational unit they unfold (Blomquist et al, 2010). This implies an ontological and epistemological view of projects as constantly ‘becoming’ in social interaction, where scripts, standards and formal organizational boundaries are treated as aspects of organizing rather than as given entities and facts (Crevani, 2011; Sergi, 2012).

2.3 Studying project leadership work with a process ontology

Studying processes often means paying attention to the actual practices and how work is performed (cf Barley and Kunda, 2001). This means researching leadership as a “lived” experience rather than a “reported” experience in interviews (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Alvesson, 1996), which also allows paying attention to the context in which the phenomenon takes place (and which the phenomenon reconstructs) and to potential contradictions and

ambiguities. Ethnography-inspired approaches are thus suitable for such endeavours (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2003). 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 and exploring the nature of a social phenomenon over time/ space (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). The focus on instances of work draws, therefore, from the ethnomethodologically informed perspective in ethnography (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994), which focuses on everyday accomplishments that sustain social life, although the prolonged observations of workdays at the organisations add an interpretative dimension (Vine et al., 2008). This rather common approach in the study of organisations is rarely used when studying leadership, given the rather scarce interest in studying practices in this field (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010).

One may of course ask what empirical circumstances that could form the basis for a developed understanding of project leadership from a process perspective. If we are to study leadership in terms of processes, practices and social interactions – instead of in terms of individuals, competencies and reified organizational units – what will we focus our empirical fieldwork on?

Gronn (2002) proposes the study of ‘concertive actions’ such as spontaneous collaboration patterns, intuitive understandings that emerge between colleagues, and institutional arrangements supporting self-managed teams and other formal practices. Drath et al. (2008) claim the need for an ‘integrative ontology’ of leadership, in which the three basic concrete entities of traditional leadership research (leaders, followers and shared goals) need to be replaced by an alternative ‘DAC ontology’ where empirical inquiry is focused on the outcomes of leadership – Direction, Alignment and Commitment. Crevani et al. (2010) and Lindgren et al (2011) appreciate both these suggestions, although remarking that notions of ‘outcomes’ are problematic given that leadership is analysed in terms of interactions and processes – maintaining that the DAC ontology tend to focus on converging processes of leadership, thereby emphasizing the common and the collective while ignoring possibly diverging arguments, interpretations and decisions of all involved parties. In this paper we thus use the concept of *direction* as a core feature of leadership processes (construction of direction in the ongoing organizing processes), which is produced through an ongoing

construction of space of action (i.e. construction of possibilities, potentials, opportunities and limitations for individual and collective action within the local-cultural organizational context, cf Holmer-Nadesan, 1996).

Given the fluidity of leadership work conceptualized through the lenses of a process ontology, there may be a number of aspects to be taken into consideration in order to study how project direction is constantly being produced as action-spacing take form. Direction should not be considered as a linear feature of organizing, but rather as an organic shaping of how organizing processes are taking form and towards what such shaping is heading. Thus, direction is accomplished both by retrospectively stabilizing the meaning of what has happened, as the sensemaking literature maintains (cf Weick, 1995; Maitlis, 2005), and by shaping the premises on which to go on acting (Gergen, 2010; Crevani, 2011; 2012).

In this paper, we build on such ideas and focus on four dimensions, which together enable us to follow the ongoing production of project direction. These are: the story-so-far, positions, issues, rhythm. Direction has, in fact, to do with sustaining possibility for ongoing collective action within certain constraints that direct it. Collective action that may be more or less intentional, and that may therefore be understood as based in a retrospective process of interactional construction of the '*story-so-far*' (the ground on which to build), but also in the ongoing production of '*positions*' and '*issues*', that may be considered as important 'bricks' in the construction of the project and its direction, a process of construction enacted with/through a certain *rhythm*. Rhythm is important in order to study processes of becoming and it is not necessarily about identical repetition in time, rather it allows for 'beginning again', for returning but differently. As mentioned, other dimensions could be studied as well, but we focus on these four that help us analysing leadership work in terms of production of direction over time by paying attention to how the present 'now' includes the past and premises for the future.

Story-so-far	Positions	Issues	Rhythm
The ongoing production of a rationalised narrative of the project and the path leading up to the current situation.	What kind of tasks one is supposed to work with and what kind of person one is supposed to be, aspects often treated separately even though they are tightly intertwined in practice (Crevani, 2011)	Questions that are produced as getting organisational attention and emotional focus (Crevani, 2011; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2011)	Movement and difference in repetition (Lefebvre, 1992/2004). In this paper, rhythm is thus treated as the frequency and intensity with which project work 'returns' to and is enacted in the work of the people studied.

Table 1: Analytical dimensions in the study of project leadership processes

3. A process ethnography: Leadership work in the SOX-404 project

This case study (earlier reported in Lindgren et al, 2011) presents a project process in a national subsidiary (ChemCorp Sweden) struggling to redesign their systems of internal control in accordance with instructions received from the board of management of the multinational chemical manufacturer ChemCorp. In 2002 the U.S. congress passed the 'Sarbanes Oxley Act' (SOX), which was the governmental reaction to recent corporate accounting scandals (e.g. Enron and World Com). The main focus of the debate was the SOX section 404, which forced US-registered companies to assure that they sustained a sufficient system of internal control. When ChemCorp management understood that the company would have to comply with the Sarbanes-Oxley Act they initiated what was to be known as the 'SOX-404 Project'.

The project was led by a steering committee and a project management team working at the ChemCorp headquarters. The project management team provided direction to the 15 local business unit projects (of which ChemCorp Sweden was involved in one). Most of the work took place at the local level, involving operative and administrative staff, supported by ChemCorp's external auditing firm and monitored by the internal audit department. In short, the local work implied creating and documenting secure control systems for all sorts of transactions and data processing in the daily operations. The business units had to assure

that 70 % of their business was assessed and they also had to follow a general time plan expressed in a series of milestones with deadlines.

The empirical base of the study is the observations, interviews and readings carried out by a research assistant during a four month period in 2005 in ChemCorp Sweden, and the findings are here presented as excerpts from an underlying ‘thick description’. The researcher worked full-time at the headquarters of ChemCorp Sweden and participated in meetings as well as the daily work related to the SOX-404 Project, and documented his data through daily field notes, transcripts of formal and formal interviews, and the collection of emails and documents related to the implementation of the project. The project process was then summarised into seven distinctive “now”, i.e. a series of points in time in which it was possible for us to trace significant re-constructions in one or more of the four analytical dimensions. The person gallery in Table 2 involves the most frequently named persons.

Position	Explanation
Accounting manager/LF Point	Second ranking manager in the financial department. She is also Local Focal Point (LF Point) and thus project leader with responsibility for practical implementation.
Business Unit Focal Point	Business unit accounting manager. Not employed in ChemCorp Sweden but frequently consulted for advice.
Financial manager	Head of the financial department, also Nordic Controller for several ChemCorp subsidiaries.
Human Resources Manager	HR manager, also working part time for business unit management.
IT Manager	Head of the IT department which is running their own SOX-404 project. Also involved in the general SOX-404 project as his department runs the internal enterprise business system.
IT SOX contact person	The SOX contact person in the IT department
Logistic and Planning (L&P) Manager	Head of logistics and responsible for the K-town warehouse unit.
Sales and Marketing (S&M) Director	Formal head of ChemCorp Sweden, also Nordic coordinator of other Nordic sales divisions.
Sales Manager	Manager not involved in the SOX-404 project as the S&M Director handles SOX-business which concerns the sales department
Warehouse manager	Second-ranked manager in K-town and responsible for the day to day activities in the warehouse and customer service department.
SOX-Assistant	The observer/research assistant. Assists the LF Point on a temporary basis as a part of an ongoing research project.

Table 2. Respondents referred to in the empirical material.

3.1 Space of action in Now 1 (May-June, project initiation):

The core actors in ChemCorp Sweden start their work in May 2005, on the basis of their experiences from the previous year when a so called “dry run” was made by the Accounting manager and the Financial manager. They understand the basic aims and methodologies of the work that is ahead of them, but they also fear that some of the mistakes might be repeated. The Financial manager clearly expresses these concerns:

“We have been carrying out this project in several steps, we begun with this work already in 2004 and that year I was Local Focal Point. I and the Accounting manager had to do the work ourselves, we were on our own. The project managers, neither they were really sure what they wanted to accomplish...the premises kept changing, and the project ended up in a big nothing while we ended up doing things in a manner that we were not supposed to. Also this year everything is uncertain, it is very hard to predict where it is all going to end” (Financial Manager, Int. 2)

The project team is created and the cycle owners – managers responsible for various administrative processes such as “Orders to cash”, “IT Controls” and “Local pensions” – are allotted their different business cycle responsibilities. A time plan is created on the basis of instructions from the headquarters, including three major phases:

- The design-phase (document processes, document key risks/controls, establish action plans) is to be finished the 23rd of September 2005
- The test-phase (establish test plans, perform tests) is to finish the 10th of October 2005
- Finish the project, close action plans and ‘sign off’ latest December 15th. 2005.

In terms of our four theoretical dimensions, the construction of action space and direction at this stage can be formulated as follows:

Construction of story-so-far	Positions	Issues	Rhythm
Talk of last year 'test run' as inconclusive. They did the wrong things and nothing happened. Everything was uncertain. Also, the 'test' was carried out mostly by two persons (LFpoint and accounting manager) while the rest of the organization was not included.	Positions of certain managers and directors is being re-shaped by including a new task: they will become cycle owners and they will be given responsibility and accountability for working with the project in their respective business cycle. The new task is mostly not prioritized since the managers put more attention to their usual tasks.	Operative work issues are the priority. Business cycles are new issues, still not prioritized, and have been assigned from distant upper management. Project starts to become an issue, something that will require attention, and is constructed in terms of something they have to do in order to just pass the audit with the least amount of effort possible.	Slow and restrained, distant deadlines and more pressing issues to deal with in the operative activities. Deadlines: to design 23 september, test 10 october, finish 15 december

Table 3: Project process characteristics in 'now 1'

3.2 Space of action now 2 (mid August, starting the design phase):

It is not until after the 2005 summer holidays (mid August) that the SOX-404 project work is accelerated in ChemCorp Sweden. Although the project has been discussed since June (in various informal forums), no cycle owner has actually begun the tangible work connected to the design-phase. The design-phase is to be finished in about one month (23rd of September) and before then a lot has to be done. Each cycle owner faces a series of detailed investigations and mappings of all administrative processes and controls within their business cycle. At a first glimpse the work connected to the design-phase may not seem impossible to accomplish. However, the narratives require some serious efforts as they often must describe activities performed in different locations and by different people. Also, to review the different inherent risks in each process turns out to be very time consuming. As the cycle owners also have regular managerial responsibilities, they experience growing time pressure in their daily work. The L&P Manager (the only cycle owner, besides the LF Point, who has now started with the 'real work'), wonders how the organization is to find time for this project:

“If there was time for these types of projects you could wonder what the personnel were doing other times of the year” (L&P Manager, Ob: 18th August).

To push the project forward the LF Point announces a meeting around the 9th of September and also stress that until then cycle owners must have done some progress with their work. As the days goes by the cycle owners gets more and more irritated, reflecting over how the project must be squeezed in between the normal activities, and on behalf of the operative activities:

“From the morning to the evening, my most important task is to develop the business and the organization. I do this as effectively, and with as few persons, as possible and this signify that when something like this comes around it collides with the normal activities. It is something which acquires time and must be done in evenings and Sundays.” (S&M Director, Int.01)

In terms of the four theoretical dimensions, this “now” can be analysed as follows:

Construction of story-so-far	Positions	Issues	Rhythm
Underestimation of the amount of work and how time-consuming it is. Involvement of several people in each business cycle and coordination among them may be a possible major issue.	A number of positions are re-shaped. The headquarters in Holland is constructed as too rigid and the DCI management as ambiguous. The position of the cycle owners is increasingly more ambiguous and subject to negotiation. Boundaries between the positions of cycle owners and IT people are also under construction: neither of them wants to take responsibility for two tasks that have emerged in the work so far, base-lining and segregation of duties	Operative questions such as next-year budget still channel most attention and energy. Main focus of attention and emotions in the project is how to translate the requirements provided centrally to the local context. Two contested issues also emerge as a consequence of the requirements from the project: base-lining and segregation of duties. No agreement is reached on how to work with them (between the IT and the entity) and the question is postponed.	Slow but increasing towards the end of the month. One meeting scheduled for September 9 th in order to push the managers. Same deadlines.

Table 4: Project process characteristics in 'now 2'

3.3 Space of action now 3 (September, changes in the project plan)

The 14th of September it is time for a long-wanted project meeting including all ChemCorp Sweden cycle owners and some other relevant managers. It is getting more and more evident that the company will have to perform several changes in the existing processes and activities in order to comply with the SOX-requirements. There are several changes to be discussed, but the major ones concern invoices, credit invoices, handling of pricelists, customer credit limits and customer ordering.

The day after the meeting the S&M Director steps in and creates a proper schedule specifying dates for when the different business cycles must be finished and also who is responsible for performing each and every walk-through. When he makes the different phone calls no one objects to the new timetable, in which the main milestones are now postponed:

5th October: deadline for completing the assessment of the design.

Sign off of design should be possible.

15th November: preliminary deadline for completing test plans.

31st December: action plans (with high risks finalized)

31st January (2006): assessment of operating effectiveness finalized.

Besides pushing all the dates forward the requirements concerning the testing seems unclear and causes some confusion. Rumours say that people in other Chemcorp subsidiaries abroad are also troubled with the project, and that there is some confusion. Also an e-mail from colleague in Germany confirms this:

“I think we all know about the workload connected to SOX. All departments here are only working with SOX, all reasonable activities are stopped. We are in the middle of the process and still so many things are not clear and as soon as you have taken one step you get new information how it should have been done... Never have I seen so

many people demotivated, the most quiet managers are getting very impatient... I think it is time that we all together canalize the work to be done in this project. Someone has to stop this insanity (I don't mean the fact that we have to do it, but the way we are doing it)." (Manager in German entity, E-mail 15th September 2005)

Also the LF point reflects over the Design-Phase:

"There are constantly new things. They send an example, but later, perhaps some project group in Holland, find a new way to do it and then it is not properly communicated." (LF point, Int.03)

This "now" in the project can be analysed as follows from our four theoretical dimensions:

Construction of story-so-far	Positions	Issues	Rhythm
The project has become 'real' and there is an increasing awareness of the scope of the changes that will need to be made.	Two groups begin to shape: onw who talk of the changes as necessary, and one who resist, basing their criticism on uncertainty, and meaninglessness of the project. Thus, both groups focus on the 'task' side of their own positions, the ones accepting the change, the others refusing it.	Attention is increasingly channelled and discussions focus on the changes to be made in existing processes and activities. It is still contested how much effort should be put into this. Another issue taking shape is the testing: it seems unclear how the testing will be done and where it will be done.	Accelerated and hectic in the near future, in particular when cycle owners understand that a walk-through has to be performed before 23 september. Slowing down in the distant future since deadlines are now again being postponed.

Table 5: Project process characteristics in 'now 3'

3.4 Space of action now 4 (October, initiating action plan work)

During the first weeks of October the SOX-404 project is unofficially put on hold. Several other duties have been set aside during the last month and the managers wish to catch up. There is also a dislike for starting up again. There is however an out-spoken consensus that everything which the organization has promised to deal with must be carried out:

“It is of course my responsibility to see this as positive and constructive as possible...it will probably be confirmed, that the reviews which we have performed have helped us identify problems and some malfunctioning procedures which now must be assessed. (S&M-Manager, Int.1)

The action plans, which were worked out during the design-phase, are many times very general and more orientated to what it is to be accomplished, than actually stating how this is to be done. There are over 60 inherent risks which will require some sort of assessment, but as stated earlier several of these inherent risks share the same action plan. While there are people assigned to each and every action plan there is still no major coordination, or communication, between the managers clarifying how the action plans are to be carried out. The managers are also having problems with persuading the organization to implement eventual changes.

“Today the sales representatives had a conference, and they were also forced to listen to a presentation regarding the SOX-404 project, and the eventual changes it may signify. Especially the question regarding how they communicate prices to the order department arose some debate. They will not accept to send every change (in product prices) in written form; they consider this to be work for the order department. They were all polite, but it was quite clear that they would be opposed to changes that would signify more administrative work for them. Their flexibility is very important for them.” (Ob. 26th October)

To get the work done LF Point calls for a meeting that will involve several managers, and should serve to clarify responsibilities and how the project is to proceed. The meeting is scheduled for the 8th and 9th of November. During the rest of October the project is not given priority. There is however still much discussion, and reflection, concerning the project. Cycle owners and other managers wish to explain why the project is backbreaking and several emphasise that the Swedish culture is very ‘different’:

“Most people are not very happy about this, it is not Swedish mentality...we do not feel that we need this. We do not need to be controlled because we already work this way. We do not feel that we need the extra controls... of course this can give signify

that we improve some routines, but it is control of control; a bit 1984.” (Warehouse Manager, Int.08)

Analysed from the four theoretical dimensions, the construction of space of action and direction at this stage of the project can be analysed in this way:

Construction of project path	Positions	Issues	Rhythm
The project so far has been exhausting and therefore a pause is needed, October is a 'dead month'. At the same time, there is also a feeling of commitment taking shape: last year no one implemented what they had promised, this year the action plans have to be implemented.	New boundaries need to be re-shaped, for example between sales representatives and order department (who is to carry out additional administrative work?). In this case, it is not only a question of tasks, the actual work to be done, but also of identity, the sales work being constructed as flexible and not administrative.	The changes prescribed in the action plans are no longer only project teams' preoccupation, since more and more people realize that they will be affected. The new procedures are increasingly constructed in terms of a stricter form of top-down control, which is not compatible with the local culture.	Very calm after the hectic rhythm in September. Same deadlines as before plus meeting on 8 and 9 november in order to discuss responsibilities and boundaries between positions.

Table 6: Project process characteristics in 'now 4'

3.5 Space of action now 5 (November, from action plans to action)

A project meeting to structure the action plans and coordinate the efforts is held the 9th of November. The day before the LF Point, and her SOX assistant, has produced a draft where a few possible solutions are suggested. Even though a few action plans (involving only one person or department) have been dealt with, the major action plans are still unattended.

“The different Action-Plans are discussed. The Financial Manager emphasise that the organization can no longer push important changes ahead. He declares that this is a matter of attitude, bad attitude, and that the problems identified are important regardless of SOX. After this the different action plans are discussed in detail, but the discussion revolves around why it is so hard to implement the suggested solutions. The Warehouse Manager is clearly disturbed and cannot see any practical reason for

documenting various things only to satisfy SOX. [...] When the S&M-Director arrives it is agreed that the company will probably have to hire a new person who will perform some sensitive tasks which must be separated from other employees.”(Ob. 9th of November)

The meeting can not be considered a breakthrough. Even though several things are discussed, and some solutions are approved, the meeting does not result in any increased communication between managers regarding the project. There is neither enthusiasm nor any surprising solutions. The result is that some things will be looked over and other things investigated. At this stage, the construction of action space and direction in the project can be analysed as follows:

Construction of project path	Positions	Issues	Rhythm
People make sense of the control aspect in terms of absurdity: you will have to produce documents to control the control etc. Also, some people feel increased urgency to implement the changes, while others see that as a meaningless effort and consider the audit as document to build further work on.	One new position is created as an external person is to be hired to perform sensitive tasks	Dreaded test-plans ‘disappear’, attention/emotions are no longer channelled on this issue which makes it ‘fade away’, resulting in postponement of deadlines several times. Other issues are still channelling attention and emotions: action plans, base-lining and segregations. They are further discussed without any resulting agreement.	Test plan deadline postponed several times ending up ‘disappearing’. The general rhythm remains slow, with some major meetings not leading to any movement, rather people seem to have got stuck: positions and issues are reconstructed in similar contested terms as before.

Table 7: Project process characteristics in ‘now 5’

3.6 Space of action now 6 (November, internal audit)

While the ‘action plan meeting’ may have been a disappointment there are however other things which call for attention from the project team. It is now clear that internal audit will investigate the work done during the design-phase and will arrive the 16th November. The auditors arrive Monday the 21st of November. They intend to stay a week and besides

performing an audit on the SOX-404 design-phase, they also plan to investigate some other operations connected to sales:

“Two ladies arrive after lunch. The Financial Manager and LF Point sit down with them and the auditors declare that they will need a few hours with each cycle owner to go through the work done on the different Business Cycles. They also announce that they will write a report commenting on the work done, but it is not certain how this report is to be disposed. Probably they will not be very critical as they have just failed three other entities, and their managers have now asked them to try to help out, instead of just failing. Actually the auditors do not seem sure about what they are here to do.”
(Ob. 21st August)

During a final meeting the 28th the auditors leave a report stating the errors they have found. There are over 100 errors, but mostly of formal character assessing how some formulations are not appropriate. They also note that there are several action plans which must be carried out, and Chemcorp managers promise that this will be done. At this stage, the following analysis can be made from our four theoretical dimensions:

Construction of project path	Positions	Issues	Rhythm
Increased talk of how the communication between the managers is not working, causing the issues not to be resolved. There is also curiosity about the upcoming internal audit.	Two internal auditors enter the scene (they have the task to control the work and maybe help out, but seem unsure themselves how). The auditors try to construct themselves as the link between the business units and the entities, thus in a less threatening and more constructive way. ChemCorp centrally is again constructed as in conflict with the Swedish subsidiary.	Internal audit is the central issue and happens through a number of meetings. Base-lining emerges again as unresolved issue; requires an action plan, even though they admit that what base-lining is is still unclear and cannot be specified at the moment.	Crescendo up to the audit week, which is full of meetings and discussions, then slowing down once more.

Table 8: Project process characteristics in 'now 6'

3.7 Space of action now 7 (December, audit report and Christmas preparations)

It is now mid December and the Christmas holidays are coming up. Internal Audit has performed their assessment of the design and the questions regarding base-lining and segregation of duties will be pushed into the next year. The 12th of December is marked for carrying out some action plans in Kristinehamn, but due to some unfortunate breakdowns in the computers systems, this is not carried out. The Kristinehamn organization is also quite sceptic to the suggested changes. They still can not see the point of documenting and filing information which has already been entered into the computer systems.

A draft of the internal audit report arrives the 16th of December. The details of this report are confidential, but in general audit is very positive to the attitudes in ChemCorp Sweden and the widespread understanding for the need to improve. During an interview one of the internal auditors remarks:

“Much of the things which we discover are very simple errors. People have not understood how to use the GRMT, others have misinterpreted the risks, or have not assigned the proper controls... ...some more guidance maybe would have been necessary. If you give people free hands you must follow up, regularly, that people are on the right track. The business unit have understood how to do this, but to facilitate communication [between them and the entities] is here a key issue. In general: you must educate people and then follow up that they have understood.” (Internal Auditor, Int. 10)

The SOX-404 project is now several months late and nobody knows exactly when it can be expected to end. This empirical study thus ends with a final quote from the head of ChemCorp Sweden:

“The normal operations run every day, and we are here to reach some certain goals. It has been very hard, for anyone, to see how this will help the organization reach these goals... ... However, in a few years we will probably be able to look back upon this and say: ‘Some good thing came from this project, now we do things this way and it works alright’” (S&M-Manager, Int.1)

This final “now” of our empirical study can be analysed as follows:

Construction of project path	Positions	Issues	Rhythm
The common meaning given to the project so far is that ‘this experience was very hard and it is difficult to know how these changes improve our operations, but in a few years we will probably have more perspective and see the advantages’.	With regards to this project, the same aspects of the different positions are re-established	The audit and its outcomes are a central question. The preliminary draft is somewhat positive, criticism is directed mostly to minor questions. The still open issues of base-lining and segregation are further postponed.	Solving base-lining and segregations is postponed until next year, some action plans were scheduled to be carried out but was then postponed given IT system failure during those same days.

Table 9: Project process characteristics in ‘now 7’

The empirical study ends here and therefore we are not able to further follow the constructions of spaces of action. However, this rich empirical material allows us to discuss a number of questions.

4. Discussion

We do not want to argue that the project could have been planned in a better way and that the problem is that the people are not following the plan. What we want to argue is that by assuming a process ontology we can see that such a hypothetical better plan would be not so useful since it is ‘reality itself’ that changes as the project takes form and is carried out.

By referring to the concept of space of action and analysing four dimensions that characterize it, we can see that the space of action that is interactionally constructed takes new shapes as the project goes on, and influences the direction in which the project is further enacted. At each moment, the space of action that is constructed contains the premises for coming actions and talks, but does not determine them completely. What is meaningful, what is urgent, what is possible, what is engaging change as time goes. Rather

than looking at people moving from one defined stage in a linear process to the next one, we are looking at people interacting with each other and interactionally constructing several spaces of actions that enable and constrain the coming interactions.

In each of these analytically identified spaces, we have certain versions of what the project has been so-far constructed by reconstructing the project story-so-far, we see positions taking shape in certain ways, we see issues channelling attention and emotions evolving, emerging and disappearing, and we feel the rhythm of the project accelerating or slowing down. At each point, not only the 'future' is re-negotiated, but also the past and its meaning, the actors (their duties and identities) and the frequency and intensity with which the project 'hit' the people involved. Therefore, rather than talking of 'before', 'now' and 'after', we do talk of several 'now', each of which contains the consequences of all the previous 'now' and the premises for the coming 'now'. This is different than assuming that, for example, the 'before' of 'now 4' is 'now 3'. Of course, what is taking form in 'now 3' will leave traces in the construction of 'now 4', but rather than determining it, what takes form in 'now 3' offers the premises for 'now 4'.

This means that the courses of action that are constructed as legitimate and meaningful change as the project moves on and space of action is re-shaped. For example, one major aspect of this in the SOX-404 Project are the changes in this project from 'too unclear instruction' (implying an action space enabled by ambiguity but constrained by an expectation on future instructions to be given) to 'too much control' (perceiving action space as merely constrained into a top-down project logic) and then on to 'this is not our culture' (taking the disagreements to another level and thereby shutting the prospects of further collaboration down). This gives character to both the issues emerging and the positions reconstructed, in which Swedishness gradually comes to take a central place. Moreover, as issues emerge, positions might need to be reshaped and boundaries become contested, giving rise to modified/strengthened issues, as in the case of base-lining and segregation of duties and who is to do what. Depending on the direction such structuring takes, different actions will become possible. Furthermore, some themes reappear in modified terms, as for example the construction of the headquarter in terms of conflict: they are too rigid, they are

not Swedish, they use a different ERP system and try to 'sabotage' the local firm – the positioning is reinforced while the meaning changes.

Finally, it is also interesting to observe the rhythm of the project, how often and how strongly the project is enacted by and to the people. As the rhythm changes, so is the 'reality' of the project and consequently the intensity of the issues, for example. The project is, in other words, not 'present' to the same extent during the whole period, and this has consequences for how actions and interactions develop, which in turn makes the project more or less 'present'.

Our analysis does not lead to the conclusion that every project will go through these specific phases. Rather, our analysis shows that, in order to work with projects and leadership in projects, a sensibility for and knowledge of how space of action is constantly changing and reshaped is needed. It is in these relational achievements that direction of the project takes form. The project manager alone cannot influence what kind of space of action is going to be constructed. Rather, the project manager and the other team members need to understand what they are relationally constructing and how. The concept we propose help organize such understanding.

Also to be noticed is that the distinction of different 'now' is an analytical distinction, which we use in order to illustrate the re-shaping of space of action as the time goes by taking seven snapshots. In practice, the reshaping of space of action is a continuous achievement, not a number of discrete stages as in our analysis.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we draw on current research in the general field of leadership studies in order to suggest that process perspectives are relevant and rewarding for inquiry into project leadership. Departing from a process ontology (Langley et al, 2013) we argue that project leadership can be studied as series of social activities and events in which actors, projects and organizational contexts are all in constant an mutually interacting flux, rather than as traits, styles and competences of individual project managers.

From such a perspective, project leadership is seen as the ongoing social production of direction in the project through construction and re-construction of actors' perceived space of action. We suggest an analytical framework in which this ongoing 'action-spacing' involves processes of continuous construction and re-construction of (1) past project activities and events, (2) positions and areas of responsibility related to the project, (3) discarded, ongoing and future issues to be dealt with in the project, and (4) temporal rhythm and pace. Drawing Through the study of the SOX-404 Project, we show how the space of action and hence the direction of the project is in constant flux and becoming. This way of analyzing project processes thus offers an alternative way of understanding project leadership beyond institutionalized Project Management notions of unitary command, linearity, formal planning and entitative notions of projects.

Theoretically, we add to strands of project research exploring the consequences of process perspectives by applying a process ontology on project leadership work. By identifying four analytical dimensions that are helpful in understanding leadership work over time, as space of action is shaped and reshaped, it leads us to conceptualize the project as developing in an organic fashion rather than along a linear sequence – each 'now' is not deterministically connected to the previous one and the following one, but rather the different 'now' contain each other. We can thus see how such leadership work influences which courses of action that become relevant and meaningful over time.

Practically, our analysis points to the necessity for concepts to use in order to understand what is going on and how direction is being produced when working in projects. While project models may offer a useful tool for conceptualizing the project over time in a linear fashion, they need to be completed by other 'tools' that the practitioner can use in order to understand how project work unfold in practice and in order to articulate such an understanding. Once articulated, it is possible to discuss the current situation and try to influence its development. As discussed, such intentional intervention does not necessarily achieve its purpose, with our perspective, but should rather be considered as part of a process necessarily including a number of reiteration between reflection on leadership work, action and talk, consequences in terms of direction, reflection on leadership work, and so on. The role of the project manager and project team members in this process is to help

each other reflect and to put attention to what is being achieved in the interactions one is participating to (Grint and Jackson, 2010).

Finally, what we focus on in our analysis is the temporal aspect of the project and what a process ontology enables us to see. An analysis more focused on the spatial dimensions, in terms of the simultaneous presence of different trajectories and their intersections over time (Massey, 2005), would complete such a picture adding other aspects to be taken into consideration.

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