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Preprint

This is the submitted version of a paper published in *Leadership*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Crevani, L. [Year unknown!]

Is there leadership in a fluid world?: Exploring the ongoing production of direction in organizing.  
*Leadership*

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1742715015616667>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mdh:diva-30035>

# **Is there leadership in a fluid world? Exploring the ongoing production of direction in organizing**

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**This is the submitted version of the article**

## **Abstract**

Although the idea of leadership being a process is clearly stated in leadership definitions, most researchers focus on individuals rather than observing and studying processes. This contradiction has been highlighted by a number of scholars turning to leadership processes and practices, thereby drawing attention to the interactional and social aspects of the phenomenon. Such contributions mostly take process perspectives in which entities still play an important role. In this article, I therefore aim at contributing to leadership studies based on a process ontology by exploring one central aspect of leadership work, the production of direction, processually. I do so by building on geographer Massey's (2005) conception of space, thus adding a spatial dimension that enables me to conceptualize direction as the development of an evolving relational configuration. In order to empirically explore such a conceptualization, two constructs are proposed: the construction of positions and the construction of issues. The reading of leadership work thus produced leads me to suggest 'clearing for action' as a means of conveying the spatio-temporal and constructive (reality constructing) character of leadership work.

Claiming that leadership is a process may not be controversial and the word 'process' may in fact be found in several definitions of leadership (cf Parry and Bryman, 2006, Schedlitzki and Edwards, 2014). More controversial is defining in what way leadership is a process and how, then, to study such a phenomenon. The result has often been a focus on single individuals, their characteristics and their behaviors (cf Parry and Bryman, 2006). Even when drawing on theories viewing leadership as a relationship, scholars often assess such a relationship individualistically, basing their conclusions on followers' or managers' ratings (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012). Such contradictions have been highlighted by an increasing number of scholars (ibid, for example) and are connected with the methodological question of how to study leadership and what kind of (limited) knowledge researchers can develop by using different methods (Alvesson, 1996). Hence, an increasing number of scholars criticize leadership studies for essentializing leadership by locating it in a person and/or situation, thus not researching the process itself (Dachler and Hosking, 1995, Carroll and Richmond, 2008, Crevani et al., 2010, Raelin, forthcoming, to mention a few). Such essentializing approaches may be criticized not only for reducing a social phenomenon to an individual's qualities, but also for not recognizing that 'persons', 'situations', what is considered 'leadership' and what is considered 'proper behavior' are ongoing social constructions, not stable and evident facts (Fairhurst, 2009, Endrissat and von Arx, 2013). Leadership could instead be considered a phenomenon produced and sustained in interactions, a situated and relational phenomenon (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012; Crevani et al., 2010). More attention should be paid to how leadership emerges and evolves in concrete social contexts (Denis et al., 2010), contexts that are in turn under construction (Endrissat and von Arx, 2013) as people interact and negotiate, thus producing certain organizational understandings (Barge and Farhurst, 2008) in meaning-making processes that set direction and engage people (Ospina and Foldy, 2010).

Such a movement represents a parallel to the 'turn to processes' in organization studies (cf. Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Taylor and Robichaud, 2004; Hernes and Maitlis, 2010; Langley et al., 2013). But while the focus on processes and developments over time is the common denominator for process organization studies, there are quite significant differences in the extent to which researchers see reality as fluid, that is, the extent to which researchers refer to entities in their conceptualizations. Thus, we have contributions in which individual actors are seen as relating and interacting in a world of change, a *process perspective*, and contributions focusing on ongoing processes constituting and reproducing forms of organizing over time, a strong *process ontology* (cf. Langley and Tsoukas, 2010, Langley et al., 2013). In leadership studies, we have an increasing number of contributions informed by process perspectives, but fewer taking a strong process ontology (cf. Uhl-Bien, 2006). This is not a sharp distinction, however, but rather a matter of degree regarding which question is most often brought to the fore: either 'what do individuals do in the process?' or 'what does the process do to organizing practices?' Both questions need to be explored and they should be thought of as developing in dialogue with each other. For example, while the first question opens up for studying what people actually do in order to influence courses of action, it does not help in

problematizing the fact that, whatever they do, people's activities are not necessarily under their control and that intentions do not necessarily result in desired effects.

Moreover, process studies of leadership have clearly 'brought time back in', showing for example developments both over long periods of time (cf. Denis et al., 2010) and over very short periods of time (cf. Vine et al., 2008). The spatial dimension, on the other hand, is still largely unexplored. As with organization studies more in general, there is a need for 'bringing space back in' (cf. Clegg and Kornberger, 2006; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004; Taylor and Spicer 2007; Vásquez and Cooren, 2013, Yanow, 1998). While we find contributions exploring the dynamics connected to material places, addressing questions such as how places construct and perform leadership (Ropo et al., 2013), in this article I refer to the work of geographer Doreen Massey (2004, 2005), which provides a relational view of space consistent with processual approaches (for applications in organization studies see for instance (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012; Vásquez & Cooren, 2013). Instead of space as a container 'already there', space is to be conceived as produced, always under construction. Hence, according to such a view, space is not to be used as a synonym of material place, but rather space is a sphere, a dimension, such as time, and is enacted in sociomaterial relations (Vásquez & Cooren, 2013) – space is more than a framework, 'we constitute space through the countless practices of everyday life as much as we are constituted through them' (Clegg and Kornberger, 2006, p 144). It is the construct that allows us to appreciate how the world is not only fluid, changing, but also characterized by interrelatedness – in other words, it helps us focus on structuring processes in their 'depth' and width'. As leadership has been argued to be about 'restructuring reality' (Dachler and Hosking, 1995), there is clearly a potential for the spatial dimension to enrich our understanding of the phenomenon.

In conclusion, in this article I want to argue that more studies subscribing to a process ontology are needed and that one way of trying such a path is to take the concept of 'producing direction' as one core aspect of leadership work and explore it processually. The idea of direction is present in most definitions of leadership and, mobilizing the spatial dimension according to Massey's conceptualization, it becomes possible to provide a novel processual account of leadership work by re-thinking direction. Such an account is exemplified by the analysis of two conversations that provides a specific reading of leadership work as an ordinary, repeated, not necessarily intentional, spatio-temporal, conversational achievement at work. This analysis leads to the suggestion of 'clearing for action' as a spatio-temporal concept possibly more suited to expressing a processual reading of an important aspect of leadership work than 'producing direction'. I conclude by discussing the consequences of taking a strong process ontology in studying leadership, in line with theories of organizational becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002): is the concept of leadership still meaningful if we take a process ontology? And is it relevant? In other words, is there leadership work in a fluid world?

## **Processual takes on leadership – ‘what individuals do in the process’ or ‘what the process does to organizing practices’?**

In their recent article, Denis et al. (2012) review the literature conceptualizing leadership in terms of plurality. Such a review shows not only the increasing interest in moving beyond seeing leadership as a quality of individuals or their behaviors, but also the disparate ways in which such an enterprise may be undertaken. While precursors may be found from decades ago, today we have an entire palette of labels deployed in order to signal the non-individualist orientation of one’s research effort: ‘shared’, ‘distributed’, ‘dispersed’, ‘collective’, ‘dual’, ‘co-leadership’, ‘postheroic’ (or ‘post heroic’), ‘collaborative’, ‘relational’, ‘leadership (as) practice’, ‘discursive’, to name the most common ones (see an overview in Denis et al., 2012; Crevani, 2011). These contributions are different according to a number of dimensions, such as the extent to which they provide normative accounts, the extent to which they are conceptual (versus empirically grounded), the kind of methodology used, the theoretical framework from which they draw inspiration. For the purpose of this article, the dimension to bring to the fore is how the concept of ‘process’ contributes to the study of leadership. Acknowledging that this may mean oversimplifying some aspects, I propose a distinction between studies taking a process perspective, thus focusing on ‘what individuals do in the process of leadership’ and studies taking a process ontology, thus focusing on ‘what the process of leadership does to organizing practices’. In both cases, leadership may be considered as a process influencing organized activity, but while in the former stream attention is concentrated on individuals’ role, relations, strategies, functions, interactions and how such arrangements (formal and/or emergent) have an impact on processes influencing organized activity, in the latter stream attention is centered on the processes themselves and how these processes influence organized activity, reconstructing at the same time social reality.

Process perspectives answering ‘what individuals do in the process of leadership’ enrich our understanding of a number of aspects of doing leadership. These include different communication patterns used in a manager-subordinate conversation (Courtright et al., 1989), negotiation processes regarding interpretative schemes (Knights and Willmott, 1992), leaders’ activities at micro-level and their effects (Denis et al., 2010), the complex work of increasing connectivity (Ospina and Foldy, 2010), the event-driven nature of some leadership processes (Holmberg and Tyrstrup, 2010), and the possibility of development programs promoting leaderful practice (Raelin, 2011) taking into consideration everyday actions as leadership and seeing individuals as ‘fields of relationships’ (Carroll et al., 2008), to mention some of the more influential contributions. Hence, these studies shift our attention to leadership as activity accomplished in interactions, whether in particular situations or over longer periods of time. What is common to all these studies (except Carroll et al., 2008, to some extent) is that actors are conceptualized as separated from the context in which they operate, even if the context is accredited with importance as regards how acting is undertaken. Actors are closed and stable entities that do not change in the interaction in which they participate – processes thus means movements of stable entities (Simpson, 2009). Therefore, actors (often

formal leaders) mostly choose which practices to deploy and the effects of such practices can be observed and classified. There is an assumption, more or less strong, of consequentiality regarding the intention of the actor, the actions undertaken, and their consequences for what is going on.

Further towards a process ontology, we find those studies that assume actors as changing in the relational processes in which they are engaged (Dachler and Hosking, 1995) – transacting agents themselves changing in the process (Simpson, 2009). Empirically, such contributions focus on the joint responsibility for the relations and actions that people together construct (Soila-Wadman and Köping, 2009, Koivunen, 2003) on more explicitly ethical aspects (Binns, 2008), seeing leadership as a way of ‘being-in-relation-to others’ (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011, p 1430), and on moments in which leadership is taken by/granted (or not) to managers (Karp, 2013). While such contributions offer interesting insight at the level of meaning-making (and certainly are very useful for self-reflection and leadership development), they provide less fine-grained insight into how the process develops, how leadership work is achieved in practice. Less common are thus studies clearly based on a process ontology and addressing the question ‘what does the process of leadership do to organizing practices?’. There are theoretical discussions (cf Raelin, forthcoming), but few empirical illustrations (see for example Carroll & Simpson, 2012). Focusing on leadership as accomplished in talk allows us to see how practical work is not only the context for leadership, but also the substance of leadership (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010, Vine et al., 2008). Hence, there is a potential for empirical studies based on a process ontology to enrich our understanding of the phenomenon of leadership<sup>1</sup>.

To conclude, while there are a number of different perspectives on ‘what individuals do in the process’ that have provided valuable insight into different aspects of leadership work, more studies looking into ‘what the process does’ are needed. That is, more studies capturing the fluidity of leadership work as it happens would provide much needed complementary views on the phenomenon (Denis et al., 2012). While we are able to discuss questions such as ‘what do leaders do over time?’, ‘with whom do leaders interact and how?’, ‘what role does the “situation” play?’, ‘how do people in organizations reproduce ideas of “leadership”?’, we might be able to expand on discussing leadership work if we had more theoretical concepts to come closer to the fluidity of the enactment of organizing and of the production of direction in such enactments. Questions such as ‘what does leadership work entail and how is leadership work achieved?’, or, in other words, ‘how is influence on organized activity produced?’, still remain partly unanswered.

### **Leadership work – studying leadership based on a process ontology**

A process ontology takes the fluidity, interrelatedness and complexity of life and work into consideration. By talking of organizational becoming, we turn our attention from stable and discrete entities to fluid and ongoing processes (cf. Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Hernes and Maitlis, 2010). A process is thus not

equivalent to the sum of a number of (finite) stages that follow each other in a (linear) sequence. Rather, process is a more profound idea to be juxtaposed to entities:

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)

Such emphasis on interactions can be supported by focusing on 'language-based relational processes as they (re-) construct more or less local relational realities' (Hosking, 2011b, p 47). Conversations are therefore taken seriously. Organization is constituted by processes of interactions (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010, Putnam and Nicotera, 2010, Simpson, 2009) and conversations are what people do: they are action (Hosking, 2011b; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Vásquez & Cooren, 2013). Conversations are local but 'current conversations draw on past conversations; past "voices" are mobilized in current utterances' (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010, p. 5), producing flows in which the past is constitutive of, not determining, the present. Organizations are thus 'conversational flows' (Gergen, 2010).

In terms of leadership, I suggest using the concept of 'leadership work' in order to more clearly signal that the focus is on the work achieved socially rather than on what leaders do. Leadership work may thus be defined as ongoing social process having to do with emerging structure (Barker, 2001), 'a relation of almost imperceptible directions, movement and orientations, having neither beginning nor end' (Wood, 2005, p. 1115). Leadership work is about co-creating relationships, is enacted in interactions among people (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012) and may be found in

processes in which influential "acts of organizing" contribute to the structuring of interactions and relationships, activities and sentiments (Hosking, 1988, p. 147)

Such definitions are open to interpretation when engaging in the study of leadership work empirically. Traditionally, the 'object' of study has remained relatively stable and formal leaders have been at the center of investigation. Taking a process ontology means trying not to reduce the phenomenon to single leaders, which brings up the question of what we should study in order to study leadership work. Such a question should be relevant for all studies of leadership, but becomes more acute when the phenomenon is not 'anchored' in some individuals. In the coming section, I therefore develop an argument for focusing on the production of direction in organizing processes as one central aspect of leadership work on which scholars could focus, an aspect crucial when it comes to the structuring and movements that the quotes above foreground.

### **Leadership work as the ongoing production of direction – adding the spatial dimension**

There are different alternatives for studying leadership work without assuming that such work is the same as what formal managers do. An alternative is to consider leadership work as what people construct in terms of leadership, giving priority of meaning closure to the people working in the organization (for

example Karp, 2013). Another alternative would be to take the definition of leadership in terms of processes of social influence on organized activity which informs most leadership research, whatever take the scholars then may have on how to study such influence, and see if a novel reading of such a definition is possible, a reading that may help in blurring the discursive closure around leadership that makes us often limit our attention to single managers. Following the latter alternative, it is we, the researchers, who give primary meaning to what is being studied in terms of leadership work by asking: in which ways could we conceptualize processes influencing organized activity?

In this article, I want to bring to the fore one central aspect of leadership work: leadership work is about providing or creating direction in organizing processes. This is seldom spelt out in definitions of leadership, but it is often implicitly there. 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 criticizing leadership as a construct for being talked about in too broad a manner —i.e. leadership being everything and nothing —Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) use the concept of ‘direction’ in order to argue that other phenomena may also be 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 characterizing leadership if one has to provide a narrower definition than ‘influence process’. 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).

Focusing on the phenomenon rather than on the individuals, leadership may thus be conceptualized as accomplished in processes producing direction<sup>2</sup> – in other words, we move from what one person does to what the processes are about. Having said that leadership work is associated with producing direction, I want to investigate how producing direction can be explored based on a process ontology.



Building on a process ontology means that direction is not an ‘outcome’ (as in Drath et al. (2008)) but rather the situated, moment by moment, construction of direction (Crevani et al, 2010, Crevani, 2011). Hence, direction does not need to be ‘one direction’ (full agreement is not necessary); rather, direction is to be interpreted in an organic sense, as a ‘never-ending-story’, not as a ‘happy ending’. Therefore, leadership interactions and practices will also have to include possibly diverging processes and instances of unresolved conflicts, ambiguities and debates — situations most well-known in any organization, anywhere. Furthermore, rather than considering ‘successful alignment’ as what enables us to enact direction, I build on the work of Taylor and Robichaud (2004) and see articulation as the crucial aspect. That is, there is no need for dissolving difference in order to sustain action in certain directions; what is needed is to give expression to differences (Taylor and Robichaud, 2004).

Producing direction, and consequently shaping movement and courses of action, may thus be seen as the core of leadership work. It could even be argued as curious that such a concept has not received so much attention yet in analyzing empirical material, even though the scant attention to the idea of direction may also be understood when considering the increasingly large interest in sequentiality in leadership studies, while the spatial aspect is still underexplored (Ropo et al., 2013). Direction has been used more or less metaphorically (in the traditional example of an officer directing his/her soldiers, for instance, direction is being provided rather literally) and is, in any case, a spatial concept, in the same way as other concepts often used (literally or metaphorically) in studying organizing, such as rhythm and speed, are temporal ones. Direction with movement is a spatio-temporal concept. Hence there is a potential for enriching our understanding of leadership by referring to theoretical contributions that elaborate on spatial concepts. Several ways of conceptualizing space have been introduced in organization studies (cf Clegg and Kornberger, 2006; Kornberger and Clegg, 2004; Taylor and Spicer 2007; Vásquez and Cooren, 2013, Yanow, 1998). With a process ontology, space cannot be understood as a fixed framework to be filled with entities (Clegg & Kornberger, 2006) nor as an empty container or stage (Massey, 2005). Both space and time are enacted (*ibid*), they are no ‘natural dimensions’, they are produced in ongoing sociomaterial configurations (Beyes and Steyaert, 2011; Vásquez and Cooren, 2013). Building on the work of Doreen Massey (2005)<sup>3</sup>, I therefore want to elaborate on how the concept of space can help in articulating a more processual take on ‘producing direction’.

In her work, Massey (2005) introduces the concept of trajectory, or story-so-far, that she uses to express the process of change in a phenomenon. A phenomenon may be a living entity, a physical formation, a norm, etc. Both humans and nonhumans are thus seen as phenomena in change across space/time and at the same time producing space/time as they co-evolve. Massey argues namely that trajectories/stories-so-far always develop in relation to other trajectories/stories-so-far. This is what space is made of, the simultaneity and multiplicity of trajectories constitute space as trajectories develop in relation to one another, ‘from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny’ (*ibid*, p 9). Simplifying, space gives us the

‘depth’ and ‘width’ of reality – it is by thinking space that we can see relations and co-evolutions – a ‘depth’ and ‘width’ that is not ‘already there’ but rather the product of relations and co-evolutions, thus always shifting. Thinking space allows us to think of a plurality of stories-so-far, of their relations and of such relations creating conditions that influence but never fully determine future developments.

Building on such ideas, one could see leadership processes as processes in which a number of simultaneously existing stories-so-far meet, co-evolve, leave, clash, return, and so on. The focus would be, in this case, on ‘the tiny’ of conversational flows and direction could then be thought of as those movements resulting from the co-evolution of interrelated trajectories, rather than as a linear development. Instead of thinking of an organization or a group moving in one direction, from one static situation to another static situation, we could think of movement accomplished by co-related trajectories in the ongoing evolution of the relational configurations they form. In other words, we could explore how trajectories take form and move forward in relations – direction may thus be conceptualized as produced in the ongoing interactional shaping of relational configurations of stories-so-far. Studying the ongoing shaping of relational configuration would thus enrich our understanding of leadership work as it provides us with the conceptual lenses to focus on ongoing structuring processes, structuring being a relational spatio-temporal process consisting of evolving (time) configurations (space). Hence, such an approach adds a spatial dimension in foregrounding not only how direction is produced dynamically, but also how direction takes form in the interplay and co-construction of several related trajectories – a processual understanding of leadership does not only mean paying attention to a flow of sayings and doings related in time (temporal view), but also appreciating that this flow takes form in the weaving and re-weaving of those trajectories that produce it, that there is a ‘depth’ and ‘width’ to the flow as well as to the reality that the flow is part of. This is a reality characterized by multiplicity and relationality, in which negotiations and contestations are inevitably part of such processes of weaving and re-weaving.

Summarizing my argument so far, while increasingly more studies are taking a process perspective on leadership, there is a need for more leadership studies based on a process ontology, in which the ‘object’ of study is what the process does. We could thus talk of leadership work as processes of co-creation and consider language and conversations as central in such processes. The question remains of what more specifically to study empirically. The production of direction is one core aspect of leadership according to the literature and offers one way of moving focus from single individuals to what the process of leadership is about. Moreover, building on a processual and relational understanding of space, we can develop the way direction is understood, from a linear concept (movement following a line) to a more organic idea in terms of the ongoing shaping of relational configurations (movement in the co-evolution of interrelated trajectories). In the next section, I discuss two constructs that one could focus on in analyzing empirical situations in order to study leadership work as the ongoing shaping of relational configurations.

## **The ongoing shaping of relational configurations – Constructing positions and constructing issues**

Focusing on the ongoing production of direction, two processes of construction emerged as particularly interesting in the empirical material presented in this article. As explained in the section below about method, in my study I use an abductive approach, which means that while direction is a theory-driven construct, the construction of positions and issues emerged as important during the study. Hence, the reader should keep in mind that even if, for the sake of clarity, I present here theoretical considerations about such constructions, they have been identified as contributing to producing direction when reading and interpreting the empirical material. This also explains the focus of conversations in the remainder of the article. While relational configurations are sociomaterial configurations including both humans and nonhumans, the empirical work has been focused on dialogue in meetings and therefore the construction processes identified are also mostly social, rather than sociomaterial, in character.

If we think of direction as continuously reproduced in the ongoing shaping of relational configurations, we can direct our attention to a number of processes in which such a shaping takes form. In this article, I focus on the two that more clearly emerged from reading the empirical material. The first process is the construction of positions, which is directly related to how relational configurations develop. The concept of positioning was introduced by Davies and Harré in order to focus on the dynamics of negotiating selves, something that the more static concept of roles prevented (1990). In their view, an utterance is not determined by the intention of the person who uttered it, but rather what is said evolves and develops depending on the following utterances and how they contribute to re-constructing it (see also Gergen, 2010).

Positioning, as we will use it is the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines (Davies and Harré, 1990, p 48).

A position is both a repertoire and a location related to that repertoire. So, for instance, the position 'mother' involves a repertoire of (more or less stable) practices and a (more or less stable) location in relation to other positions that depend on those practices. Positioning may be more or less intentional, is relational and may be initiated by oneself or by others (Czarniawska, 2013). While Davies and Harré were preoccupied with the production of the self and thus assume that people may or may not take up positions in conversations, and that when they do they see the world from the vantage point of those particular positions (Davies and Harré, 1990), my argument is more moderate. I only assume that the positions that are constructed, and the relation in which they are positioned, have consequences for how relational configurations develop.

Relational configurations are in fact made of stories-so-far that co-evolve becoming more or less temporarily anchored in different kinds of positions (cf. Czarniawska, 2013, Gergen, 2010)– whether a

position is just a discursive resource mobilized (my approach) or a subject position assumed in the course of the conversation (Davies and Hárre's view). Hence positions may be considered as both premises for and products of relational configurations under development (see also Massey, 2005). Inspired by Davies and Hárre and influenced by the observations I made, I define a position as what one is supposed to do and how one is supposed to be (in relation to other positions). In order to analyze how direction is produced, to unpack how relational configurations are being shaped, it is thus interesting to look at what positions are being articulated and in which relation they are being located.

The second process I focus on is the construction of issues, which contributes to directing organizing by affecting trajectories as one more co-evolving trajectory (the 'issue') is created (or reinforced). An issue may, in fact, be considered as a trajectory, a story-so-far, in Massey's terms. The concept of issue has been used in strategy and organizational change studies by researchers applying a processual perspective (for example, Dutton and Duncan, 1987) and may be considered a central aspect in leadership work (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Issues are thus recognized in research as an important aspect of how organizing is directed. Hence, I build on the idea of an issue as committing time and attention and an issue as the result of an interpretative process concerned with producing both opportunities and problems (as in strategy and organizational change studies), but based on a different ontology. In the mentioned studies, problems and opportunities are conceptualized as something 'real' to be processed and diagnosed as an issue or not (i.e. Dutton and Duncan, 1987) and the focus is very much on individuals and their intentions and strategies. What I propose is a strong processual interpretation of constructing issues, in which reality is constructed rather than framed (Endrissat and von Arx, 2013). By 'issue' I thus mean a question produced as attention becomes channeled and emotions focalized (emotions treated as social accomplishments rather than individual properties, see Simpson and Marshall, 2010). Thinking of issues as trajectories that interrelate with other trajectories (people, other issues, etc.), relational configurations are affected in their development by the emergence of new issues (or the reinforcement of existing ones), as new trajectories (the new or reinforced issues) become part of the configuration and its ongoing shaping. Hence, when attention and emotions intensify, leading to the emergence of a trajectory (or changing the course of an existing one), the direction other trajectories take, as well as the intensity with which trajectories interrelate with one another, will be affected, influencing how relational configurations are being shaped.

To conclude, in traditional leadership accounts, leadership has been defined in terms of direction; in this article I subscribe to the idea of leadership having to do with direction, but take a processual perspective on the phenomenon. To help me in this effort, I lean on Massey's conceptualizations of space as relational achievement (2005). This leads me to propose thinking of direction in terms of relational configurations under development. Combining theoretical insights with readings of the empirical material, two ongoing constructions are proposed as important to focus on (among others that also need to be considered in further studies): the construction of positions and the construction of issues. The first one provides temporary 'anchoring points' for the relational configurations under development, the second one affects

trajectories as they unfold by adding a trajectory to the ongoing development of the configuration. In the remainder of the article, after presenting some methodological considerations, I turn to the analysis of parts of a couple of conversations that illustrate the processes in which positions and issues are under construction. Such analysis leads to a discussion of ‘clearing for action’ as a concept that may better suit a processual take and convey the nature of leadership work emerging from the analysis of the empirical material.

### **Methodological considerations and the empirical setting**

In this study, observations are the central means for coming close to practice (Czarniawska, 2007, Alvesson, 1996). Attention is thus paid to the context in which the phenomenon takes place, a context that in turn is also under construction (Endrissat and von Arx, 2013). The focus on instances of work draws 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 organizations add an interpretative dimension (Vine et al., 2008). In other words, particular situations are analyzed in depth with the help of a more contextual understanding (Alvesson, 1996), developed through observations, but also through a number of interviews. While organizational discourse analyses have provided the approaches and tools for a detailed study of how relational work is achieved in practice through language, the analysis I provide is complementary by taking a situational approach (Alvesson, 1996). Rather than the form of the interaction and the ordering consequences of such forms (Wodak et al., 2011), what I focus on is the interactional production of the content of such conversations and the ordering consequences of such contents.

The empirical study took place at two different companies in Sweden, CleanTech and StrongMat. CleanTech is a small engineering company, while StrongMat is a large industrial company – in the second organization, I therefore limited my attention to two departments. Although my analysis is embedded in a broad understanding of these two organizations, I will not provide any detailed account of them because of space constraints (for a broader account the reader is referred to (reference omitted for blind-review purpose)). During my fieldwork, I participated in a number of meetings over a period of one year. I also interviewed 27 people, both managers and co-workers. The empirical material thus produced is limited but allows for analysis of some of the processes in which direction is being produced.

In my analysis I focus on talk as social practice constituting reality (Fairhurst, 2009). Although talk is just one aspect of the sociomaterial practices that produce reality, it is an important, if not the most important, one (cf. Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). In the article I reproduce entire extracts from conversations, which have been transcribed and not edited. The extracts have been chosen since they provide, in pieces of dialogue with rather short lines, clear examples of the construction that I could observe in several conversations. The dialogues could then be reproduced in their entirety. The reader is thus also enabled to

make her/his own interpretations. Moreover, presenting conversations means also presenting the actors contributing to the conversation, but this does not imply a focus on actors in the analysis. Rather than analyzing ‘what do individuals do in the process?’, I focus on which processes of construction producing direction are taking place.

The analytical work started, therefore, with a broad discursive reading to surface constructions taking shape in meeting conversations that could be related to producing direction. In parallel, I also analyzed the interviews and searched for meaning-making around direction. Of the constructions achieved in talk, I chose to focus on those two that were more directly shaping direction in organizing (and had consequences in other conversations throughout the organization), that people in the organization also seemed to reflect on (even though not in theoretical terms), that showed connections to previous leadership literature and that could be considered as including aspects of other identified constructions (such as the construction of boundaries). In this article, because of space constraints, I only reproduce three fragments of conversations, which exemplify the constructions identified. For a larger number of conversational fragments showing different instances and types of such constructions please refer to (Crevani, 2011). As direction is an ongoing achievement, the entire empirical material is threaded through with constructions impacting the production of direction (see Carroll and Simpson, 2012, for a similar argument), although such achievements are more or less intense during the conversations. The few episodes reported in this article show typical situations at the companies studied in which direction is more intensely produced.

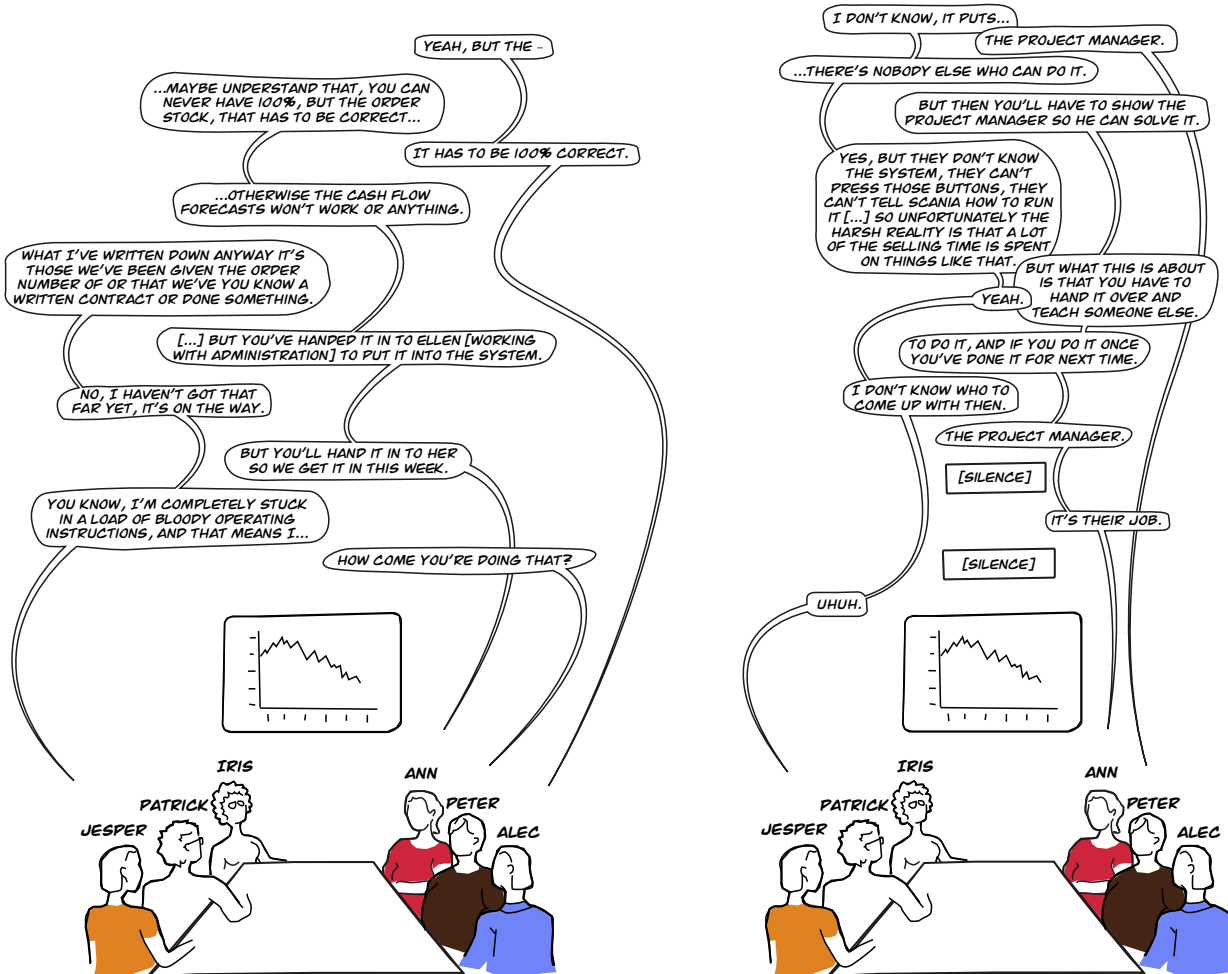
Finally, one word about the form I chose to present interactions. It may seem quite unusual to employ a sort of comic strip. To me, it is a way of reproducing interactions that retains some of the elements that are so easily lost when writing dialogues. For example, it becomes graphically apparent that conversations are not ordered, people interrupt each other or finish each others’ sequences. Quick replies follow each other. Also, the materiality of the interaction is brought out: we see that there are different people around a table (most often) and we see who is speaking. On the other hand, we don’t ‘see’ who is speaking in terms of the particular person, since I have opted to draw rather generic silhouettes. What is emphasized is the conversation, the interaction in terms of the words said. It is to such words that the reader’s attention is directed.

### **The order stock is too low – or constructing positions**

In this section and in the next one, I present two situations in which voices become animated, tension becomes palpable and the discussion proceeds with quick overlapping utterances and/or meaningful silences. Such situations are common at work, even though relatively rarely analyzed when studying organizations.

The first conversation takes place at CleanTech, a small engineering company. The people gathered around the table all belong to the sales department (they sell industrial cleaning plants). Given that the focus of my analysis is on the interaction, they will not be presented in any detail. Rather, we can see this conversation as one occasion in which a number of trajectories meet for a limited period of time. These trajectories meet in this way every other week, and in more informal or other formal meetings in between. This conversation is consequently also shaped by how these stories-so-far have previously intersected. The tone is generally informal, but there are moments of tension and conflict. The ‘so-far’ of the stories-so-far that meet is clearly relevant for how the interaction develops. In order not to fall into the ‘focus on individuals-trap’, I give some glimpses of relations rather than people. These trajectories have previously both clashed and become aligned. Some relations have stabilized with time, but are constantly being challenged. As we will see below, there is, for example, some tension surrounding the position ‘Salesperson’.

This sales meeting starts with Ann mentioning that the order stock that she can see in the IT system is very low, something that, she says, has a number of negative consequences for the company. Jesper affirms not being able to recognize what she describes. He says that he has himself sold a few cleaning plants recently. He therefore affirms that the order stock in the IT system must be wrong. A discussion starts about this issue and how important it is that the order stock is always updated (see the conversation below) and it becomes articulated that Jesper has not registered all the orders he has received.



Hence, the meeting starts with one story (the order stock is low and it is a problem) enacted from Ann's trajectory (I shadowed her during a previous meeting where, in my reading, this was constructed as an issue). This seems to clash with Jesper's trajectory (enacted in the conversation through his statements of having finalized a lot of orders). This clash starts the conversation reproduced above. The conversation then moves from assessing whether Jesper has reported the new orders into the IT system or not, to why Jesper is working in a certain way, to what Jesper should do and what he should demand that others do. Reading this conversation (the extract reported and the rest of the meeting), and others that followed a similar pattern, the concept of positions emerged as relevant. In several conversations, questions about the position of Salespersons were more or less explicitly debated. Also to be noted is that positions may be of different kinds reflecting different kinds of categories: woman, mother, beginner, to name only three. Here I focus on Salespersons as a position being under construction. This is of particular interest, to me, since Salesperson is usually treated as a formal role, clearly defined and stable. What this interaction shows is how contested and complex the ongoing construction of such a position may be. While more traditional accounts would see organizational roles as the premises for individuals to work, the reading of



conversations that I present points to seeing positions as ongoing achievements conversationally produced while working.

What is being articulated is: what should a salesperson do and how should a salesperson be? In this case, is the priority to give the best service possible to the customers or to spend time on administration? Such a discussion is somewhat unresolved: there is no consensus. In the dialogue reported, statements such as 'I am completely stuck...' or 'there is nobody else who can do it' or '...the harsh reality is that a lot of selling time is spent on...' contribute to the ongoing construction of the position 'Salesperson' in heroic terms, putting the customer first and sacrificing time and energy for the benefit of the customer – a person that takes care of certain tasks (everything, no delegation) and has certain characteristics (confident, dedicated, self-sacrificing). I am not arguing that such a construction is fully accomplished in these few lines, but these lines reinforce an ongoing construction that I could observe taking shape in several conversations. Such a construction is also intertwined with the construction of seniority which in this conversation may be glimpsed in the 'there is nobody else who can do it...' quote. Alternative constructions of Salesperson, including an approach to sales less related to personal bonding with the customer, are also present. In the conversation reported above, the insistence on handing over some tasks to other people is in contrast with the construction of salespeople as handling all the stuff and feeling personally responsible in relation to their customers. The 'heroic version' of such a position is therefore contested by a more 'administrative version'. Not only that, towards the end of the conversation, the focus is also on the project manager and whether he should/is able to carry out certain task or not. The position of 'Project Manager' is thus also under construction, in particular it is positioned in opposition to 'Salesperson', something that happens repeatedly in the conversations I observed. In the quote 'they don't know the system, ...', in the doubtful 'yeah' in response to the suggestion of teaching them and in the absence of any voice claiming project manager competence and/or commitment (there is an argument about Jesper needing to teach them, no argument against his skepticism) we can see the reinforcement of the construction of 'Project Manager' as lacking motivation and competence (note that the conversation shifts from talking of one specific project manager to 'Project Manager' more in general). Where the boundary should be drawn between the two positions is thus also under construction and hence the relation between the two locations produced.

What happens to the relational configurations under development is that there are divergent constructions of 'Salesperson', which means that there are different 'anchoring points' at their disposal, 'heroic Salesperson' and 'administrative Salesperson', mobilized and re-constructed during the conversation (thus resourcing the conversation as well as being a product of the conversation). This also means that the trajectories that leave the meeting will not develop in only one way when it comes to this positioning. On the other hand, there is convergence when it comes to the positioning towards 'Project Managers'. There is no agreement on where the boundary between the position 'Salesperson' and 'Project Manager' goes (who is to do what), but there is convergence on positioning 'Salespersons' as more motivated, committed and competent than 'Project Managers'. Such positionings are consequential for how trajectories develop

through their relations to these anchoring points, for example, in such ‘trivial’ things as who is asked for suggestions, invited to meetings, involved in decision making – or, in other words, for how relational configurations evolve. Although I focus here only on a specific situation, the observations I performed provide support for such a take, since the constructions of ‘Salesperson’ above reproduced were indeed mobilized and reshaped in a number of subsequent conversations. For example, in the weeks after the meeting, the heroic construction of ‘Salesperson’ was intensified, delegitimizing an IT system for customer relationships management that the management proposed to purchase (and that was more aligned with the ‘administrative Salesperson’ position) and making such a purchase no longer viable.

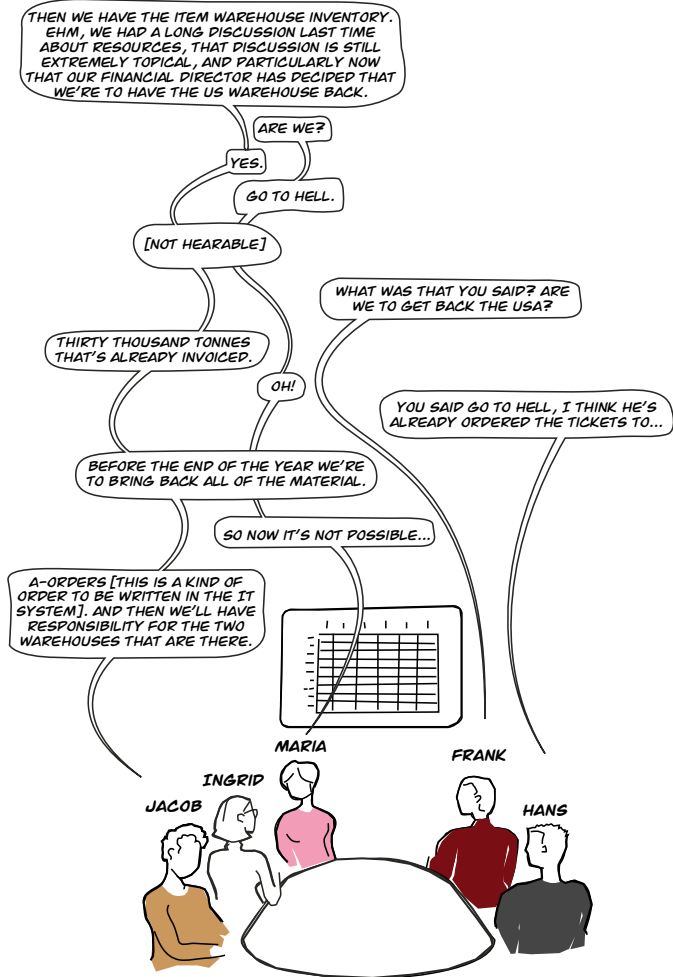
Finally, note also that, when constructing positions, we are talking about both practical tasks related to the position —what one should do and how —and identity aspects related to the position —what kind of person one is or one should be. The two aspects are intimately intertwined in talk. In organization studies, and in particular in the leadership literature, we can find the idea of different roles defined by which tasks the person holding one role should perform, and we also find discussion about identities, and how important identity constructions are for people at work (cf Clegg et al., 2006, Schedlitzki and Edwards, 2014). Hence, talking of positions allows us to appreciate how this may be seen as ongoing constructions, not stable entities, and how aspects usually treated separately are intertwined as such constructions develop.

It is also interesting to note that the conversation reported was not intentionally and explicitly about positions, as may be the case when discussing what a new co-worker is supposed to work with, for example. Rather, we are looking at a dialogue about sales figures, the result of which is, among other things, the construction of positions, happening quickly and emotionally in the course of the conversation.

### **Changing ownership of the US warehouse – or constructing issues**

The second conversation takes place at StrongMat, a large industrial company producing steel. People from the department for Distribution and Transports are sitting in a meeting with people from the departments for Delivery Assurance and Invoicing. This is what they call a ‘distribution meeting’ in which different matters affecting the departments participating are discussed. As they put it, the idea is that, given that the people present come from different parts of the organization and work with different, but related, tasks, getting together they can talk about those questions, projects, problems, and opportunities that lie at the interfaces between their departments. It is, with the conceptual lenses I propose, an occasion for co-evolving trajectories to meet. While these trajectories meet and clash even in other situations, this is a formalized way of meeting in which all the trajectories deemed relevant are included. The Excel file projected on the wall shows the list of points to be dealt with in the meeting, thus bringing other kinds of trajectories into the meeting.

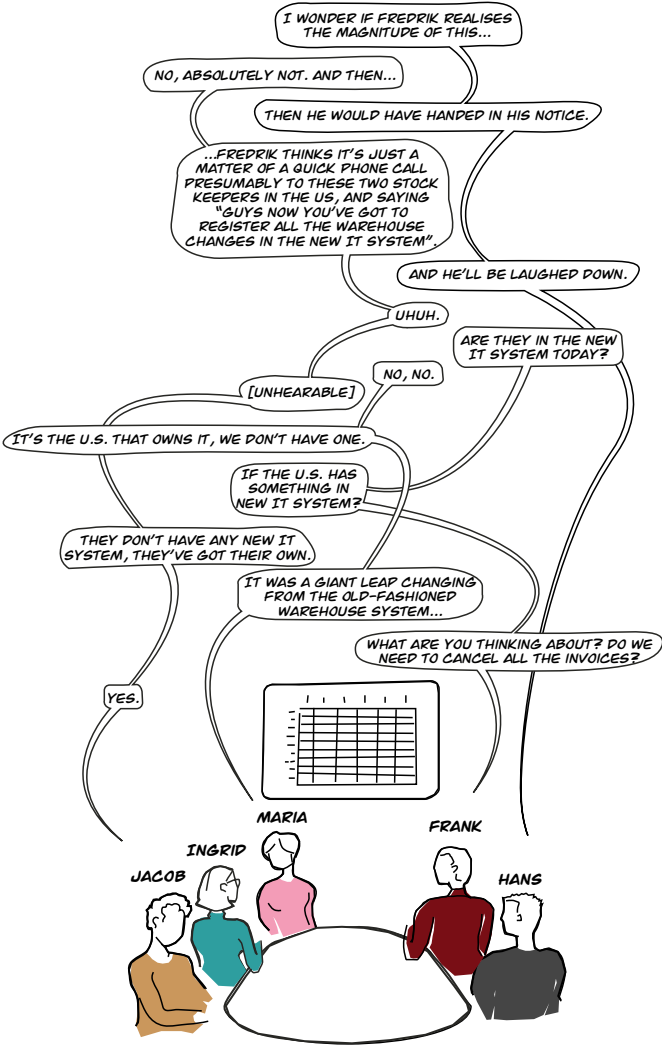
The part of the meeting that I analyze is the one in which warehouse inventory, one of the questions to be dealt with in this meeting, is discussed. The conversation starts with talk about the need for carrying out an inventory of the warehouses located abroad, something that is said to be necessary to do on a regular basis and that implies checking the material physically present in the warehouses against the records found in the IT system. Such a need has been previously discussed, since it is described as a huge job and their departments are said to lack the resources to complete such work. However, in the past few days, a new task has emerged, when it comes to warehouses. StrongMat has a unit in the USA that has formally owned the two warehouses located in the USA for some years, but now the order has been given to transfer the formal ownership back to the Swedish ‘mother company’ before the end of the year. In the piece of conversation below, we see what happens when Jacob, talking about warehouse inventory more generally, says that the upper management has decided to move the USA warehouse ownership.



In the quick exchange, it is articulated that there is a lot (thirty thousands tonnes) of already invoiced (but still physically in the warehouses) material that has to be ‘transferred’ from the USA unit to the Swedish company in the system by re-writing the A-order (one kind of order in the system) linked to each piece of material. All this needs to be done in a couple of weeks. After that, the departments that the people around the table work for will also have to be formally responsible for the warehouses in the USA (which

is deemed difficult given the physical distance and the cultural differences). The lines ‘go to hell’, ‘what was that you said?...', ‘oh’ and ‘you said go to hell, I think he has already ordered the tickets to...’ (‘he’ being the guy that has not resisted the upper management order, Fredrik) show the intense tone that the conversation quickly takes on.

The discussion continues. The fragment below begins with an exchange about Fredrik (not participating in this meeting), the one who has been given the formal task of carrying out the transfer of the warehouse stock in the IT system. There is clearly disapproval of him having accepted the task supposedly without any resistance and we find expressions of irony (‘then he would have handed in his notice’ and ‘Fredrik thinks it is just...’) and scorn (‘he’ll be laughed down’). Then the discussion moves to being about whether the USA office is already connected to the new IT system, which it is not, and what that means in practice in terms of what will have to be done. Given that the USA office is not connected, the task is constructed as even harder (‘a giant leap’). The last line re-focuses the conversation on what will need to be done practically and the conversation develops along those lines for a while.



Hence, in this situation we have two trajectories, Maria's and Frank's, that become heavily affected by a piece of information given in the passing, when talking about warehouses in general (the 'warehouse item' on the Excel file can be seen as a trajectory itself). The USA situation was not one item on the agenda, as none of these people have been given any formal task concerning such a situation (only Fredrik has been asked to do something formally and he has not formally asked anyone else to act, according to my observations). As the conversation develops, all trajectories become affected, as well as their relations, since the situation and its implications are constructed as *an issue* that will probably 'hit' many of the people sitting around the table. It is articulated that some of them will have to perform certain tasks, some of them will have to find solutions together, some other task will have to wait, etc. Time that should have been dedicated to other questions according to the meeting agenda is now instead spent on the USA situation that is discussed at length. The people participating in this meeting have received no formal assignment regarding this task. Still, the task that is being constructed is something that creates emotional engagement —there are plenty of exclamations, irony, and sarcasm —and that becomes framed as something that needs to be given close attention. The USA situation, therefore, becomes an issue, a question produced as attention becomes channeled and emotions focalized. The issue is constructed not as a clearly defined problem (in the excerpts presented and in the rest of the conversation there is no clear consensus on what the problem is and how big a problem it is), 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. Such aspects are unresolved; there is no consensus about how exactly to construct the issue, but attention has still been concentrated on something, something that is being shaped during this and later conversations. It is something on which time is spent during the meeting as sense is being made of the situation, but it is also something that will be brought up in subsequent meetings and informal conversations in the coming days. What I could observe in the following days was increasing focus and a lot of time spent on solving problems, producing arrangements that could in turn give rise to further issues, without any formal order/authorization to do so.

Moreover, looking 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. 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. It is an issue related to people's work and situated in it. And in the following days, work will be done in the name of this issue (still without any formal order to do so) such as organizing meetings, working on the IT system and similar activities.

We may therefore argue that the 'USA warehouse situation' trajectory has emerged, or better, it has been heavily reinforced, having already started to emerge in previous conversations in which only some of the people were involved. The 'story-so-far' has been articulated in the pieces of conversation reported, and in the rest of the discussion, and is now part of the relational configuration involving the people present at the meeting. It is a 'new piece of reality' added to the evolving relational mesh that reality is. Reality has

thus been temporarily re-structured and relations re-organized. This story-so-far will later develop as further interactions will focus attention and emotions on it, and will eventually fade away as attention is re-focused somewhere else and emotions cool down – thus ceasing to ‘exist’ as a story, no longer affecting the development of relational configurations.

### **Leadership work as spatio-temporal and constructive ongoing achievement – or ‘clearing for action’**

As discussed at the beginning of this article, leadership has long been considered a process and defined in terms of direction, but such a process of direction setting has most often not been studied in processual terms. In this article, I propose one way of studying direction production processually. I do so by referring to Massey’s (2004, 2005) work on space in order to add the spatial dimension to the temporal dimension that often dominates process approaches in leadership studies. Thinking of space processually and relationally means, then, paying attention to the simultaneity of co-evolving trajectories that forms reality (ibid). Such an approach can be applied from the global to the very tiny, as Massey affirms (2005). In this paper it is ‘the tiny’ that is focused on, by zooming in on co-evolving trajectories in work meetings. Direction can thus be conceived of in more ‘organic’ terms of movement achieved by relational configurations under development, rather than in terms of a linear, singular development. In order to analyze the development of relational configurations, two constructs have been proposed: the construction of positions, and the construction of issues. By focusing on such constructs we can understand some important aspects of leadership work (of course, other constructs would add other aspects). Once analyzed with such lenses, the conversations presented show what kind of leadership work is going on in interactions that may be considered chaotic, contested and often at first sight about something else than positions and issues. In other words, we can appreciate leadership work in terms of ongoing ‘trivial’ processes. In ‘ordinary’ situations, relational configurations are shaped and re-shaped. This is no ‘one time’ achievement; rather, as trajectories meet and diverge, the constructions analyzed are re-constructed time after time –in repeated temporary achievements. Such achievements are not necessarily intentional. In fact, direction in the interactions analyzed is produced not only by what may have been intentional efforts originally aimed at influencing the course of action and/or talk in specific ways, but also by what is constructed in interactions that develop quickly, at times rather chaotically, and where the intended subject is not explicitly positions and issues. These are interactions that, nevertheless, result in an interactional re-direction of attention and re-configuration of relations. Moreover, both the construction of positions and the construction of issues illustrate how producing direction may be seen as achieved in spatio-temporal processes, in which we have not only doings related in time, but we also have to take into consideration the spatial dimension consisting of the ongoing shaping of relational configurations constraining and enabling the simultaneous development of co-related trajectories. Also, people’s trajectories are shaped in a number of interactions, whether people are participating in conversations or not, by re-construction of positions (re-configurations of trajectories by re-shaping of

possible relations) or by construction of issues (re-configuration of trajectories by emergence of new trajectories).

Hence, leadership work may be understood in terms of ordinary, repeated, not necessarily intentional, spatio-temporal conversational achievements. What the expression ‘production of direction’ does not convey, however, is just the ‘depth’ and ‘width’ that the spatial dimension adds and how producing direction is constructive, meaning intertwined with the production of reality itself. In the conversations analyzed, leadership work was threaded throughout the interaction, not isolated to a particular moment, and was integral to the ongoing production of reality. Both direction and reality may be thought of as produced in spatio-temporal processes that are open-ended (never deterministically determined given the multiplicity simultaneity of co-evolving trajectories), but bounded as the past is constitutive of the present (Massey, 2005). Zooming in on interactions, they are characterized by responsiveness (Shotter, 1993, Hosking, 2011b). Each utterance provides the premises for the next one, but gains its meaning only as the conversation develops depending on how it is supplemented – and how it is supplemented depends on, but is not determined by, the past. As Gergen puts it:

actions embedded within relationships have *prefigurative* potential. The history of usage enables them to invite or suggest certain supplements as opposed to others – because only these supplements are considered intelligible within a tradition. (p 63).

Hence, ‘different constructions differently resource and constrain how processes “go on” and the realities that are made’ (van der Haar and Hosking, 2004, p. 1023).

What I want to propose is therefore that the concept of ‘clearing for action’, as a development of ‘space of action’<sup>4</sup>, may better express the constructive, open-ended but bounded character of leadership work. The verb ‘clearing’ signals an ongoing active achievement thus expressing the constructive nature of leadership work. Given that clearing as a noun has a spatial connotation, it may also suggest an active achievement in which space is produced, thus expressing the ‘depth’ and ‘width’ of such work. Both positions and issues are located in space, but such constructions are also at the same time producing space: the construction of positions by providing possible anchoring points for co-evolving trajectories, the construction of issues by adding/reinforcing one trajectory, thus affecting the relational configurations that make space.

Clearing as verb may also suggest the idea of providing the premises for an open-ended development. On the other hand, clearing as a noun evokes the image of a bounded space providing a feeling for the ‘depth’ and ‘width’ of leadership work – not everything is possible, the weaving of trajectories and the resulting spatio-temporal configurations make certain developments more or less probable. For example, when the issue analyzed emerges, it does so in an already existing mesh of trajectories, with which it will co-evolve, and the positions under construction provide certain ‘anchoring points’ but not others, thus

enabling/constraining how trajectories may co-evolve.

Clearing for action resonates with conceptualizations that see actors and their world as constructed in certain ways that expand or contract the space of possible action (cf. Holmberg, 2000, p. 181), in which different constructions resource and constrain which space is created (van der Haar and Hosking, 2004), which means that a landscape of enabling constraints relevant to a number of next possible actions is created (cf. Shotter, 1993) in ‘a process by which certain trains of consequences, intended or unintended, are set in motion’ (Davies and Harre, p. 266), certain lines of action are opened up, others tuned out (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010). Hence, the spatio-temporal way of conceptualizing leadership work I propose, with concepts such as ‘clearing for action’, ‘co-evolving relational configurations’, ‘constructions of positions’ and ‘construction of issues’, may contribute to those studies taking a processual approach to leadership and using concepts such as line of action, landscape of possibilities, train of consequences, among others – concepts that have a spatial connotation.

### **Concluding: Leadership work in a fluid world**

The present article provides one proposal for how to conceptualize leadership in a fluid world, starting in an ontology of becoming and exploring one central aspect of leadership according to most definitions, the production of direction, processually. Leaning on Massey’s (2005) work, I suggest conceiving of direction in an ‘organic’, not a linear, way: movement accomplished by co-related trajectories in the ongoing evolution of the relational configurations they form. Studying the ongoing shaping of relational configuration would thus enrich our understanding of leadership work. Constructing positions and constructing issues have proved to be two interesting constructs to investigate in order to empirically study such production of direction. The resulting reading provides one (limited) perspective on leadership work that enriches our understanding of such a phenomenon by showing how it can be understood in terms of ordinary, repeated, not necessarily intentional, spatio-temporal conversational achievements at work. Finally, the concept of ‘clearing for action’ is suggested as a way of capturing the spatio-temporal and constructive character of leadership work. Hence, this article provides an empirically based account of leadership work in processual terms. I now turn to a discussion around the meaningfulness of such an enterprise.

Having investigated the possibility of empirically exploring leadership work processually, or, in other words, having showed that it is possible to talk of leadership work even in a fluid world, why bother? First, while it is possible to see a parallel in the development of leadership theory and organization 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 ‘organizing’. The interpretation of leadership work developed here, on the other hand, presents leadership as an aspect of organizing processes (Hosking and Morley, 1988), not as something separated from them. Here, the meaningfulness of the concept lies within a process



ontology of organizing. It is a way of focusing our attention on the question of how organizing unfolds, in particular how such unfolding takes certain directions. Leadership work may be part of organizing processes, much like identity constructions, for example, which may be considered as more intensively happening at specific times, but which are above all continuously done and re-done, an aspect of what happens in interactions (Simpson, 2009, Lindgren and Wählin, 2001; West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Second, even though one could argue that such a conceptualization of leadership waters down the concept too much, making it almost unrecognizable, such an enterprise is necessary in order to not only challenge traditional individualistic understandings, but also to contribute to changing leadership practice by reformulating what leadership is about. In fact, if we label certain achievements that have to do with providing direction in terms of 'leadership', such as when a manager gives instructions or holds a speech, there is no reason not to re-read other achievements related to shaping direction, such as when positions and issues are being constructed, in terms of leadership. Otherwise, the traditional notion of leadership and its individualistic character are not challenged 'at the core' and they tend to constrain action in practice, even when initiatives are formally taken to restructure leadership work in organizations in more collective terms.

Moreover, process perspectives have contributed to bringing to the fore other aspects and practices than traditionally discussed in leadership studies. Previous studies taking a process perspective have depicted leadership as, for example, dynamic, collective, situated and dialectic (Denis et al, 2010). Thanks to its focus on direction and the introduction of the spatial dimension, this article adds to such types of analysis by reformulating some of those adjectives and adding others. Leadership work may thus be seen as interactional rather than collective, since even when consensus and shared meanings are not reached, direction may still be produced. Leadership work may also be characterized as equivocal, since it does not determine action but only provides premises for action as relational configurations develop. Finally, leadership work is trivial and not necessarily intentional; in the conversations reported, issues and positions emerge as other problems/questions are being discussed, in everyday situations. Such an understanding of leadership deprives actors of individual agency as traditionally conceptualized and refers instead to agency as it may be conceived when building on a process ontology. This means that agency is not taken to be a property of an individual, but rather is manifest in the continuously unfolding movements of social engagement, in those turning points in which the flow of practice is re-directed (Simpson, forthcoming). Leadership thus produces change but there is no guarantee that instrumental outcomes may be enacted (ibid). Simpson thus (building mainly on pragmatist philosophers, Pickering and Barad) distinguishes between self-action, inter-action and trans-action (ibid). Self-action is what dominates the leadership literature in which the individual leader has agency. In inter-action, agency plays out in-between agents – interactions are foregrounded but they are thought of as between entities trying to influence each other. Finally, trans-action is action in the flow of practice – trans-actors are transformed in the trans-actional engagement as new and ongoing meanings are enacted; there is no

simple causal relation between entities and doings. Agency thus resembles, in the trans-actional case, what Mary Parker Follett called “power-with” (Follett, 1924) rather than “power-over”. For a practitioner this means that it is never possible to fully predict and instrumentally influence courses of action – clearing for action is a contested and open-ended kind of work. On the other hand, it is important to develop a sensibility for paying attention to the complex and subtle doings that are taking place as conversational flows unfold and for trying to ‘tune in’. If inclusive leadership is aimed at, this means trying to develop ways of engagement that result in increased collective space of action, or inclusive clearing for action. But this is no individual enterprise, rather a trans-actional one, which means that it is not individuals that need to be trained, but rather practices that may be developed (Crevani, 2015) – leadership development needs therefore to be re-thought too (Carroll and Simpson, 2012, Carroll et al., 2008).

To conclude, this article should be seen as contributing to the ongoing conversation about processual takes on leadership and to leadership practice. From a theoretical point of view, a spatio-temporal conceptualization of leadership work is provided and empirically illustrated – further studies could expand on the material character that leadership work also has by focusing on sociomaterial processes rather than conversations. From a practical point of view, concepts such as clearing for action, positions, and issues may help practitioners challenge their own ideas and ideals of leadership and appreciate what kind of work is done in ordinary interactions and what kind of work is beyond the manager’s reach (Crevani, 2015, Packendorff et al., 2014). Hence, this article aims at contributing to a ‘socially constructive’ social construction of leadership (Grint and Jackson, 2010) —that is, a contribution to building alternatives to still dominant individualistic conceptions of leadership.

## Notes

1. It should be noted that placing studies in the categories delineated above is not always easy – for example, when the focus is on the ‘moves’ made in conversations and not on the constructions produced in talk (cf Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012)– and not an end in itself. The aim of the distinction is rather to show that the phenomenon can be processually approached from different angles and that there is a question of degree when it comes to going from a process perspective, still highlighting the role of entities as actors, to a process ontology.
2. Presenting leadership as ‘production of direction’ rather than ‘what managers do’ may raise the following comment: ‘how do you know it is leadership?’. However, such a comment has different meaning depending on from which theoretical tradition it is posed. For example, it may imply that this is too broad a definition – then everything is leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003)–, or that this is not a truly social constructionist definition – leadership should be what the people studied construct as/name leadership (Fairhurst, 2009). Both criticisms denote positions that are critical to traditional individualistic and essentializing takes on leadership – the first one dismantling the concept constructed by researchers and practitioners, showing its emptiness in practice, the second one filling it with meaning provided by practice. What I propose, however, is that researchers pursue another avenue. The researcher

can also re-articulate the concept keeping key aspects, but with a twist, in order to advance knowledge by enabling thinking and talking about leadership in a different way (similarly to a critical performativity agenda, Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). This may result in ‘making a difference by doing differently’ (Calás and Smircich, 1992, p. 234), that is, not only adding knowledge, but also adding knowledge by providing a novel reading of a phenomenon, being aware that we produce organizations when writing about organizations.

3. Doreen Massey’s work has been previously used in studies of organizing by, for example, Vásquez and Cooren (2013)

4. The idea of ‘space of action’ has been 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 programs with a constructionist approach in order to express the idea of a space for identity work on the part of leaders (ibid.).

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