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Communicative leadership: exploring leaders' discourse on participation and engagement

Liderança comunicativa: explorando discursos de líderes organizacionais sobre participação e engajamento

Liderazgo comunicativo: explorando discursos de líderes sobre participación y compromiso

ABSTRACT

This study investigates organizational leaders' discourses and how they are embedded in organizational and national structures and relate to leadership and communication in two Swedish organizations. This study has social constructionist aspirations and invokes qualitative, discursive, and interpretive perspectives. The findings, based on 27 interviews with leaders at various levels in the two industries, indicate that leaders' discourses are affected differently by national and organizational cultural structures and are related to the circumstances affecting the construction of communicative leadership in these organizations. In a strongly established organizational culture national, context has less influence because members are loyal to the communication and leadership views of the organization in question. Discourses of communicative leadership and Swedish leadership are relevant to the organization that work to make its leaders more communicative. However, notwithstanding the predominance of national or organisational leadership and communication views, leaders remain viewing themselves as the main leadership actors. The study also seeks to extend the knowledge of the concept of communicative leadership contributing to the understanding of its definition in relation to characteristics of national and organizational cultures.

Keywords: communication; leadership; communicative leadership; discourse; national culture; organizational culture.

RESUMO

Este estudo investiga os discursos de líderes em duas organizações suecas e como esses estão envolvidos em estruturas organizacionais e nacionais associadas à liderança e comunicação. O estudo tem um enfoque social-construtivista e evoca perspectivas qualitativas, discursivas e interpretativas. As conclusões, baseadas em 27 entrevistas com líderes de diversos níveis hierárquicos, indicam que, nas ditas indústrias, os discursos dos líderes são influenciados de formas distintas por estruturas organizacionais e culturais. Também indicam que esses discursos estão circunstancialmente associados à construção da liderança comunicativa. Em uma cultura organizacional fortemente estabelecida, o fator nacional possui menos relevância, uma vez que os empregados das organizações estudadas aderem mais às visões de comunicação e liderança das próprias empresas. Discursos sobre liderança comunicativa e o estilo próprio de liderança sueca são relevantes para uma organização que objetiva investir no aperfeiçoamento comunicativo de seus líderes. Contudo, a despeito de os padrões de comunicação e liderança serem nacionais ou organizacionais, os líderes ainda se concebem como os principais agentes do processo de liderar. Esse estudo também procura expandir o conhecimento do conceito de liderança comunicativa e contribuir para a compreensão de sua definição em relação às características das culturas nacional e organizacional.

Palavras-chave: comunicação; liderança; liderança comunicativa; discurso; cultura nacional; cultura organizacional.

RESUMEN

Este estudio investiga los discursos de líderes de dos organizaciones suecas, cómo estos se involucran a los sistemas organizacionales y nacionales y cómo describen las nociones de liderazgo y comunicación. El estudio tiene un abordaje socio-constructivista y utiliza perspectivas cualitativas, discursivas e interpretativas. Las conclusiones, basadas en 27 entrevistas con líderes de diversos niveles jerárquicos, indican que en las industrias suecas citadas los discursos de los jefes son afectados diferentemente por la cultura organizacional y nacional. Además, esos discursos circunstancialmente colaboran para la construcción del liderazgo comunicativo en sus respectivas compañías. En una cultura organizacional fuertemente establecida, el contexto nacional tiene menos influencia, ya que los empleados obedecen más a las visiones de liderazgo y comunicación de las mismas empresas. Los discursos de liderazgo comunicativo y el estilo sueco de liderar son relevantes para las organizaciones que anhelan desarrollar las competencias comunicativas de sus líderes. Sin embargo, independiente de que las visiones de comunicación y liderazgo sean organizacionales o culturales, los líderes aún se consideran como agentes principales del proceso de liderar. Esta investigación también busca ampliar el conocimiento acerca del concepto de liderazgo comunicativo, comprendiéndolo a partir de sus características culturales y organizacionales.

Palabras clave: comunicación; liderazgo; liderazgo comunicativo; discurso; cultura nacional; cultura organizacional.

Despite the increasing number of studies criticizing the image of leaders as heroes, it remains as strong as ever (FORD; HARDING; LEARMONTH, 2008; GRINT, 2010). Leaders are still considered to be powerful figures (FORD et al., 2008) and continue to identify with this image themselves (ALVESSON; SVENINGSSON, 2003). Cross-cultural and cultural essentialist approaches (see HOFSTEDE, 1980; CHHOKAR et al., 2007) explain leaders' and employees' preferences and leadership orientations in terms of cultural or national values. Leaders' behavior is held to reflect the ideas, values, and norms of their national culture and hence national culture is seen as constraining or enabling organizational culture (HOFSTEDE, 1980, 2001). This functionalist approaches imply that preference for power is cultural and might have implications on actors' behaviors.

The postmodernist perspective emphasizes that discourses of leadership are embedded in social-historical and organizational structures which play an essential role in individuals' co-constructions of leadership, contradicting or corroborating already existing discourses of leadership (FAIRHURST, 2007; FAIRHURST; PUTNAM, 2014). This perspective emphasizes the extent to which members are embedded within and interact with various structures as well as their ability to be reflexive and to transform contexts (ALVESSON;

KÄRREMAN, 2000; FAIRHURST, 2007, 2009; FAIRHURST; PUTNAM, 2004).

In line with this perspective, this study investigated the discourses of organizational members in two Swedish organizations, in particular the extent to which they are embedded in organizational and national characteristics and how they relate to leadership and communication. The study focused on leaders' accounts of the Swedish concept of 'communicative leadership' and highlighted discourses of engagement and participation, which are central to this concept. Communicative leadership involves engaging others in decision-making through dialogue and feedback and being open (JOHANSSON, MILLER; HAMRIN, 2014). The concept originated in Swedish organizations (NORDBLOM; HAMREFORS, 2007) and relates to Swedish social-historical characteristics. It emphasizes, for example, employee participation and more widespread and open decision-making (SCHRAMM-NIELSEN, LAWRENCE; SIVESIND, 2004).

The aim of the study was to investigate national and organizational influences on discourses of leadership and communication, focusing on leaders' perceptions of their attitudes and practices related to these constructs. The study also contributes to understanding of the concept of communicative leadership. In the following sections we provide an overview of leadership and communication and organizational culture in the Swedish context to provide a frame of reference for our exploration of leaders' discourses on leadership and communication with a view to extending understanding of the Swedish context and facilitating interpretation of the data. The findings are discussed in relation to organizational and national cultures and the concept of communicative leadership.

Leadership in the Swedish context

Cross-cultural and management literature suggest that in Nordic countries, specifically Sweden, there is more attempt to involve all members of a group in leadership practices (SCHRAMM-NIELSEN, LAWRENCE; SIVESIND, 2004) and leadership style is influenced by a culture which encourages equality, consensus, and cooperation between leaders and employees (GRENNESS, 2011). Swedish leaders show preferences for team involvement, coaching, and participative behaviors (HOLMBERG; ÅKERBLOM, 2007). According to Grenness (2003), leadership in Sweden is distinguished from leadership in other countries in several ways; for instance other nations consider Sweden to have a consensus-driven decision-making style (ISAKSSON, 2008). The requirement for consensus slows down the decision-making, but once taken a decision can be implemented forthwith as the whole group or organization has already accepted it. It is called 'förankring' ('anchoring' an idea) in Swedish language and means that acceptance of a decision is achieved through, and during, the process of building a consensus for it (LÄMSÄ, 2010; LOUHIALA-SALMINEN, CHARLES; KANKAARANTA, 2005). Isaksson (2008) described how Swedish leaders carefully 'anchor' ideas and proposals over several meetings, involving employees to a greater extent than leaders elsewhere.

Other studies corroborate this view, pointing to Swedish management values: participative decision-making, conflict aversion, strong focus on relations, and a certain formality (DORFMAN, 1996). Holmberg and Åkerblom (2007) analyzed the Swedish sample from the 2008 Globe Project and found that Swedish middle managers scored very high on inspiration,

integrity, and vision – qualities which characterize transformational leaders – as well as on team integration, performance orientation and decisive and collaborative team orientation. What makes Swedish leaders so interesting, however, is that they point out how non-participative, autocratic, face-saving, self-centered, and malevolent elements inhibit outstanding leadership (HOLMBERG; ÅKERBLOM, 2007).

In behavioral terms, Nordic leaders put more emphasis on interpersonal relationships than on the structuring of tasks (LINDELL; ARVONEN, 1996; SMITH, et al., 2003), and this is reflected in the Swedish literature (SCHRAMM-NIELSEN et al., 2004). In Nordic countries, coaching is preferred over giving directives. Swedish leadership is reported as participative, as enabling employees to play a consultative role and yielding decisions that are the result of group processes (LAWRENCE; SPYBEY, 1986); people are taken seriously when they speak 'on behalf' of the group rather than out of self-interest (SMITH et al., 2003). Employees are goal-oriented but also comfortable following loose directives (ISAKSSON, 2008). In the Globe sample, what differentiated Swedish leaders from their counterparts of other nationalities is that self-protectiveness emerged as an inhibitor of performance and Swedish leaders were characterized as "having ability in building, integrating, coordinating, and sustaining a team whose members collaborate in a collegial and equalitarian way" (HOLMBERG; ÅKERBLOM, 2007, p. 322).

Organizational culture and the Swedish organizational context

The link between national and organizational cultures is complex and difficult to determine (NEL-

SON; GOPALAN, 2003). A thorough understanding of the cultures of countries, organizations, and clusters of industries would be needed to explain the similarities and differences between national culture and the culture of a specific industry (NELSON; GOPALAN, 2003). Research on identity construction has provided an account of the processes involved. Ailon-Souday and Kunda (2003) argued that individuals are not, as theoretical frameworks using national theory predictions state (e.g., CHHOKAR, BRODBECK; HOUSE, 2007; HOFSTEDE, 1980), passive observers of cultural values. Organizational members actively and creatively appropriate culture, constructing national identities as symbolic resources which allow them to adjust to different contexts (AILON-SOUDAY; KUNDA 2003).

These studies, whilst providing support for a constructionist approach, ignore the dominance of uniform national values and focus instead on actors as reflexive agents who appropriate the culture and make it their own (HALL, 2011). Through a discursive lens, the macro-discourse of leadership in Sweden is characterized by discourses of consensus, equality and participation, which are dominant in various settings (e.g., political, historical, social, and institutional). However, several global and organizational factors influence the strength of this macro-discourse on members' micro-discourses. A longitudinal study of a unit in a Swedish multinational company (SIMONSSON, 2002) described the modern leader as representing a blend of democratic and a transformational leadership; someone who encourages participation whilst inspiring non-leaders with his or her vision. Simonsson argued that communicative behaviors could be divided into two types, sense-making behaviors (see WEICK, 1995)

and information dissemination, grounded in traditional leader-centric approaches (among others, e.g., trait approach, behavior approach, contingencies). The organizational environment and work conditions influence both approaches to communication. A modern leader needs a work environment in which information is decentralized. However, the empirical evidence showed that leaders are information disseminators because, for instance, there is no time to develop relationships with non-leaders. The material conditions to enable this exist (e.g., remote communication technology such as email, face-to-face interactions, meetings), but leaders and employees needed dedicate more time to communicating to each other and developing sense-making through dialogue.

Although cross-cultural studies mention employees as having a consultative role in Swedish work places, leaders' interpretations of policies, goals, and visions filter the information which reaches employees. Johansson (2003) reported on a medium-sized Swedish organization in which middle leaders acted as gatekeepers and were responsible for making sense of and transmitting information down the organizational hierarchy. The way in which top managers' messages about vision and strategies were communicated was influenced by the middle leaders' perspectives and priorities. Communication was influenced by organizational structure and other elements of culture. Riestola (2013) noted that current leadership practices in Sweden are influenced by a new rationalism. The originally one that focused on employee involvement has started to change under foreign influences and diverse global management models focused on enhancing performance. Leadership practices have begun to shift away from employee participation.

Swedish leadership then is described in the litera-ture as an ideal of what it believe to be and what it is perceived to be in workplaces according to results of qualitative empirical studies. The aim of this study was to investigate organizational leaders' perspec-tives on leadership and communication, highlighting discourses associated with engagement and participa-tion, as these are central to communicative leader-ship, a concept developed in Swedish organizations.

We examined the extent to which discourses are embedded in organizational and national characteris-tics and leaders' perspectives on leadership and com-munication in two Swedish organizations. The investiga-tion was guided by the following research questions.

RQ1: Which characteristics of national and local/organizational cultures are present in leaders' ac-counts of communicative leadership?

RQ2: How do leaders discursively construct en-gagement and participation?

RQ3: How do leaders discursively position them-selves in the engagement process?

Two Swedish organizations

We investigated two Swedish manufacturers. Orga-nization A is a company with about 500 employees at its headquarters and two factories in the north of the country, which is the main market for its products. Or-ganization B is a secular family business employing 1000 people and its target market is the whole of Sweden.

Organization A had started implementing 'lean management' of production two years before the study. Leaders and employees were still getting used to the new ways of communicating and a recent survey had suggested that employees were not satis-fied with the existing leadership style, which had lead

to a series of measures designed to involve them in decision-making. The organization started recruiting new leaders externally instead of sending employees with leadership potential to training. The human resources (HR) and the communication departments also began working with a consulting firm to develop training programs on the new management process and a leadership vision that also focused on communication skills. The HR manager said that the organization was developing a new leadership style involving leaders not only motivating and inspiring employees, but also encouraging them to participate in decision-making.

The average length of employment in organization A is 23 years. Several employees, and some whole families, have spent their entire working lives in the organization. Leaders emphasized that employees were considered the main resource for the quality of the work and development of the organization, and representatives of the communications and HR departments emphasized this aspect of the organizational culture. Moreover, in several departments employees had relationships that extended outside the workplace, thus creating informal structures that often included the leader as well.

At the time data were being collected for this study organization B was going through significant changes. There were plans to shut down one site and replace it with another; the management team was announcing both lay-offs and investments. Moreover, after 35 years the organization was to have a new chief executive officer (CEO). The new CEO was said to have similar leadership style to his father. The CEO perceived that organizational structures restrict em-

ployee creativity and work satisfaction. Among members it was known that the organization followed the principle of *freedom with responsibility* (Isaksson, 2008), i.e., employees had the autonomy to make decisions, but were expected to do so responsibly and with the organization's well-being in mind.

Methodology

This study has social constructionist aspirations and invokes qualitative, discursive, and interpretive perspectives, which follow on from the linguistic turn of the 1990s (FAIRHURST; PUTNAM, 2014). Accounts of micro-contexts and discourses related to everyday conversations among actors and of macro-discourses and contexts are inspired by Foucault's more general work on discourse, the enduring influence of which is now recognized (ALVESSON; KÄRREMAN, 2000, 2011). For the purposes of this study the characteristics of Swedish leadership described in the cross-cultural management literature (national discourses or leadership perspectives) are therefore considered macro-discourses related to the Swedish social-historical context.

Interviews were conducted in 2011with leaders at various hierarchical levels in two Swedish organizations. The interviews were conducted at a time when both organizations were going through changes which were expected to have an effect on their organizational culture. Both organizations agreed to participate in a project related to communication and leadership in the expectation that they would be able to use the results to improve communication within the organization and to improve their leadership development programs.

Method and data

Leaders at several levels of the organizational hierarchy were selected in collaboration with the HR and communication departments at the local sites and headquarters using a maximum variation method (PATTON, 2002) so as ensure that a wide variety of views would be represented (PATTON, 2002; TRACY, 2013).

Two researchers conducted the interviews with the assistance of two senior students of Information and Public Relations who conducted and transcribed the interviews. The findings were reported to representatives of both organizations verbally and in writing; these reports described how communicative leadership had emerged locally. These procedures strengthened the credibility of our findings (GUBA; LINCOLN, 1994) as they were not contested by either the organizational representatives or the respondents.

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 12 leaders (4 senior managers, 7 middle managers, and 1 first-line manager) in organization A, and 15 leaders (4 senior managers, 8 middle managers, and 3 first–line managers) in organization B to establish respondents' understanding of communicative leadership and how communicative leaders behave. We also interviewed representatives of the communication and HR departments (Organization A: the head of HR, a lean management strategist and the head of communication; organization B: the information director and three members of HR, one at headquarters and one in each site) to gather background information about the organizations and their leadership visions and programs. We also interviewed the CEO of organization B to obtain background information.

Respondents were asked to reflect on their leadership and communication styles in relation to employees and to their own managers, and to articulate the implications for the work environment. Individual interviews provided the opportunity to explore these central constructs (KVALE; BRINKMANN, 2009) and allowed respondents to reflect on everyday practices and their relationships with other members of the organization.

Data analysis

The first step of data analysis was a careful reading of the transcripts to identify central patterns and themes. During this first read-through answers were coded with labels (words or short phrases) that represented the essence of what the respondent had said (TRACY, 2013) in order to reveal general patterns and an organizational narrative through the leaders' narratives of situations of engagement and participation, and show how leaders discursively construct these behaviors. After this the data were revisited several times to identify any of the specifically Swedish leadership and communicative leadership characteristics highlighted in the literature (MILES; HUBERMAN, 1994; TRACY, 2013).

The second step was to isolate excerpts that focused on engagement and participation, translate them into English, and analyze them further. This second iteration involved identifying subthemes and establishing the characteristics of these discourses (TITSCHER et al., 2000) in relation to perspectives to leadership and communication. The third iteration involved reading the excerpts and analyses to search

for similarities and differences between the two organizations with respect to the theoretical concepts.

Results

The findings suggested that in organization A leaders' discourses were more associated with national discourses of leadership than in organization B. They were also more complex because they reflected circumstantial events such as recent leadership training on the creation of a new organizational/leadership view. National discourses referring to leadership and communication (e.g., consensus) were thus more evident in organization A (leaders' exposure to leadership training might explain this), whereas organization B presented a distinctive culture associated to their top leader leadership style. Leadership style throughout the organization appeared to have some similarities with the leadership style of the CEO. Leaders at different hierarchical levels agreed that employees should emulate their leaders. The leadership style also reflected the previous CEO's reputation for hard work, his aversion to structure and his preference for bypassing the chain of command and going straight to the source of the information to make the work more efficient. However, the leaders faced challenges, such as finding a balance between control and freedom for employees. Leadership and communication discourses indicated that those higher in the hierarchy were models for other leaders and even employees.

In organization A, leaders' discourse indicated that they worked actively to engage employees and enhance their agency. Leaders worked to ensure a work environment where employee participation in decision-making was important for good organization-

al results, whereas leaders in organization B emphasized employee acceptance of decisions (top down management). Leaders in organization B also stressed their own importance for the process of engagement, enhancing their own agency.

Leaders in organization A described employees as being essential to decision-making and themselves as facilitators and moderators of the process, whereas leaders in organization B positioned themselves at the core of the organization, as role models for employees.

The sections below present the results in more details.

Organization A: Swedish communicative leadership and national discourses

In organization A, leader's discourses of employee engagement and participation seem to be embedded in national discourses of participation, diversity of voices, and consensus as process. All these imply that leaders and employees have ongoing conversations during meetings to deliberate and establish ('förankra') decisions. The role of the leader is to encourage and facilitate employee contributions to organizing through open communication. Leaders' discourse emphasized the enhancement of employee agency, demonstrated through employee participation in group discussions:

> We have an open atmosphere and one has the right to say whatever one wants to. (...) At our meetings I demand that everybody is there and participates, too. (Production, male leader)

This quotation illustrates the openness that the leaders described as being necessary to the creation

of an environment in which employees can contribute to the discussion, and thus exert influence. The data suggest that the creation of such an environment depends on how leaders interact with employees. The leader quoted below sees herself as a coach and takes into consideration employees' particular backgrounds:

> If [employees] then report to me and say that it feels like it's going well or raise a flag and say that it's not going to work, we need a few weeks to make things work – there is a kind of continuous reporting to see what it looks like then – and feel that (...) one has one's manager on one's side (...). One should be praised not only when things go well. So, it's not just when one shows that one can provide support, one is there on the sidelines and it feels as if sometimes one has to be a bit of a coach. How involved I get depends a lot on what kind of task it is, (...) which union someone is in, their experiences and their background, so to speak. (Finance and IT, female leader)

Here the leader is saying that employee contributions in dialogues and discussion are allowed and she relates her own level of engagement to the experience, background and occupation of the employees involved, and even the kind of union representation they have; several aspects of employees' social identity are critical for their level of engagement.

The leaders' accounts reflect national discourses of participation, team working and integration. The leaders saw employees as assets in the decision-making process and expected them to take responsibility and contribute to the work environment (LAWRENCE; SPYBEY, 1986). The leader below had a strategy for promoting employee engagement and participation:

Sometimes I expect the group to step up and take greater responsibility for various things. (...) I might avoid telling them certain things and tell them that they have to figure it out themselves since it is their responsibility, to be proactive, to get them to act and think about it. I often say and do things in a particular way in order to trigger a reaction. (Research, female leader)

In the quotation below the leader is also describing behavioral strategies for encouraging employees to contribute and how they affect engagement and participation.

[To be communicative] (...) it is also necessary to motivate the people you communicate to respond so it really becomes two-way. (...) it is necessary to, say, be able to listen then and get everyone to speak, (...) there may be someone in the group who sits quietly (...) and then I usually turn directly to the person in question and prompt them a little. (Laboratory, female leader)

Leaders' accounts indicate that all members' contributions are important, both during group discussions and face to face with the leader.

Using consensual decision-making to promote participation.

Leaders' discourses indicated that consensus is the outcome of a creative process involving multiple voices. This process has to involve *learning* through *interaction*. Members engage and participate to make sense of different issues and reach a consensus. The process by which consensus is achieved and the discussion this entails seems to be enriching for leaders and non-leaders alike. Below a research manager emphasizes that a group should include people who think differently:

> Of course difference arises, but the important thing is to feel secure with one another and to be able to understand that these people react in this way because they are this way and that everyone wants what's best, so one feels free to speak one's mind and is receptive to dialogue and discussion. I believe that it is very important and if one has that, (...) the group functions even if everybody is not the best of friends. I think it works well in a work team if one can open oneself up to understanding others and imagine how the others may be thinking. (Research department, female leader)

In other words diversity of ideas is necessary initially and the difficulties that this brings are welcome. People who think differently make leaders rethink their positions and thus contribute to development:

> It is always much easier to talk to people who communicate in the same way as oneself. (...) what is most pleasing then is when one has succeeded to communicate with the people who think differently (...) usually hearing other views allows us to revise our own views. (Research department, female leader)

This quotation also challenges the widespread idea that Swedish leaders are afraid of conflict.

The leaders agreed that the hierarchical structure was still a problem for communication. One difficulty was that team leaders had a big responsibility for communication as the senior management could not address everyone directly. Moreover, team leaders had a close relationship with their team and, according to the leader of the laboratory, this potentially influenced the credibility and relevance of what they said and hence affect its impact on production.

In the quotation below one leader explains how communication of information about the manage-

ment program could be improved. The quotation also reveals that leader-centric views co-existed with discourses of engagement:

> (...) the leaders have been away (...) many times on whole-day meetings and there have been consults who have told us and we have learned a lot. One would like everyone to go to a such a training day at some point. But instead, it has to be channeled down through the leader. (Laboratory, female leader)

This leader believed that communicating directly with all members about the organization's new leadership strategy and vision would be more effective than using leaders as gatekeepers of information.

Role and positing in engagement and participation

The discourses in organization A suggest that leaders were aware of their central role in the existing leadership environment.

> (...) there is a lot of responsibility on me (...). But I try to involve everyone and also to make it clear that everybody has a responsibility to participate. But it's necessary to create that climate, too, so that people will feel able to trust me. (Production, male leader)

This production manager emphasized that to create an environment in which as many members as possible are engaged in dialogue, leaders need to communicate clearly and openly. He was aware of being responsible for ensuring good communication and concluded that employees have to believe that leaders can represent them.

Below a leader describes his role in improving communication, but also the need for employees to take some responsibility for good communication within the organization and hence the need for employees to have the same communication training as the leaders.

> (…) Even if the leader has a really important role, I believe that one has to win over the employees; and the employees need to understand the importance of effective communication and what they stand to win through it. One can create opportunities for them to practice their communication. It is perhaps more natural for us, as managers, to think that we need to take courses, read books, and do various things to improve our communication, but it is at least as important to take the employees on board. If one only invests in the leaders when one is trying to create a communicative enterprise, then one will not succeed. (IT, male leader)

Although the senior management had decided to invest in training to enable the organization's leaders to communicate lean management strategy to employees, the leader quoted above saw the potential benefits of extending this training to employees. Leaders contributed to good group communication by signaling that they wanted all members involved in decisions about what to prioritize in the group as well as the organization as a whole, as the following quotation illustrates:

> When I started here, I (…) asked each and every person what they thought was important and then we did an exercise during a departmental meeting where we went through and prioritized all the points and then set them up and said, "This is important for the whole enterprise" "That is important for our department" and

so on. That exercise was good because now everyone knows what we need to prioritize (...) and (...) why we do things the way we do. (Finance, female leader)

Organization B: Swedish communicative leadership and organizational discourses

Leader's discourses at organization B highlight both employee autonomy and the acceptance of decisions already made in a well-established organizational culture which reflected the CEO leadership style. Leaders were seen as role models and representatives of the organizational culture.

The leader below mentioned that organization B's culture was well disseminated among members. He explained that the departments had their own leadership styles, but that the frame of reference was set by the senior leaders:

> (...) we [...] are quite "sprawling" and I think it's not only to do with our perspective on leadership but also with where the company culture comes from. Every department has had its own quite large sphere of responsibility. (...) it is [the highest] manager's leadership style that has been most influential. (Legal Affairs, male leader)

The following quotation illustrates how the hierarchical power structure in organization B worked; the CEO could bypass leaders and talk directly to an employee to get information:

> We have a culture (...) in which it's okay for me to go directly to the source.(...) it's one thing for me to collect facts but it's another thing if a decision has to be made in that case, a manager cannot of course be ignored. But I can ask a salesperson directly how relations are with this customer (...) and I think that this is quite important. (CEO, male)

The CEO recognized that leaders have to be involved in decision-making, but exerted his power when needed. This leadership style had an impact on leadership style throughout the hierarchy. Leaders were seen as role models and these characteristics were disseminated to employees, who were encouraged to behave similarly:

> It is very important for a leader, for example, like we're sitting in an open office space, to walk through the offices in the morning (...), look at everyone and say good morning so that everyone feels they are being seen. (...) one must not sit and curse in an office space which is open; it only infects all the others with negativity. (Administration, male leader)

This quotation also makes it clear that leaders' communication does not have to be verbal. Symbolically, everything the leaders did mattered to employees. It was important to the environment of the organization that leaders showed interest in and appreciation of employees and this improved performance.

One of the leaders noted that employees are more likely to engage when they are well-informed; and, correspondingly, that lack of communication could have a negative impact:

> If we have a meeting and go through the agenda and we try new things in new ways, [it] creates a sense of engagement among the employees, they feel that they can get involved, and influence what's going on; and vice versa, if one does not communicate at all, one only gets a negative spin on the whole thing. (Service, male leader)

Although this leader mentioned a 'sense of engagement among employees', in general the lead-

ers of organization B emphasized the acceptance of decision already made by employees, and the importance of the leadership role for engagement and in preparing employees to be independent in their work. One leader, for instance, said:

> (...) you are really satisfied when you feel (...) that you managed to get the whole message understood and accepted and when someone comes up afterwards, when they're leaving the meeting, and says, "You know, I had a whole other opinion before I came here, but now, although I maybe still don't think the same as you I understand why we have to do this". (...) But those meetings which end up in some rebellious chaos, like, "No, we can't agree to that!" and one feels like everyone is beginning to acceptance but instead gets defensive about the decisions the company has made, then one feels, "This is not good. It's about to derail."(Export, male leader)

Although this leader recognizes that it is essential that the group is given information about decisions that had to be implemented, dissenting voices are considered a disruption to the process; employees have to understand the reasons for the decisions and accept them. To this leader, disagreement with a decision once he had explained it was a sign that he had failed to engage people. Leader's discourse indicates that employees are engaging at the work place occurs when they accept the information about the decision.

The challenge for leaders, then, was how to inform employees about decisions and motivate engagement to execute these decisions. 'Acceptance' of decisions, rather than participation in decision-making is what matters. As the quotation below indicates,

leaders engage employees, with the overall aim of improving performance.

> I then worked hard for a very long time on explaining and making people involved in how to measure our objectives do follows, and influence these objectives. And we got a very good response, both in terms of job satisfaction – because people felt they meant something to the workplace – and better results. (Operations, male leader)

According to this operations manager, leaders have to fulfill the needs of employees, giving them resources to make them independent in their work. Another leader said that employees are never satisfied with the amount of information they receive and emphasized that leaders should wait until a final decision has been made before communicating to employees in order to avoid confusion caused by different updates; lack of information causes uncertainties which have a negative effect in the workplace.

> (…) the point of information (…) is to engage people, because they understand "what my role is now in the big picture and how I am a part of this process and what this means for me." And obviously, one cannot do this all that often and besides, not all information can be communicated. Sometimes, early in a decision-making process, one can say, "Maybe we should communicate this," but this can almost become disinformation if the final decision ends up being completely different. (CFO and IT, male leader)

In organization B it was important for employees to know their leader well because this supplied the frame of reference within which they would make decisions; although they had personal autonomy, deci-

sions were expected to be in accordance with the leader's perspective — *freedom with responsibility*.

Leaders were directive even when they talked about engagement strategies. Below a leader describes how he engaged a new group of employees by giving them autonomy and showing trust in their competence.

> I have four salespeople under me (...). Before my first meeting with them, I asked them to tell me a little about themselves, which they thought was a little strange since I should already know about them. Once they had done that, I said, "So you must feel quite secure. After 15 years, I assume that you know your jobs, and I'm not planning to order you about." It felt like I had laid down the whole situation through noting that instead of asking if they knew their job. I thought I didn't need to change anything, the way all new managers often do (...). Both the salespeople and I were satisfied with this. (Business Area, male leader)

This quotation illustrates the directive style of leadership adopted in organization B. Although the leader had made the strategic decision that he would not make changes simply to assert his leadership from the beginning the employees were neither involved in nor consulted about this decision.

Leaders' discourses indicated that they were aware of their ability to influence employees. This leader said that self-motivation facilitated engaging others to achieve goals. Leaders were also aware that they needed to meet employees' expectations to avoid generating frustration.

> Most meetings where one has to achieve results and has to engage others become so much simpler if one is self-motivated. We reach the objective set much more

quickly. On the other hand, sometimes when people have a different expectation from the meeting, they become disappointed and angry. One has perhaps used words one thinks are neutral but they are not and then they cause anger and fear instead. (Administration, male leader)

This administrative manager meant that leaders have to have discursive strategies. He, for instance, avoided using words, such as 'discussion' which could signify 'conflict', according to him. This ability to frame and adapt information according to current objectives is also evident in the CEO's discourse:

If I stand there and talk about, for example, the changes we're making now (…), that we are building that warehouse, I mean, I can't stand there and run through the same presentation in [name of a site] as I do in [another site]. Because these people would just get furious if I go on about how fantastic this high technology we're building in [name of a site] is, since it is their jobs that disappear. In the same way, when I'm in [name of a site], I have to think about the fact that a number of truck drivers are probably sitting there and won't have [a job]. (…) Then you somehow have to put yourself in their shoes, think about what it is they want now, what they need to know, and how to put it to them so that it is understood correctly. (CEO)

The CEO was adjusting his communication strategy to his audiences; to do this he needed to gather information within the organization and know what employees expected from him communicatively. Since leadership practices were based on his position, what he did was central to leadership behaviors of both leaders and employees at different levels.

Discussion and conclusions

The data analyzed for this study suggest that Swedish leaders in these two organizations focus on different contexts and circumstances to elaborate their discourses. In organization A, there were signs that macro-discourses and leadership perspectives mattered rather more than local or micro-discourses. The findings suggest that organization A has several characteristics that have previously been associated with the Swedish style of leadership; achieving consensus (LOUHIALA-SALMINEN et al., 2005) is one such characteristic.

A preference for team working can also be discerned in organization A. Decision-making discourse occurred in groups and so it was natural for the members to be gathered in meeting as a forum of representation. Even if the leader appeared to play a critical role in initiating communicative processes, decisions were still the outcome of a group process.

In organization B, on the other hand, leaders' discourses of employee participation were embedded in organizational discourses of leadership related to the behavior of local senior leaders. Participants' leadership and communication discourses corroborated other research suggesting that in family-owned organizations the organizational logics are associated to the logics of the family who owns the business (see EDWARDS; MELIOU, 2015; MILLER, et al., 2014; ZAHRA; SHARMA, 2004). Leaders' discourses in organization B were related to the CEO's leadership style and determined leadership practices throughout the organization; leaders are perceived as role models. Order, control, and hierarchy were more evident in these discourses than in organization A, despite the CEO's

professed claim that structures stifled creativity. The objective of employee engagement was to secure acceptance and implementation of decisions; the leaders' role in communications was to deliver information strategically. Consequently, leaders at all hierarchical levels adapted their communication style and message to their audiences. Our data do not suggest that leaders' discourses of engagement involved coercion; however leaders were aware of the importance of communication or lack thereof and used their linguistic resources strategically. The organizational culture was evident in discourses about leaders' behaviors towards their employees and about their own leadership role. An effect in cascade was expected: employees were expected to act like their leaders while the leaders were expected to act like their other leaders upwards in the hierarchy. The findings indicated a belief in a referent power among leaders in organization B.

Team working is mentioned in these leaders' discourses, but not to the same extent as in organization A. Leaders in organization B did not mention promoting wider participation by, for instance, encouraging employees to raise their voices during meetings. In organization B, discourses were about how leaders communicated with employees to secure their acceptance of decisions. Leaders thus had greater communicative responsibility as their communication skills needed to be good enough to secure this acceptance.

Swedish Communicative Leadership and Power Relations

The data from organization A suggest that the characteristics of Swedish leadership identified in the literature, such as more balanced power relations

(SCHRAMM-NIELSEN et al., 2004), team work, consensus, cooperation (GRENNESS, 2011; LÄMSÄ, 2010; LOUHIALA-SALMINEN et al., 2005), and participative decision-making (HOLMBERG; ÅKERBLOM, 2007; LAWRENCE; SPYBEY, 1986), improve leaders' communication with employees, especially emphasizing their practices towards engaging employees in decision-making through dialogue and feedback (JOHANSSON et al., 2014). Enhancing employee agency and participation can facilitate organizational activities, but does not mean that leaders are making an effort to distribute agency (FAIRHURST, 2007) between themselves and employees equally.

Leaders in both organizations were aware that they still had primary responsibility for leadership and for initiating the entire process of engagement and participation, regardless of whether the goal was a consensual decision reached by the group (organization A) or the acceptance of management decisions (organization B). The influence of recent training on leaders' discourses should thus be further investigated in organization A to clarify the stability of discourses that indicate a transition from leader-centered to meaning-centered views among leaders.

The discourses of leadership and communication in these two organizations provide further evidence that the process of 'engaging employees' also depends on conditions within the organization and on the social-historical structures interacting with actors (MARTIN, 2002). The Swedish concept of communicative leadership places high value on leadership practices which engage employees through communication.

In addition, the findings also confirm the constructionist assumptions that leadership is dynamic, flexible,

and contextualized (CLIFTON, 2012; FAIRHURST, 2007; HALL, 2011). Communicative leadership cannot be defined independently of the organizational context; it is defined in accordance to the relationship between leaders and employees. However, their relations are associated to which perspectives on leadership and communication are relevant locally. The central assumption is that engagement can be achieved through effective communication and that enhancing employee agency has a beneficial effect on decision-making. The methods leaders used to achieve employee agency and participation are important, because they influence the work environment and organizational culture.

Communicative leadership took different forms in organizations A and B as leaders in the two organizations promoted engagement for different purposes. Leaders in organization A facilitated employee participation with the aim of encouraging employees to be more reflective (FAIRHURST, 2007) and creating an environment of trust. Discourses of employee participation indicated that organization A grounded their new organizational view on macro-discourses of Swedish leadership and communicative leadership. The findings for organization A suggest that 'communicative' (expressing opinions, and giving and receiving input on one's own or others' ideas) was equivalent to what was meant with participation. Communicative leaders encouraged employees to participate in decision-making and the life of the organization reflexively.

The leaders' discourses at organization B represent a blending of empowerment, control, and care for employees and their activities. Leaders promoted empowerment to some extent, creating autonomous,

self-directed individuals or teams (SHARMA; KIRKMAN, 2015). However, leaders exerted control over employees' deliberations as they expected employees to emulate them and were thus able to predict behaviors. The leader's role was to bring about acceptance of decisions and provide employees with the information they needed for their work. Leaders' behavior dictated the work environment; leaders believed they were omnipotent and able to influence others' behavior. They used linguistic resources to influence rather than engage. Although communication appeared to be essential to securing the acceptance of decisions, communicative leadership was not used to promote group processes or create a collective voice. National characteristics are not equally evident in all types of organization within a country. Organizational culture is linked to socio-historical structures (BRANNEN, 2009); however the data from organization B indicate that the local organizational culture can be strong enough to limit the influence of other structures. Organization B's local cultural dynamics, built up over generations, had a direct influence on leadership style.

In conclusion, this study contributes to understanding of communicative leadership through its exploration of leaders' leadership and communication styles; it also provides a qualitative explanation of the complexity of the link between national and organizational culture (NELSON; GOPALAN, 2003). The data indicate that the relationship between national (leadership characteristics endorsed by cross-cultural and management literatures) and organizational contexts are not easily untangled, but the two cases presented indicate that although leaders still have a heroic view of leadership (a macro-discourse), their discourses in-

teract differently with the contexts they are embedded in and can be affected by circumstances and the conditions created by senior leaders.

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