Developing and spreading leadership across levels: the facilitating and constraining role of context

Authors

Sylwia Ciuk, Doris Schedlitzki

Abstract

Leadership development programmes increasingly encourage plural forms of leadership to counteract the pitfalls of individualistic approaches. This paper contributes to our understanding of the role of context in developing and spreading leadership across hierarchies. Working within an omnibus approach to context, previous research has highlighted the role of institutional forces in the emergence of distributed leadership in the public sector, yet so far neglected the influence of the discrete organisational context. Drawing on an in-depth case study of a private sector organisation trying to recover from a turbulent past through an in-house leadership development initiative, we show how the omnibus *and* discrete organisational contexts jointly facilitate and constrain the development and spread of leadership and how they are instrumentalised in this process. We surface how social and political dynamics associated with socio-material relationships and institutional arrangements, together with wider omnibus forces, influence the aim of an in-house LDP and its potential to impact perceptions and practice of distributed leadership in organisational settings. We argue that a nested approach to context – encompassing the interconnected omnibus and discrete contexts – is required for a deeper understanding of the factors that facilitate and constrain the development and spread of leadership.

Introduction

Research into leadership has seen a shift towards plurality (Denis et al., 2012) where leadership is conceptualised as an interactional process that is fluid, temporal and situated in practice (Ospina and Foldy, 2016). Informed by Denis et al.'s (2012) 'leadership in the plural' framework, we seek to contribute to the research stream that explores 'spreading leadership across levels over time' by adding a much needed focus on leadership development (LD) (Lloyd and Carroll, 2019). More specifically, we aim to enhance our understanding of how omnibus and discrete organisational contexts (Johns, 2006; Oc, 2018) facilitate and constrain the development and spread of leadership across levels (Currie et al., 2009; Denis et al., 2012; Holm and Fairhurst, 2018).

The spreading of leadership tends to be depicted as a required capability for organisations dealing with increasing institutional complexity and business challenges (Gibeau et al., 2020; Lloyd and Carroll, 2019). Relatedly, we have seen a growing interest in plural forms of LD practice where organisations move away from developing a few individuals to developing groups, teams or whole cohorts (DeRue and Myers, 2014; Moldoveanu and Narayandas, 2019). Yet, despite the potential benefits of distributing leadership, there is a lack of empirical insight into 'what makes or breaks distributed leadership (Chreim, 2015: 54). In recognition of the inherently situated nature of leadership (Spillane et al., 2004), authors have called for more research on the role of context in plural forms of LD (e.g. Day, 2000; DeRue and Myers, 2014). While these calls remain largely unanswered (Diochon and Nizet, 2019; Gagnon and Collinson, 2014), the role of context has featured more prominently in distributed leadership research (Currie et al., 2009).

We adopt a contextually sensitive lens to studying the development and spread of leadership across hierarchical levels. Our nested approach conceptualises context as encompassing interconnected omnibus and discrete contextual factors. This builds on the seminal framework put

forward by Johns (2006) and further extended by Oc (2018). Our insights are based on an in-depth case study carried out in a private sector organisation – a Polish subsidiary of a pharmaceutical multinational – which tried to overcome a perceived leadership deficit (Chreim, 2015) with the help of an in-house distributed leadership initiative. Our results bring to the fore two types of inter-related tensions when developing and spreading leadership across hierarchical levels: a socio-cognitive attachment to a heroic MD-centric leadership approach and challenges with separating leadership from formal positions of individuals. Focusing on two groups: executives promoting the leadership development programme (LDP) and middle managers as its main target, our study demonstrates how the omnibus *and* discrete organisational context jointly influence and are instrumentalised in providing the impetus for LD and how they impede the enactment of leadership across levels. Thanks to a contextually sensitive lens we surface how social (Ospina and Foldy, 2016) and political dynamics associated with socio-material relationships (e.g. a large influx of new staff and associated tensions, the turbulent history of the subsidiary, a perceived threat of closure, authority-based hierarchical culture) and institutional arrangements (the individualising motivational and competition inducing performance evaluation systems), together with wider omnibus forces (pressures from the parent organisation), influence the purpose and aim of an in-house LDP and its potential to impact perceptions and practice of distributed leadership.

We start by reviewing insights from the distributed leadership literature on facilitating and constraining contextual forces when attempting to spread leadership across levels. We then introduce our case study and explore the LDP. Our analysis focuses on how attempts to move towards a distributed leadership approach were both facilitated and impeded by the discrete and omnibus organisational context. We conclude with reflections on the value of a nested approach to context when studying the development and spread of leadership across levels.

Spreading leadership across levels

Since the 1990s, leadership studies have seen a growing stream of research on leadership as a collective phenomenon rather than a property of individuals (Denis et al., 2012; Ospina et al., 2020). As a means to navigating this varied body of work, Denis et al. (2012) provided a comprehensive framework that categorises 'leadership in the plural' research into four streams. The first stream focuses on 'sharing leadership for team effectiveness' and explores how team members lead each other. The second strand of work, 'pooling leadership at the top to lead others', looks at small constellations of joint leadership. The third body of work is concerned with 'spreading leadership across levels over time' and explores distributing leadership across individuals. The final strand of work - 'producing leadership through interaction' – comprises studies of leadership as an emergent property of relations. Whilst recent contributions (e.g. Gibeau et al., 2020; Ospina et al., 2020; Sklaveniti, 2020; Van De Mieroop et al., 2020) have provided innovative approaches to researching such plural forms of leadership, we still lack insight into how they are developed (Lloyd and Carroll, 2019). Fairhurst et al. (2020) also critique a positivity bias in this field and insufficient focus on political dynamics, historical influences and connections to hierarchies. Our paper responds to this critique by examining a case of an in-house LDP attempting to spread leadership across levels in a private sector organisation, where we explore the facilitating and constraining contextual influences on developing this plural form of leadership.

Our approach to contextual influences is informed by Johns' (2006) framework which differentiates between the omnibus context – macro-level societal, institutional and environmental influences – and the narrower discrete context – specific, situational influences such as the nature of the task and the social and physical aspects of the context, such as the group composition or physical distance. We concur with Oc (2018) and Jepson's (2009) interpretation of these two types

of context as nested and influencing each other. We see the distinction between the omnibus and discrete contexts as analytical, rather than categorical and the factors that come into play as emergent rather than pre-determined or acting uniformly.

Far from being a 'monolithic concept' (Spillane, 2005: 149), distributed leadership has attracted much research which has revealed multiple patterns, or configurations - to use Gronn's (2009a,b; 2015) terminology - of distribution (e.g. Chreim, 2015; Spillane, 2006, Thorpe et al., 2011). Building on Gronn (2002) and Spillane's (2005, 2006) conceptualisation, we see distributed leadership as 'widespread leadership agency' (Currie and Lockett, 2011: 289) where interdependent actors located within and beyond hierarchical arrangements engage in multidirectional influencing. This shifts our attention from individuals to groups (Denis et al., 2012) where leadership enacted by a small number of individuals can coexist with leadership exercised by groups and larger collectives. Gronn (2002) underscored this holistic aspect of distributed leadership moving beyond aggregate views of distribution. He thus conceptualised 'pure distributed leadership' (Currie and Lockett, 2011) as entailing both concertive action and conjoint agency. Concertive action – or, to use Currie et al.'s (2009: 1739) words, a 'circulation of initiative', - refers to a specific form of collaboration in the course of which individuals, sharing implicit understanding and pooling different skills and expertise, act as 'a decision-making unit' (Gronn, 2015: 556) to complete a task. This collaboration can be spontaneous, formally mandated by organisational design or develop organically in close working relationships, for example in a shared role space (Gronn, 2002). Conjoint agency, on the other hand, refers to coordination and alignment of leadership work which results in a synchronization of leadership across individuals. It is seen as producing synergies founded on mutual, reciprocal influence (Gronn, 2002; 2015. Whilst we perceive both of these elements as jointly constitutive of the leadership synergies

associated with Gronn's 'pure distributed leadership' (Currie and Lockett, 2011), we also recognise that collaboration is not free from tension and that convergence on goals might be partial and contested (e.g. Chreim, 2015; Denis et al., 2012; Gronn, 2015; Spillane et al., 2004). As we explore below and in our empirical case, specific organisational socio-material relationships and institutional structures may favour and/or work against synchronization of leadership (conjoint agency) or collaboration (concertive action). In different contexts distributed leadership can take miscellaneous forms with varying degrees of concertive action and conjoint agency. To better depict the spectrum of distributed leadership variants, Currie and Lockett (2011) have plotted concertive action and conjoint agency on two axes thus creating a taxonomy. They differentiate 'pure' - highly concertive and conjoint variants of distributed leadership from collaborative (concertive but not conjoint) and shared forms (conjoint but not concertive) which they contrast with individualistic approaches which are neither concertive nor conjoint. We acknowledge this plurality of distributed leadership variants and see distributed leadership as dynamic, rather than stable patterns of multi-directional influencing among groups and individuals.

A shift towards 'pure' distributed leadership is not always desired or possible (Lloyd and Carroll, 2019; Fletcher 2004; Fletcher and Käufer, 2003; Van De Mieroop et al., 2020) as it requires conducive organisational and institutional environments. Empirical research in the public sector has revealed various forms of distributed leadership resulting from contextual influences, such as structural and political complexities (e.g. Bolden et al., 2009; Currie et al., 2009) which impede aspects of concertive action and conjoint agency. Currie and Lockett (2011: 290), for example, found top-down driven approaches less likely to engender concertive action. Bolden et al. (2009) explored similar dynamics in UK Higher Education institutions, pointing to the existence of disconnected and disengaged forms of distributed leadership. They note the 'potential shadow

side' of distributed leadership (Bolden et al., 2009: 258) where rhetoric of distribution masks the dominant patterns of hierarchical power and influence (Lumby, 2013, 2019).

Contextually sensitive studies have mainly considered the constraining and facilitating role of the *omnibus* context in distributed leadership. Currie et al.'s (2009: 1735) study of English schools is particularly illuminating in this regard. The authors analyse the influence of institutional pressure: coercive regulatory forces of governmental policies, normative forces associated with professional norms, and cultural-cognitive forces linked to perceptions of leadership. Similarly, Currie and Lockett's (2011) conceptual paper discusses how the health and social care sector context creates a paradox for distributed leadership due to the complex interplay of professional and policy institutions. As the authors argue, the dominant professional bureaucracy archetype, together with a logic of hierarchy and government policy with individualised, target-based accountability foster concentrated, rather than distributed leadership. The authors' focus on sector wide patterns is less conducive to unpacking the role of the *discrete* organisational context. Yet, it has been suggested that the historical (Bolden et al., 2009) 'immediate organizational context' (Currie et al., 2009: 1741) influences how organisation members respond to opposing demands for distributed and individualised leadership and is thus likely to have a more significant influence on leadership than the omnibus context (Jepson, 2009; Oc, 2018).

Indeed, the distributed leadership stream has been subject to critique (e.g. Fairhurst et al., 2020; Lloyd and Carroll, 2019; Lumby, 2013, 2019) for its perceived tendency to pay insufficient attention to power dynamics that come to the fore in discrete organisational contexts and which undermine the often touted transformational potential of distributed leadership (Fletcher, 2004). Van De Mieroop et al. (2020), for example, conclude that we still know little about the interplay of formal and informal leadership within a hierarchical context. Lloyd and Carroll (2019: 1) further

stress that any attempt to spread leadership is likely 'to be messy, multi-layered and involve the exercise of both hard and soft power'. Vertical and shared leadership are not exclusive (e.g. Currie and Spyridonidis, 2019; Spillane et al., 2007) and organisations typically contain 'parallel and interwoven sources of influence' (Gronn, 2015: 546). Bringing to the fore issues of power, Holm and Fairhurst (2018) unpack the complex negotiation between formal and emerging leaders where attempts to distribute leadership interact with personal ambitions and hierarchically based responsibilities. Enacting distributed leadership can engender more tensions and conflict than is often assumed (e.g. Chreim, 2015). It is therefore crucial to focus on discrete experiences (Fairhurst et al., 2020) and social (Ospina and Foldy, 2016) and political dynamics.

We argue that such discrete organisational influences are always interconnected with the omnibus context. Bolden et al.'s (2009: 260) research in the HE sector, for example, pointed to tensions between the regulatory participatory vision of distributed leadership promoted in the wider institutional context and the discrete organisational context where authority, recognition and career paths were individualistic. Currie et al. (2009) described similar dynamics in secondary school settings. They found the individualistic discourse of leadership to be so deeply embedded in the discrete organisational role of the Head of School that it counteracted attempts for conjoint agency. Recently, Currie and Spyridonidis (2019) discussed how the sharing of leadership for diffusion of innovation can be affected by a range of factors, including financial challenges which often lead to top-down performance management and centralised leadership.

Despite the evidence for the important role of contextual factors on distributed leadership (Bolden et al., 2009; Currie et al., 2009), an exploration of these interconnected omnibus *and* discrete organisational influences, particularly within a LD context, is still missing (Diochon and Nizet, 2019). This includes the contribution by Lloyd and Carroll (2019) who examine the

empowering possibilities of creating a distributed leadership environment within a LD setting. Yet, whilst their LDP participants are subject to the same regulatory and normative omnibus forces affecting the health and safety industry – they come from different organisations. The discussed LDP, therefore, was located outside participants' organisational settings and the research, while illuminating, unable to capture discrete influences and the associated political dynamics.

In contrast, a nested approach to context encourages us to approach LDPs as 'embedded organizational phenomena' (Diochon and Nizet, 2019: 618). While authors have already indicated that material considerations, such as financial insecurity (Gagnon, 2008), or forced rankings (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014) play a role in LD, a more nested approach to context is required in the study of developing and spreading leadership across levels. This means paying attention not only to the influences of wider institutional forces (Bolden et al., 2009; Currie and Lockett, 2011), but also to the social and political dynamics associated with socio-material relationships and institutional arrangements. We thus pose the following research question: How does an omnibus and discrete organisational context affect the development and distribution of leadership across levels in a private sector organisation recovering from a turbulent past?

Methodology

Our empirical material comes from an extensive longitudinal multi-method qualitative study, conducted in Pharmacia (a pseudonym) – a Polish subsidiary of a well-established North American pharmaceutical multinational. The study explored how organisation members work with a culture change project – an initiative which quickly embraced LD as one of its key priorities. A single intrinsic case study design was adopted in order to enable an in-depth exploration (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995). This design is still rarely used in studies of LDPs (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014),

despite the recognition that intrinsic case studies offer a unique opportunity to 'reconnect with context' (Edwards et al., 2013: 5). The empirical material comprises multiple sources of data: a wide range of company documentation pertaining to the culture and LD programmes, staff surveys, motivation and performance evaluation systems, interview transcripts and insights from non-participant observation, including presentations of the consultants' culture and leadership study. Adopting a nested approach to context, we grounded our analysis within the understanding of the wider omnibus and discrete organisational context (Johns, 2006; Oc, 2018).

First, we used the whole dataset to build a deep contextual understanding of the organisation. This is based on company documentation and 65 interviews with 47 purposefully selected participants from a cross-section of functions, seniority, length of service and, in the case of the salesforce, geographical location. 40 interviews were conducted before the LDP launch, whereas 25 took place a year later, post LDP activities. The pre-LDP interviews combined a retrospective focus to develop a more nuanced understanding of the omnibus and discrete organisational context with an exploration of current issues, such as perceptions and experiences of the recent organisational changes, challenges, reflections on relationships among staff, and hopes for the future. Post-LDP interviews focused on experiences and views on the culture change project and LDP and wider organisational changes, including relationships among staff. Interviews were conducted in Polish. They lasted on average an hour, were recorded and transcribed in full.

Secondly, we undertook a deep analysis of relevant LD documentation and 36 interviews conducted with 18 organisation members, including the executives who championed LD and those who were its main target, pre and post the LDP launch. Interviews were chosen as the main method of data collection as they enabled us to both develop a more comprehensive understanding of the organisational context, including its historical dimension, and explore participants' experiences

and evolving perceptions of organisational changes, an important aspect of which were the efforts to promote a distributed model of leadership.

The *first* stage of analysis entailed first order descriptive coding as a means of data reduction. We identified all references to leader(ship), context, the in-house leadership model and the LDP. We sought to create an account of the chronology of LD activities, its content and the nature of the promoted leadership model before moving to a detailed reading of the interview material. We followed Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) by staying attentive to what *our participants'* saw as important when making sense of their experiences. To focus on influences of the omnibus and discrete organisational context, we looked for significant 'rich points' (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011: 1432) when participants reflected on self and others in relation to specific organisational and wider institutional forces and the promoted leadership model in their everyday practice.

The importance of discrete organisational context in tensions in everyday practice emerged from the data. While engaging in open coding we were struck by the difficulties that our participants recounted in relation to the enactment of the distributed leadership model. We focused on the identification of wider patterns in the data by comparing and contrasting participants' experiences within and across a range of groupings, such as occupation, hierarchy and length of service. It was at this stage that we noticed a strong contextual aspect in the accounts of tensions, including references to other staff and the wider socio-historical context.

Research Site

Pharmacia, a sales and marketing focused subsidiary, was established in Poland in the late 1990s, shortly after Poland's transition to a free market economy. It was initially run by a string of expatriate managers. The subsidiary employed approximately 230 staff, approximately half of whom had worked there for less than a year because of the unprecedented turnover associated with

the incumbency of the last expatriate MD. The salesforce, divided into geographical regions, was dispersed across the country and as such their interactions with their colleagues and line managers were predominantly technology mediated. Office staff worked in functionally divided departments, the largest of which was finance which enjoyed a strong internal position. The division of staff into sales and support staff served as an important distinction, as it was the sales staff where most of the development efforts and resources were directed. Pharmacia had recently welcomed its first Polish Managing Director (MD) and saw a large influx of staff, including three new executives, two of whom oversaw the sales and marketing functions, and were only starting to establish ways of working with each other. As one of the longest serving staff observed:

> We have to adjust to each other and the [MD] has to introduce a way of leading his team. This is already happening but …it takes time for people to learn how to cooperate with each other. … We are trying to open up the different silos. (Lukasz, executive)

The significant influx of staff was also seen to have contributed to the temporarily heightened perceived sub-divisions and tensions among staff. We observed that length of service and past employer were often used as signifiers of difference in struggles over status.

Data collection coincided with wide ranging change efforts. These were often referred to as 'rebuilding the organisation' after a turbulent period associated with the last expatriate MD who had run a tight regime in response to detected irregularities in an internal audit. The inclusion of a retrospective focus allowed us to develop a better understanding of what was often referred to in interviews and informal conversations as 'macabre' (Wojtek, internal consultant), 'traumatic' (Ola, accountant) and 'paranoid' times (Jacek, executive) underpinned by what was experienced as deep mistrust towards local staff. Participants across organisational levels discussed

unprecedented micro-management and burgeoning bureaucratisation as having 'incapacitated staff' (Marek, sales rep) and 'killed initiative' (Magda, marketing).

It was this traumatic recent past that saw Pharmacia's turnover reach staggering levels and financial performance plummet. While the appointment of the Polish MD – often referred to as an ambitious 'high calibre manager' (Magda, marketing) appeared to be a very welcome move, Pharmacia was facing a lot of challenges. It was believed that its future was contingent upon a decisive improvement of sales results. As one participant revealed, it was 'stated very clearly that we need to … achieve a success if we want to continue our operations' (Lukasz, manager). Uncertainty over Pharmacia's future was often described as a major source of concern which was exacerbated by the fact that the company's product portfolio did not include any new flagship drugs, and some patents were approaching expiration. Voluntary staff turnover was still high, with approximately half of the marketing team having recently handed in their notice.

In interviews Pharmacia was often described as 'terribly bureaucratic' (Jacek, manager), 'operationally inefficient' (Hania, director) and 'very risk-averse' (Milada, assistant). Although considerable effort to simplify procedures was often acknowledged, a large proportion of staff reported feeling constrained by 'the constant need to seek permission and approval' from multiple layers of management (Jacek, manager). Staff surveys pointed to the burgeoning bureaucracy as one of the key impediments for change. As we will discuss below, these socio-material relations had an important bearing on attempts to develop and spread leadership across levels.

Findings

An in-house leadership development initiative: the role of the context

Unlike most of the LDPs described in the literature (e.g. Carden and Callahan, 2007; Carroll and Levy, 2010; Gagnon, 2008; Gagnon and Collinson, 2014, 2017), Pharmacia's LDP championed

by the new MD and three of his direct reports was aimed at the whole workforce. The LDP was closely intertwined with the turbulent organisational history and the imperative to turn the organisation around. Not only were the newly appointed executives under pressure to achieve results and protect their reputation in the small Polish market, but the subsidiary was also under pressure from the parent organisation. While a number of new managers presented the changes as 'a massive challenge but also a unique opportunity' (Iwona, manager), others, including some senior staff, revealed their 'constant fear of not being able to meet expectations' (Ela, executive) as Pharmacia was an organisation where 'you get a green card only for a year' (Ela, executive).

The newly appointed executives often pointed to the turbulent past to explain the perceived poor leadership capacity in the organisation, which they often defined as a lack of initiative and risk taking. As one executive observed: 'when things started to go wrong, the best managers left …so those who stayed were not that feisty, they did not have the drive … leaders were missing … because the organisation did not use to support leaders' (Adam, executive). Difficulties with navigating the complex bureaucratic system and risk avoidance were often interpreted as a lack of accountability, in particular on the part of middle managers. The newly appointed executives often expressed their frustration with what they described as longer serving staff's reactiveness which they contrasted with their approach. As Ela observed:

> I keep saying: 'People, if you notice that something is stupid, think about ways of improving it and report it'. … They don't report anything…. This is how they used to behave. There is no culture of improving the organisation. This is not how I work.

Leadership development was seen as 'a means of working on initiative taking' with the hope that it could trigger an attitudinal change among staff and thus contribute to the emergence of a more entrepreneurial culture where staff 'care for their organisation's wellbeing' (Marek, MD). The

assumption was that 'There is a group of people who can be 'activated' but they are waiting for a sign …as responsibility had been killed in people' (Adam, executive). LD was thus closely entwined with the perceived need to boost organisational performance. Perceived leadership void (Chreim, 2015) was to be filled by 'increasing people's awareness…that the organisation needs to become more efficient…that you need to take on the responsibility' (Ewa, executive) and 'want to improve the organisation' (Marek, MD). Leadership capacity was equated with the presence of a large number of leaders in the organisation:

> We have a large group of people who are reactive. … We need people who … do not look for excuses … who try to turn a bad situation into a positive one. … we need to deliver results. You have a company which [recently] had sharply declining sales … If we want to change the organisation, we need people who can change something within their scope of duties. …. A real change can only be accomplished by leaders (Adam, executive).

It was often acknowledged that 'a lot of work needs to go into building the culture of the organisation towards integration and shared values' (Marek, MD). However, although collaboration and teamwork were often mentioned as still in the process of development after the large influx of staff, and teamwork was one of the leadership competencies to be developed, the executives did not explicitly link it to the objectives of LD. In the excerpt below, for example, Ewa bemoans the lack of synergy which underpins conjoint agency, but links it to team building rather than LD:

> In my team there is no team. I try to build this team. There is a group of people. They meet. You talk to them. They listen. It is not that they want to be together. They don't motivate each other. You can see this in meetings. I want to train my managers to work on this. This is my goal for this year. (Ewa, executive)

Before LD was launched as a formal initiative, a local consulting company was commissioned to carry out 'a culture and leadership audit'. An informal conversation with two executives suggested that its results were hoped to add weight to their tentative diagnosis about the leadership void at Pharmacia. Indeed, the consultants' report purported that 'there was little leadership potential in the company' and that managers, in particular longer serving staff, 'did not want to be leaders'. This contentious finding was based on an all staff survey and four focus groups. The survey asked staff to rank a list of values, one of which could be loosely translated as leadership. Relatively low declared importance of leadership, prestige, income and promotion opportunities were problematically used as a proxy for leadership potential. Additionally, insights from focus groups in which less than 15% of staff participated were mistakenly extrapolated to the whole organisation. Despite clear methodological and conceptual weaknesses of the consultants' study, its conclusions did not get contested. Indeed, they were welcomed and strategically used by some executives to add legitimacy to their original diagnosis:

> [I remember the] surprise and some delight when we showed, quite on purpose, the results on leadership and the controversy around leadership in our company. This was: 'Yeah, we had known this all along! (Justyna)

Subsequently, a local leadership model, referred to as N-level leadership was put forward by the MD. The model was presented to us as 'the MD's vision' (Justyna, executive). It described leadership as linked to qualities and behaviours that were seen as required but missing in the organisation. It presented leadership as a shared responsibility that was to be enacted by all staff within their scope of duties, even if they did not have any managerial responsibilities. Despite this repeated reference to leadership as a shared and widespread responsibility, the model was firmly

focussed on the attributes, attitudes and behaviours of individuals. It thus reflected the continued presence of an individualistic leader-centric approach at Pharmacia.

A closer reading of the model revealed the extent to which it was suffused with individualist leader competencies. It distinguished three leadership dimensions. The first element was described in a staff memorandum as a 'moral compass' and contained four corporate values: achieving, innovation, perseverance and caring, the definitions of which pointed to effectiveness as the overarching value. The second dimension was referred to as the 'power dimension': energy, self-motivation and ambition and it drew on the consultants' reading of McClelland's motivation theory. It highlighted the importance of personal influence and achievement. The final dimension focused on leader competences: integrity, adaptability, initiative, innovation and teamwork which derived from an existing corporate leadership framework. This simple, if not mechanistic, amalgamation of existing frameworks which glossed over overlaps (two mentions of innovation), possible tensions and inconsistencies (e.g. reconciling a focus on personal power with teamwork or the inclusion of achieving rather than integrity in the 'moral compass') was depicted as providing clear guidance to staff. It was described as 'a platform based on which we could pull all these things together … to show how to act' (Justyna, executive). We did not observe much questioning of the content of the framework.

The N-level leadership model was introduced to staff in an MD's memorandum. The provided explanation again equated leadership with the attributes and behaviours of individuals, suggesting that these are universally applicable and thus expected to be embraced by all staff. The memorandum made appeals to professionalism and success. Leaders were said to demonstrate:

> the ability to set and build the firm's vision and strategy while engaging all employees, the
>
> ability to skilfully build organisational structures, business processes, competences and

functions needed in the firm and building a healthy working environment for the whole

firm's personnel, ensuring the best conditions for the development of self-motivation and

creativity of all employees. Further attributes of a professional leader are the ability to

inspire people and their development, the ability to set ambitious goals and to provide

stimulation for their realisation … It is a person with the appropriate professional and

specialist background …, a learning individual ... This is a person who can take tough

business and personal decisions thanks to their knowledge and their internal moral

compass. This is a manager who can communicate openly and effectively, who can

influence their subordinates, their peers, managers and clients.

The model presented an ambitious set of expectations common in normative competency-based

leadership models (Ford et al., 2008). While it referred to the need for multi-directional

influencing, it was conceptualised as enacted by individuals asserting their influence over others.

It thus promoted individualised notions of success, which is a common shortcoming of competency

models (Bolden and Gosling, 2006). Crucially, it failed to acknowledge the role of ongoing

reciprocal influence (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2005) thereby missing the value of concertive action

and conjoint agency seen as key in 'pure' forms of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002).

This model was used as a regulatory basis for the development of an in-house LDP. The

program was designed as an awareness and educational campaign. It was introduced to all sales

and later support staff. It contained a strong normative dimension. Not only was it meant to 'inspire

and motivate people to be pro-active and to take initiative' (Marek, MD), but it was to signal to

staff that 'leadership is good; that everybody can and *should* be a leader within their scope of

duties' (Marek, MD, emphasis added). It suggested that staff had an obligation to 'want to be

leaders' (Damian, executive) and think 'how their actions impact the whole company' (Iza, middle manager), although what this meant was differently understood. As one manager explained:

> If you are an assistant, if you work at the reception desk or are responsible for our car fleet, your diligence and accountability, this is also leadership within your duties. You can showcase your commitment and accountability. This is what is expected. ... These can be trivial things – it is 7 p.m. and you are walking past a conference room and see that a projector is still on. You need to turn it off. Maybe this is not leadership but responsibility. This is how it all comes together. (Bartek, middle manager)

The first run of the LDP was conceived of as the beginning of a longer commitment to LD, with annual events planned for further discussions about leadership and the development of leadership competencies. LD was to be an integral part of the socialisation of new staff. Yet, despite the declared intention to separate leadership from formal hierarchies and convince all staff that they can and should be leaders, LD was delivered in a top-down way which paradoxically reinforced the importance of hierarchy. Aided by an external consulting firm, the programme commenced with the executives designing and running workshops for middle managers – ten of whom were subsequently encouraged to volunteer to train non-managerial staff.

The in-house programme was then run as a series of awareness building and educational workshops – with compulsory participation. Divided into smaller groups, participants attended a series of five half day workshops. Each workshop was focused on a leadership competence and was run by two volunteers in more senior positions. The primary concern was to help participants understand how they could and should demonstrate the given competences within their roles. The workshop activities included role plays and case-based group discussions of the meaning behind individual competences and their link to the corporate values. The focus was on 'the given

competence in action' in daily tasks. For example, training on integrity as a leadership competence saw participants being given a series of scenarios (e.g. Imagine that a doctor refuses to meet their contractual obligations. What do you do?) in order to consider their responses:

> 'the task was to steer the discussion so as to allow the group to arrive in a spontaneous way at the corporate definition … to secure a buy in.' (Olek, middle manager, LD trainer).

The training was intended to help create an attitudinal change among staff and it was hoped that, with time, the desired norms and patterns of behaviours would become more embedded. It was cast as a pioneering initiative because of its collective approach. As the MD observed:

> [Our LDP] is a pioneering initiative as, to the best of my knowledge, nobody else runs LD for sales reps in the pharmaceutical market, and probably other markets. (Marek, MD)

The LDP focused on the development of individuals, albeit in large numbers in order to achieve alignment of collective efforts (conjoint agency) with a view to 'improv[ing] the organisation' (Marek, MD), as suggested earlier. Such a preoccupation with the aggregation of individual contributions, Gronn (2002) argued, could be considered a minimalist version of distributed leadership, although it is fraught with challenges, as our case illustrates. Using Currie and Lockett's (2011) typology, it was closest to what the authors describe as the shared leadership (Pearce and Conger, 2003) variant of distribution, due to its top-down driven approach and focus on alignment. However, it was also individualistic in its orientation.

Contextual influences on the development and spreading of distributed leadership

While efforts to distribute leadership through the new leadership model and the LDP were, with a few notable exceptions, presented to us as a principally welcome, or at least an uncontroversial move, interview data brought to the fore 'rich points' – 'words and moments that appear to carry

significance' (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011: 1432) - which indicated challenges and tensions with the enactment of the new distributed leadership model in everyday practice. Interestingly, these tensions surfaced not only in interviews with those who were primarily at the receiving end of the LD initiative, but also among the newly appointed executives championing the initiative. We started to notice an embeddedness of such tensions in existing socio-material relations and institutional arrangements rooted in the discrete organisational context as well as omnibus influences. We observed an interrelated dynamic: the predominance of a heroic MD-centric leadership approach and tensions with separating leadership from formal positions of individuals.

The predominance of a heroic MD-centric leadership approach

Notwithstanding the emphasis of the LDP that 'everybody can [and should] be a leader within their scope of duties' (Marek, MD), our data provided ample evidence that an individualised, heroic MD-centric leadership approach continued to underpin staff's assumptions. Both pre- and post-LDP interviews often discussed leadership as a responsibility of the MD, albeit with some shift in focus. In pre-LDP interviews, participants talked about their hopes, fears and expectations which were directed at the new MD. The MD was discussed as being able and obliged to 'put the house in order' (Natalia, sales). He was described as having 'a big task to do … [to] calm people down' (Wojtek, internal consultant) and 'set out a compelling vision for [Pharmacia] to defend itself from the serious threat posed by generic drugs' (Martyna, sales). A commonly expressed expectation among the longer serving staff was that the MD would provide the much-needed feeling of stability. As one of the longest serving members remarked, 'the survivors welcomed him as salvation' (Natalie, internal consultant).

The post-LDP interviews revealed continued attachment to MD-centric views of leadership. When asked about the state of leadership after the LDP, it was not uncommon for participants to comment on particular characteristics and behaviours of the MD as a 'real leader' (Bartek, middle manager). This could also be interpreted as a veiled counter-critique on the part of the longer serving staff of other new executives espousing the need for LD:

> The MD is a leader. You practically do not see other leaders on a daily basis. … He is a leader when he gives speeches, when you talk to him. … he takes decisions quickly. … he is impatient when somebody takes longer to gather their thoughts. (Olek, middle manager)

A closer reading of interviews with the new and longer serving executives suggested that they, too, appeared to be attached to the authoritative role of the MD. While they highlighted their own contributions, they also located the responsibility for wider organisational changes within the realm of the MD 'who is leading the way' (Irek, executive):

> These expected changes need to materialise. … [The MD] *should help implement this*. … without his help this will be a very long process. He needs *to firmly introduce these changes*, …. I try *to build a culture* in my department but …. [he] wants *to change the whole organisation*. But how can you do this? He is alone. (Adam, executive)

While Adam presented himself as one of the few people who were able to help the MD, he also discussed carrying out deep changes to the organisation as something only the MD as the lone leader had the responsibility and ability to accomplish. This quote illustrates how the pervasive cultural-cognitive influence of the heroic MD-centric leader image continued to shape the expectations around leadership. Our data point to how these assumptions affected actions. A particularly revealing observation came from Justyna who reflected on executives' difficulties with enacting the distributed leadership model by sharing the responsibility for leading key meetings:

> The organisation still needs [the MD] … When he is not around, there are no key meetings. Nobody *steps in for him* … it is clear that there is no point continuing because *he always makes the final decision*. The management still cannot work well without him.

Justyna's account points to a relational aspect of the executives' challenges. It is not only the direct reports to the MD who fail to enact leadership which is seen as residing within the authority of the MD. The MD's own difficulty to distribute leadership by refraining from 'mak[ing] the final decisions' appears to re-affirm others' challenges with enacting the new leadership model.

Tensions with separating leadership from the formal position of individuals

The analysis of 'rich moments' in the data revealed a second interconnected tension with separating leadership from the formal position of individuals. Earlier we explained how the discrete organisational context, in particular the troubled history of the organisation and pressure for quick performance improvements, were strategically used to provide an impetus for the launch of the LDP. In this section, by contrast, we discuss how organisational context simultaneously impeded the enactment of distributed leadership which was reflected in accounts of difficulties with separating leadership from formal positions of individuals. More specifically, our analysis points to three key discrete contextual factors: (a) the deeply ingrained importance of status and formal hierarchy, (b) individualising work practices and performance evaluation systems and (c) the precarious financial position of the subsidiary. We discuss how these factors, together with the distinctly individualistic understanding of leadership, contributed to tensions with separating leadership from the formal position of individuals.

(a)   Our reading of the data leads us to suggest that Pharmacia was a strongly authority-based organisation with a deeply ingrained importance of status and formal hierarchy which affected

participants' daily experiences and their difficulties with enacting distributed leadership. Despite surface indicators of seemingly reduced power distance among staff, such as informal ways of addressing each other which run counter to the Polish custom, a closer analysis of cultural cues revealed the importance of status and formal hierarchy in the organisation. Participants often used spatial imageries to describe the distance between them and executives, for example by suggesting that decisions are made 'at the top' and that middle managers were not the right discussion partners for the MD who was 'out of their reach' (Igor, middle manager). Decision-making was centralised and formal authority was used to cascade information and deliver training, including the LDP. Extensive bureaucratic requirements, in particular a complex multi-layered approval system for expenses, continued to shape staff experiences. The importance of hierarchy and status was further reflected in the material aspects of the office design and staff benefits. These signs of status carried a lot of symbolic value, for example once resulting in a protest when parking spaces were seen to be re-allocated contravening the perceived accrued status of some senior longer serving staff.

While the LDP aimed at encouraging all staff to see themselves as leaders who can 'take tough decisions' and influence not only their peers but also their managers, the existing patterns of relationships which aligned decision-making powers with formal authority, ran counter to the espoused principles of distributed leadership. These tensions were not only visible in interviews with middle managers, but also the newly appointed executives who were most vocal about the need to distribute leadership. As one executive admitted:

> We often have scheduled meetings with the MD. Managers prepare very thoroughly …. The MD should give them a chance to deliver these presentations. …. He needs to listen to them. … it does not make sense to force a group *to come up with ideas* which are never heard because the MD already has an idea for something. …. We should *listen to people*

more …. When the MD makes a decision, this shuts down all discussions because nobody will question his decision. … this kills *initiative*. … I admit that this is the feedback that I have also received about myself and the organisation. (Adam)

The excerpt points to challenges with shifting existing practices. Enabling middle managers to enact the distributed leadership model by showcasing initiative and novel solutions required not only a change of attitudes and behaviours of middle managers, on which the LDP focused, but also a shift in how organisation members related to each other. Challenging the MD was not perceived as a viable option. A powerful illustration was offered by Justyna when reflecting on the relations between two groups in the organisation: the executives and the Area Sales Managers:

[the ASMs] started asking for something [to motivate their staff]. We had a tough discussion … It turned out that [they] do not feel that they have something [they could use]. ... What is still ahead of us is delegating. So far, we have been delegating a lot on the top of the organisation. We need to let the organisation start acting more independently; [keep it] on a longer lead. Let people have the fun of creating, deciding, influencing, taking risks, making mistakes …. [Recently we have had] the first meeting of all managers where they were treated for the first time like managers and we talked to them as managers.

The difficulty with shared decision making is linked to the deeply ingrained, normative assumptions about how, by whom and where strategic decisions should be made. Justyna describes leadership as 'fun' but also as a privilege linked to formal authority which the executives as benevolent positional leaders can share with others. She uses the striking imagery of keeping staff 'on a longer lead' suggesting a stable division of power and a version of distributed leadership as responsibility and some authority, albeit 'offered with a leading rein' (Lumby, 2013: 588). These ingrained assumptions subtly undermined the officially endorsed distribution of leadership. We

noted intentions to change practices, yet these were seen as requiring more time and effort. Despite calls for widespread leadership agency, in practice the possibility of multi-directional influencing appeared to be reserved for more senior staff:

> This year I will try to work through a group of managers that are close to me so that I eventually do not take many decisions myself but that they are taken by the sales and marketing managers, after a strong and healthy process of challenging each other. … this is how I will try to build a team. (Adam, executive)

Tensions with separating leadership from formal positions of individuals also manifested themselves in difficulties with upward influencing. These were particularly pronounced among ASMs who, while working remotely, tended to have a larger span of control and found themselves most often critiqued for perceived failures to adequately display leadership. As Kacper describes:

> I am expected to be a leader for the sales reps. I feel that the work has been centred on us more; *we are responsible for contacts with the sales reps*, for teaching them. However, when it comes to relations with the upper management, I would like to have a better opportunity *to influence [the people]* in my region. …. Do I really have an *ability to have a bigger impact on the company?* …I get the impression that our ideas are often not considered …. Even during our last meeting, we [the ASMs] *had some ideas we really wanted to implement*, but they were disregarded. We wanted to run training for our own sales reps, but we were told that we couldn't. We interpreted this as a lack of trust … Also, there was a sales rep to whom I wanted to give a final warning and another one whom I wanted to keep. My boss and I sat down and we talked this through. He agreed with me. Two days later he called and told me that things are just as we discussed but reversed ….

> So when it comes to *my ideas*, they are not taken into consideration. Somewhere higher up, I am not noticed…. My *leadership in a wider forum* is problematic.

Kacper uses events from his daily work to interpret his and his peers' difficulty with exercising leadership. He acknowledges the normative expectations of the new distributed leadership model by noting that his role has been redefined so that he, and his peers, see themselves as leaders, when interacting with their direct reports. What he depicts as problematic are his interactions with his superiors. He not only reflects on how his own staffing decisions have been disregarded but he points to challenges that he shares with his peers. He describes attempts by ASMs to act as a group and engage in concertive action but simultaneously explains how it is undermined.

Despite these accounts of shared challenges, it was evident that not all staff's views were consistently disregarded. In fact, both interview data and documentary analysis of staff surveys indicate that ideas coming from staff had provided impetus for changes in policies and procedures. Some longer serving support staff favourably evaluated their ability to exercise their discretion, in particular in contrast to the recent turbulent past when they reported feeling incapacitated:

> [In the past] As an ASM …I was an incapacitated moron. …. Now we have more autonomy, but this comes with more responsibility. (Michal, middle manager)

(b)   Our analysis suggests that the challenges of separating leadership from the formal position of individuals can also be traced back to a range of institutional arrangements, including individualising work practices and performance evaluation systems. As we discussed in the introduction to our case study, in order to boost performance, the new executive team instated an aggressive, as it was often referred to, motivational system for sales staff. It was seen as 'introducing a healthy competition' (Marek, MD) by rewarding top performance. This new system, with an extended range of performance metrics and stretching targets, however, also markedly

increased rivalry among staff. Top/bottom performance rankings were created and publicised, with warnings and subsequently termination decisions issued for bottom performers. Sales staff would receive daily text messages with target tracking statistics and comparisons:

> Because of the bonus system, there is more competition…. What matters is the interest of the individuals and not the team's as a whole…. If people don't see how a given activity will translate into their sales results, they won't get involved. (Ola, sales rep).

> There is a sales ranking which says that you are better or worse. You can be good now but next month can find yourself among people who are in danger of losing their job … There is still no feeling of solidarity, partly because most of the people have worked here for less than a year, partly because of these rankings. (Kacper, Area Sales Manager)

Demanding sales targets increased insecurity and competition while focusing staff's attention on individual goals undermining both concertive action and conjoint agency.

 (c)   The heightened focus on top performance and short-term improvements linked to the organisation's precarious financial situation not only compounded feelings of insecurity but also impacted on how staff related to each other. This link was well captured in an interview with a newly appointed executive who admitted to feeling 'constantly monitored and under pressure 'not to be kicked out'. She outlined her frustration with the perceived lack of adequate performance improvements among middle managers despite the LDP:

> Our managers …. are independent when it comes to business decisions, but not on a more strategic level …. They [don't think] about their group, who fits where … They should be self-motivated instead of being such chickens. (Ewa, executive)

Facing demands to prove her effectiveness as a leader, she admitted to being more directive, despite this approach running counter to the distributed leadership model she wanted her staff to

embrace. Ewa observed that she did not 'want to keep doing things for [her staff]' and that she wished others 'would come to [her] with solutions'. However, she also saw little alternative to exerting strong influence herself, as she believed that in Pharmacia 'we don't play soft ball'. We noticed a similar pattern of self-assertion adopted by some ASMs who emphasized the need to 'give a boss's speech to spell out what one wants and what cannot be tolerated' (Kacper), or to 'enforce that the sales reps do what they should' (Jacek). This focus on controlling as a key relational practice reasserted the importance of formal hierarchy and contravened the ethos of more widely distributed leadership with multidirectional influencing associated with conjoint agency.

Discussion

Our intrinsic case study design (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Stake, 1995) based on extensive longitudinal data allowed us to capture the interconnected influences of both the omnibus and discrete context (Johns, 2006; Oc, 2018) on the development and spread of leadership. First, this stepping 'outside the discrete pedagogical or learning focus' (Gagnon and Collinson, 2014: 664) enabled us to advance our understanding of how organisational context was interwoven with the purpose of the LDP. Thanks to the inclusion of a retrospective focus, we were able to uncover an interesting political dynamic associated with attempts to develop and spread leadership. Our study illustrates how the largely new executive team instrumentalised aspects of the discrete context (troubled organisational past and poor performance) and the omnibus context (coercive pressures from the parent organisation) to account for a perceived leadership void (Chreim, 2015) and to legitimise a new model of distributed leadership and the associated LDP. With the help of consultants, the LDP provided a strategic platform for the new executives to attribute performance problems to the historical legacy of the organisation. It helped to justify and concentrate the bulk of critique on

longer serving middle managers and solidify perceptions of their own competence and status as effective, pioneering and benevolent leaders who solve organisational issues by developing and distributing leadership throughout the organisation. Our study contributes to the strand of work on 'spreading leadership across levels' (Denis et al., 2012) by highlighting not only how contextual factors impact this process (e.g. Bolden et al., 2009; Currie et al., 2009; Currie and Spyridonidis, 2019) but also by showcasing the strategic usage of context (Diochon and Nizet, 2019) in the development and spread of leadership. Our study thus also extends previous critical work on LD (e.g. Gagnon, 2008; Gagnon and Collinson, 2017) by unpacking the political role of LDPs which comes to light when LDPs are conceptualised as 'embedded organizational phenomena' (Diochon and Nizet, 2019: 618).

Further, our study demonstrates the so far overlooked entanglement of the given rhetoric of distributed leadership with organisational context and how this impacts its potential for changing attitudes and behaviours. In contrast to earlier studies on the public sector where distributed leadership was associated with omnibus, sector-wide, pressures (e.g. Bolden et al., 2009; Currie and Lockett, 2011), the distributed leadership model promoted in Pharmacia was developed in-house by the MD and was strongly contextualised. It was closely linked to efforts to aid organisational recovery. In line with its goal, it foregrounded elements which were seen by the newly appointed executives as missing in the workforce but required to enable change, namely pro-activity and initiative-taking. However, it also heavily relied on the 'language of competence' (Fletcher and Käufer, 2003: 26) which undercut its ambition.[1] While it made references to multi-directional influencing and strongly emphasized the need for coordinated collective effort to

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[1] The authors would like to thank one of the Reviewers for encouraging us to unpack further the contradictions inherent in the local version of distributed leadership.

improve the organisation (conjoint agency), it simultaneously foregrounded individual effectiveness. Despite making a few references to teamwork, the leadership model failed to acknowledge the importance of 'ongoing reciprocal influence' (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2005) and instead promoted influencing over others. This was despite teamwork and collaboration often being seen as sorely missing in the largely new workforce. They appeared to be treated as separate rather than a core part of LD. Our analysis suggests that the promoted version of distributed leadership resembled what Gronn (2002: 492) described as 'distributed leadership as numerical action', so an additive view of leadership. It depicted successful leaders as acting in isolation and irrespective of context, which is a common problem in competency models (Bolden and Gosling, 2006; Carroll et al., 2008). It also failed to recognise that the presence of more leaders does not have to lead to synergies (Chreim, 2015). Our study thus demonstrates how an individualistic interpretation of distributed leadership can undermine the conjoint agency it was designed to achieve.

Our findings add to the existing work on tensions between distributed models of leadership and hierarchical organisational structures reported in earlier empirical (e.g. Bolden et al., 2009; Currie and Spyridonidis, 2019; Holm and Fairhurst, 2018) and conceptual studies (e.g. Currie and Lockett, 2011; Denis et al., 2012; Fairhurst et al., 2020). We do this by unpacking the role of the omnibus and discrete context in these tensions. More specifically, our data brought to the fore the joint influence of the troubled recent history of the subsidiary (discrete context), the perceived vulnerability of the organisation due to industry challenges and coercive pressures for performance improvements from the HQs (omnibus context) in the continued attachment to a heroic MD centric approach to leadership. Our study also demonstrated how efforts to develop and spread leadership across the organisation can trigger tensions between distributed leadership models and the

continued attachment (Currie et al., 2009) to leadership as linked to formal positions of authority (Van De Mieroop et al., 2020). Our analysis revealed how closely entwined these tensions were with socio-material relationships and institutional arrangements and how they impeded conjoint agency (Gronn, 2002). A focus on discrete organisational influence showed how the strong authority-based organisational culture and bureaucratic structure with its deeply ingrained importance of status and formal hierarchy contributed to tensions among staff in their attempt to practice distributed leadership in their daily working lives. Formal authority firmly shaped the narrated experiences of both groups, re-affirming internalised hierarchy-based relationships and evoking challenges within and across both groups to move away from a heroic MD-centric and positional model of leadership towards a more distributed approach to leadership. This demonstrates how existing structures and relationships can act as a regulatory influence (Currie et al., 2009) on staff's perceptions and on patterns of distribution. To enact distributed leadership, the organisational context needs to be conducive and reinforcing this (Currie and Spyridonidis, 2019). As our research has demonstrated, this reinforcement comes not only through existing relationships, but also institutional arrangements and material factors that are closely intertwined. We observed small emergent patterns of (re-)distribution of leadership, although these were often confined to smaller groups of senior managers, again reflecting the dominant socio-cultural patterns favouring formal authority and positional leadership. In strongly hierarchical organisations like Pharmacia the temptation might be to distribute leadership as shared responsibility but to maintain 'a leading rein' on authority (Lumby, 2013: 588). Our findings suggest that in these contexts, deeper cultural changes might be required than the changes in routines, behaviours and structures discussed in the literature (Fletcher and Käufer, 2003) in order to enact a more profound and long lasting change in leadership patterns.

Our study also advances our understanding of the 'spreading of leadership across levels' by foregrounding the tension between the rhetoric of distributing leadership and everyday discrete work experiences. More specifically, it demonstrates how everyday work experiences re-affirming the importance of hierarchical authority, individualising work practices and performance evaluation systems encouraging competition rather than collaboration exacerbated challenges with the distribution of leadership. The likelihood of such tension was earlier reported in critical commentaries on shifts towards post heroic leadership (e.g. Fletcher, 2004 and Fletcher and Käufer, 2003). In our case study this tension became more visible thanks to our focus on groups, rather than individuals. More specifically, they came to the fore in the interconnected difficulties of executives with sharing decision-making and the middle managers' upward influencing. Both groups experienced contradiction with their formal hierarchy-based reporting relationships and the individualising performance system they were operating in. Furthermore, our study demonstrates how the forces from the omnibus context can add to this tension. In our case it was the financial instability and perceived pressures to secure one's networked reputation in the local labour market which played an important role. These pressures were reflected when newly appointed executives made references to their need to appear effective in their formal role and to safeguard their personal reputation to justify their directive approach to middle managers. By struggling to engage in multi-directional influencing where decision-making is more distributed – as a key part of conjoint agency (Gronn, 2002) – they inadvertently reaffirmed hierarchical leadership structures (Holm and Fairhurst, 2018). A similar relational dynamic could be observed between the MD and executives, impeding the 'ongoing reciprocal influence' required for widespread leadership agency (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2005).

Taken together, the adoption of this contextually sensitive perspective has enabled us to surface social (Ospina and Foldy, 2016) and political dynamics associated with socio-material relationships and institutional arrangements that, together with omnibus forces, influence the purpose and aim of an in-house LDP and its potential to impact perceptions and practice of distributed leadership in organisational settings. By moving our focus beyond the confines of the LDP classroom context, we have been able to deepen our understanding of the importance of contextually situated analyses of LD. We thus advance our understanding of the role of context in LD (Gagnon, 2008, Gagnon and Collinson, 2014; Lloyd and Carroll, 2019; Meier and Carroll, 2019; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013) by underscoring the socio-material relationships and institutional arrangements as important discrete contextual factors, which can be downplayed in some discursive approaches. This particularly helps to draw out how contextual influences may simultaneously create the impetus for and impede LD. Secondly, we add to earlier research into distributed leadership practices (e.g. Bolden et al., 2009; Currie and Lockett, 2011; Currie et al., 2009) through our nested approach to context that captures the interconnectedness of discrete and omnibus contexts. This responds directly to Fairhurst et al.'s (2020) call for collective leadership scholars to research discrete experiences by focussing on political dynamics, historical influences and connections to hierarchies.

Concluding thoughts

This paper has adopted a contextually sensitive approach to explore how omnibus and discrete organisational contexts affect the development and spread of leadership. Our study adds to the understanding of tensions that surface when organisation members seek to enact distributed leadership beyond the confines of the educational setting of LDPs. Adding to the growing focus

on issues of context and tensions in critical LD research (e.g. Carroll and Levy, 2010; Nicholson and Carroll, 2013), we have highlighted the role of the omnibus and discrete organisational context in simultaneously providing the impetus for and impeding the enactment of distributed leadership (Bolden et al., 2009; Currie and Lockett, 2011; Currie et al., 2009) in the context of an in-house LDP. We have thus supported calls for situated LD research (e.g. Carden and Callahan, 2007).

Drawing on a unique case has allowed us to advance our understanding of tensions between emerging and hierarchically situated leadership structures (building on Holm and Fairhurst, 2018) and the role of socio-material relationships and institutional arrangements when developing distributed leadership in a hierarchical private sector organisation. Yet, as this is an exploratory study which draws on a limited non-interactional, largely interview based data set collected within a very distinctive context, it cannot be generalised empirically to other settings. More work is needed on the interplay of omnibus and discrete organisational contexts and their combined influences on LD in different organisational settings. It would be particularly interesting to explore how distributed LD efforts play out in less traditional organisational contexts.

We see great potential in research inspired by a range of ethnographic methods to explore contextual influences on the enactment of distributed leadership in a wide range of contexts and LD settings. We add to Meier and Carroll's (2019) call for more work on LD dynamics not only during, but also before and after given LDPs in participants' actual work settings. Future studies adopting interactionist methodologies may be well suited to exploring emerging tensions in situ. Authors may also consider the adoption of participatory visual methodologies, in particular while studying globally dispersed workforces, which could draw attention to subtle organisational dynamics that might be more difficult to access through traditional research methods.

We suggest that executives advocating LDPs need to carefully consider the influence of organisational contexts and reflect on the suitability of both the content and the mode of delivery of LDPs for a given setting. If LDPs are to contribute to the spreading of leadership agency, care needs to be taken to ensure that the enactment of 'widespread leadership agency' (Currie and Lockett, 2011: 289) is enabled in LDP participants' work context through conducive socio-material relationships and institutional arrangements. The rhetoric of a given version of distributed leadership also needs to be well aligned with its intensions.

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