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**Doctoral Thesis**

## Narrative construction of leader identity in a leader development program context

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**Copenhagen  
Business School**  
HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

# Narrative Construction of Leader Identity in a Leader Development Program Context

**Gitte P. Jakobsen**

Doctoral School of Organisation  
and Management Studies

PhD Series 16.2009

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in a Leader Development Program Context**

Gitte P. Jakobsen

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***Narrative Construction of Leader Identity  
in a Leader Development Program Context***

*Industrial PhD Dissertation*

*Gitte Petersen Jakobsen  
Institute for Organization, Copenhagen Business School  
March 2009*



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## **Prologue**

*"I am honored to be with you today at your commencement from one of the finest universities in the world. I never graduated from college. Truth be told, this is the closest I've ever gotten to a college graduation. Today I want to tell you three stories from my life. That's it. No big deal - just three stories. The first story is about connecting the dots.*

*I dropped out of Reed College after the first 6 months, but then stayed around as a drop-in for another 18 months or so before I really quit. So why did I drop out? It started before I was born. My biological mother was a young, unwed college graduate student, and she decided to put me up for adoption. She felt very strongly that I should be adopted by college graduates, so everything was all set for me to be adopted at birth by a lawyer and his wife. Except that when I popped out they decided at the last minute that they really wanted a girl. So my parents, who were on a waiting list, got a call in the middle of the night asking: "We have an unexpected baby boy; do you want him?" They said: "Of course." My biological mother later found out that my mother had never graduated from college and that my father had never graduated from high school. She refused to sign the final adoption papers. She only relented a few months later when my parents promised that I would someday go to college. And 17 years later I did go to college. But I naively chose a college that was almost as expensive as Stanford, and all of my working-class parents' savings were being spent on my college tuition. After six months, I couldn't see the value in it. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life and no idea how college was going to help me figure it out. And here I was spending all of the money my parents had saved their entire life. So I decided to drop out and trust that it would all work out OK. It was pretty scary at the time, but looking back it was one of the best decisions I ever made. The minute I dropped out I could stop taking the required classes that didn't interest me, and begin dropping in on the ones that looked interesting. If I had never dropped out, I would have never dropped in on this calligraphy class, and personal computers might not have the wonderful typography that they do. Of course it was impossible to connect the dots looking forward when I was in college. But it was very, very clear looking backwards ten years later. Again, you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something — your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life."*

**Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple Computer and of Pixar Animation Studios,  
Stanford University; Speech of the Commencement<sup>1</sup>, June 12, 2005**

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<sup>1</sup> The Speech of the Commencement is held every year at the graduation ceremony at Stanford University. June 12, 2005 Steve Jobs was invited to speak. This is part of the speech he delivered, the speech can be found in its entirety at: <http://newsservice.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505>



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# 1 Introduction and the Empirical Context

This research project is about connecting the “dots” of life into stories; it is about how experiences and events are retrospectively connected and made sense of. The research project follows five Danish executives over a three-year period to explore how leaders<sup>2</sup> unfold significant themes of identity in narratives<sup>3</sup> to make sense of themselves and others in the context of a leader development program and beyond.

This chapter positions the research project in relation to the research field and the contemporary debate and practice. The research aim, interest and questions are specified, and the dissertation structure introduced. The final part of the chapter unfolds the empirical context of the *Executive Training Program*, in which the five leaders participated in 2005. This research has been carried out within the frame of an Industrial PhD established in 2005, in which I functioned as a liaison between the consulting company, Right Management, and Institute for Organization at Copenhagen Business School. Therefore, since I entered the research project from a business organization's world of practice, the project's stakeholders represented two walks of life from the start.

## 1.1 A Way into the Project

Over the last decade there has been an increasing individualization in society, and the personality of the individual leader has become increasingly important as globalization, new organizational structures, outsourcing, and rapid changes have become more dominating. Research by the psychologist and leadership development consultant, Larry Hirschhorn, shows that these developments contribute to growing pressure on individual leaders to reveal more of themselves, and the border between the private and professional have diminished or vanished (Hirschhorn, 2003). In complex, borderless and fast-paced organizations, the leader has become vital for creating and communicating meaning, and each leader's personal conduct, ethics, and identity are taken to be symbolic of the organizational

---

<sup>2</sup> In this dissertation, the term leaders is used on the basis of the hierarchical position of the leaders in my sample. In chapter 4, I substantiate this within the leadership and management debate. Also, I use the masculine pronoun when referring to leaders because it reflects the reality of the Danish leader population, especially at the executive level, and is also reflected by the five leaders in my sample.

<sup>3</sup> In this introductory chapter, the word narratives and story are used interchangeably. In chapter 3, I discuss in detail the conceptualization of narratives and story, and make a tentative distinction regarding their use in this dissertation.

brand. Hence, leadership is publicly evaluated on the basis of how the leader “tells the story” of him and the organization i.e. how he is seen to communicate organizational values and aspirations and the extent to which he exemplifies and *lives* the brand. The personalization of leadership implies that the leader can no longer hide “who he is” behind a role or a task, but is expected to interact with others as a person. This brings to the fore new requirements for leadership. As Hirschhorn points out, leaders of today:

*“...face a complex task – they have to identify with own ambitions and limitations at the very same time. They must step out of the formal leadership role and show themselves as people for their subordinates – people who not only contain strong aspects but also have limitations and insecurity” (Hirschhorn, 2003:30).*

In this sense, the leader has become individualized and personalized, and leadership is more and more becoming an interpersonal narrative practice. According to Danish Institute for Conjecture Analysis, these tendencies are reflected in an increasing demand for leader development programs with a personal orientation and psychologically oriented development focused on individual leaders’ personal challenges.

My interest in leader development programs also derives from 15 years of working with leader development as an industrial psychologist and consultant. Throughout these years, I worked primarily with leaders from the private sector, across a broad variety of industries. I experienced in many different contexts how leaders were struggling with leadership and trying to figuring out how to be a leader. From a consultant perspective, I was puzzled by the same questions, notwithstanding that I, as a consultant/psychologist, was supposed to help the leaders with some answers. Even when leader development programs seemingly did something for the leaders so that they left somewhat more knowledgeable, optimistic or self-assured, there was still no way of telling what had made the difference or how the leader development context had contributed to them becoming leaders. The exact nature of the struggles of these leaders was not very clear, since they seemed to be multi-dimensional and have shifting proportions.

In the process of defining this research project, however, I found two significant concerns when approaching leaders and leader development. First, the state of the leadership field is not unproblematic; research in leadership has agreed on very little, and studies are characterized by inconsistencies and contradictions. They



have been criticized for conceptual weakness and for lacking empirical support, and the results are contradictory and inconclusive (Yukl, 1989:253). Hence, the meaning of the concept *leadership* is often implied or else described by a broad spectrum of definitions (House, 1997; Day, 2001). Few agree on terminology, methods or desired outcomes, and leadership is investigated without explicitly formulating the theoretical position or assumption (Peterson and Hicks, 1999). The second concern is that leadership studies have traditionally been investigated within a system-control view, often within a causal logic and with approaches focused on effectiveness (Watson, 2006:94-95). They have been dominated by quantitative and hypothesis-testing approaches with the explicated aim to formulate general rules for “good or effective leadership”, thus giving prime importance to results and outcome over process (Alvesson, 1996). To relate leader development directly to organizations' quantitative results, such as profits, return on investment or productivity, is highly problematic, however, because of the complex relation between the variables of cause and effect.

Identity research with interest in process has traditionally focused on roles, role adaptation, categorization and identification processes, as in studies based on social identity and identity theory (Styker, 2000; Tajfel, 1982). Such research has focused on when identities are likely to change or the outcomes of individual change processes (Nicholson, 1984; West, Nicholson and Arnold, 1989). Still, the bridging processes that are the antecedents for outcomes and are important to identity construction processes are relatively neglected (Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006:236). Also Willmott (1994) points out how the performance and effect-measurement approaches tend to: “...*marginalize the personal and social competencies that are not readily standardized, measured, and evaluated*”, and finds that this does not further the understanding of the complexities of management practice (1994:110). This dissertation therefore adopts a relational process-oriented approach within critical management theory that gives primacy to the exploration of complexity and the embeddedness of identity processes in language and in the social context. Identity construction processes are dynamic and cannot be isolated, nor is it possible to determine the influence of possible factors or distinguish where it starts and ends. Critical management theory offers an alternative approach to studying leadership; it describes leaders' narrative construction processes as identity work and identity struggles (Svenningson and Alvesson, 2003).

## 1.2 Research Aim and Questions

In the context of this dissertation, the narrative construction of leader identity is perceived to be a process that is inseparable from life circumstances and context. The research interest is to understand, to explore and to analyze the meaning systems and the contexts within which leaders understand themselves and others. The purpose is to understand the construction of meaning in the context of a particular leader development program.

The theoretical framing of the research is based on a narrative epistemological point of departure, implying that narratives are perceived to be not only fundamental for human sense making, but also constitutional for the construction of identities (Bruner, 1987; 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; White, 1990; Gergen, 1994; Czarniawska, 1997a). The dissertation is interdisciplinary and primarily draws from narrative identity theory and critical management studies, but it is also inspired by narrative therapy theory and practice. Hitherto, narrative therapy theories have been scarcely integrated into the academic study of narratives. I argue, however, that narrative therapeutic theories and models should be integrated, because they privilege the processes of reconstruction and offer alternative ways of interpreting narratives, as well as providing inspirational models for analysing narrative construction (Michael White, 2007; Sarbin, 1986).

I investigate *ontological narratives*, which are narratives entailing the maintenance of a personal narrative. This only happens through the individual relating to the social world (Somers, 1994:618). This study examines the meanings that the five leaders ascribe to their experiences. It examines the *processes* of leader identity construction, and the sequencing and structure of the process. In an epistemological understanding of narrative, language is seen as central to identity construction. Language connects the individual with other people, with human culture and with the larger historically based human foundation (Gergen, 1997). In the context of this dissertation, identity is conceptualized as *discourse* and *narrative resources* (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). In the field of critical management theory, leader development is conceptualized as *identity work*. This refers to the processes of individuals are engaged in to form, maintain, and repair identities. It is investigated as identity construction through the use of narrative resources entailing identity struggles (Svenningson, and Alvesson, 2003). Thus, leaders' identity is an ongoing achievement of social interaction (Watson, 2001). The dissertation also includes positioning theory to integrate the power aspects of narrative identity construction conceptualized as negotiation of subject positions (Davis and Harré, 1990, 1991).

The aim is not to generate solutions to practical problems of leader development programs, nor to formulate a contribution in terms of leader typologies or normative suggestions for improving leader identity. This dissertation deals with what the leaders say, as opposed to what is objectively the case. Actions can only be inferred or interpreted on the basis of the narratives that are told (Watson, 2001c:224). This dissertation has a practical-hermeneutic interest, and the aim is to understand and gain more insight into the processes of identity construction in the context of a leader development program (Habermas, 1972). The narrative approach privileges people's narratives, but it also positions the researcher as an interactive part in the research process; hence, the researcher is not a neutral reporter of stories but a co-constructor of narratives, and this dissertation is itself a narrative product.

The social constructivist research position indicates a shift from traditional psychology's conceptualization of identity in terms of personality, needs, motivation and attitudes, towards a discursively produced individual identity, which is understood as being achieved by engaging in identity work and through social processes of interaction and negotiation (Watson, 2001b). A further distinction has to be drawn between what might be considered a good leader development program and what might be considered a piece of solid research. This dissertation does not intend to prove or demonstrate the success of the *Executive Training Program*.<sup>4</sup> The empirical material is not evaluated on the basis of whether the leaders perceive their participation to be a success or not. Whatever the experience and perception, the empirical material in this research context is equally relevant for exploring the interaction and co-construction involved in narrative identity. Thus, this dissertation does not set out to investigate possible outcomes and effects of leader development programs – even though this approach could well have been applied to address the need to place outcomes and effect measurement high on the agenda, as has been launched in the public sector in Denmark with the municipal reform and application of the principles of New Public Management (Klausen, 1998). These tendencies have evoked an intense interest in outcomes, which also includes attempts to measure outcome and effects of leader development programs. This research project might have been initiated in the light of this debate, but its investigation does not have this aim. The empirical context of the *Executive Training Program* is intended to facilitate personal leadership, and

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<sup>4</sup> The empirical context of the Executive Training Program is extensively unfolded in the last part of this chapter.

the focus is on the relational and psychological processes of leadership. Relational and psychological processes are not easily measured; thus, the outcomes are indicated through the leaders' own reflections, experiences and narrative constructions of leadership, all of which are increasingly important in a world where leaders must continuously negotiate their positions and prove their worth in stories of their virtues.

On the basis of this first positioning of the project and the central concept of identity work, the aim of this dissertation is two fold: first, to explore *what* leaders engage in when doing identity work, i.e. investigate the thematic content of leaders' identity struggle; and second, to specify the processes of identity work by examining the narrative processes by which leaders construct leader identity, i.e. investigate *how* identity work is carried out by means of narrative resources and discourses. Therefore, the overall research question is:

*How is leader identity narratively constructed in the context of a leader development program?*

The research process of generating the empirical material and framing the theoretical approach in reading and writing led to the specification of two sub-questions, which as such are both theoretically and empirically generated. The formulation of the two sub-questions aims to further specify and guide the investigation:

*What discourses and narrative resources can be identified in the leaders' narratives?*

*How is leader identity positioning used as a narrative resource to negotiate identities in relation to different actors, activities and notions?*

These questions imply two investigative focuses: first, an examination of the role of *narratives* and *narrative resources* for identity construction; and second, an investigation of the *process* of leader identity construction.

### **Language is not something else**

Narrative research does not just focus on collecting data, but rather on producing new narratives where events are presented with a beginning, a core and an end. The

process of narrative analysis is generative, i.e. its action is to produce or construct a new narrative, a new order, a new meaning. The aim of narrative studies is to investigate how in interviews respondents impose order on the flow of experience in order to make sense of the events and actions in their lives. In the narrative approach, language is not something else; it constitutes the basic material and the infrastructure of your subject. Narratives do not speak for themselves; therefore, it is always necessary to ask about interpretations, relationships, and context in order to try to embrace the complex constitution of the narrative.

In everyday life, people navigate by using language to make sense of events and experience. Often, the language is categorical, representative, and normative. The everyday language of leadership and the language used in leader development program contexts are prone to reproduce managerial discourse in applicable categorical and dichotomized language – e.g. leader styles, task-oriented versus person-oriented leadership etc. When writing a dissertation from a social constructivist position, the use of language presents a challenge. Not only does a social constructivist approach reflect on language use, but socialization into a culture takes place in language, and the research work calls on the researcher to dismiss categorical knowledge and examine the construction of categories and knowledge. Furthermore, writing in a social constructivist tradition suddenly makes certain words and terminology inconsistent with the tradition. The psychology research tradition in which I have my roots originally operates with ideas and terminology that are inconsistent with the social constructivist perspective. Hence, terms have to be translated, and the researcher has to learn a whole new vocabulary. Data is no longer data but empirical material; insider-outsider researcher positions are translated into different levels of involvement; and asymmetrical relations are translated into positioning. Thus, I as researcher am not only exploring new territory, I must also acquire a new language in order to speak in the tongue of the dynamic process I aim to explore. Returning to everyday leader practice, leaders also have to make sense of themselves and publicly create themselves in narratives. Leaders have to find language and vocabulary through which they can narrate leader identity in ways that are considered convincing, legitimate, and credible by various audiences. Towards this end, the narrative construction of leader identity is central, and it is constantly being negotiated in language, in and out of organizations. In the following, I first present an overview of the dissertation in the reading guide, and thereafter introduce the empirical context of the Executive Training Program in which the five Danish executives participated in 2005.

## 1.3 Reading guide

<i>Be patient</i>	<i>Do not seek the</i>	<i>And the point is</i>	<i>Live along some</i>
<i>Toward all that is</i>	<i>Answers that</i>	<i>To live everything</i>	<i>Distant day</i>
<i>Unsolved</i>	<i>Cannot be</i>	<i>Live the questions</i>	<i>Into the answer</i>
<i>In your heart</i>	<i>Given you</i>	<i>Now</i>	
<i>And try to love</i>	<i>Because you would</i>	<i>Perhaps you will</i>	
<i>The questions</i>	<i>Not be able</i>	<i>Gradually</i>	
<i>Themselves</i>	<i>To live them</i>	<i>Without noticing it</i>	<i>Rainer Maria Rilke</i>

This section provides a brief overview of the dissertation disposition and structure to support and guide the reading. Chapter 1 empirically anchors this Industrial PhD project. It describes the outset in the consultant business; the societal debates that initiated the research interest; and the paradigmatic controversies in leadership research and studies attempting to determine how to approach leadership and leader development programs. The research aim, interest and questions are specified, and the project positioned to investigate *the narrative construction of leader identity* in interaction with a leader development program, with special focus on contributing to the conceptualization of identity work. The empirical context of the *Executive Training Program* is unfolded to make transparent how the leader development program acts to co-construct leader identity interactively with the participating leaders.

Chapter 2 provides the methodological considerations that construct the field of study, starting with a meta-theoretical perspective, the *moderate social constructivist researcher position* and its implication relative to the investigation's aim. This chapter describes and reflects upon the concrete application of the methods used and the production of empirical material, specifically case choice and the specific methods of inquiry. Reflections on the particular researcher role and different contexts of interaction are discussed in relation to ethical aspects and the research process. Finally, this chapter takes the first steps in approaching analysis by reflecting on the processes of selecting, interpreting and authoring.

Chapter 3 lays out the theoretical foundation in order to position the concept of identity theoretically, primarily in social psychology theories and in the historical context. The extensive theoretical review of identity theory traces the emergence of *the identity concept* through time, and indicates how different historical periods and theories construct the identity concept that contributes to the contemporary

constructive discourses of identity. The review further serves as a backdrop for the argument that identity is deeply embedded in historical and societal processes. The linguistic turn in identity research is narrowed down in the review to describe how to make sense of narratives and to convey how a diverse theoretical outset creates differences in the ways of understanding, defining and approaching the narrative field. The narrative-oriented approach of this dissertation is theoretically defined and the process of making sense of narratives is clarified. Finally, the chapter specifies the theoretical point of departure in *the narrative construction of identity*, understood as processes whereby the individual makes sense of the self, understands others, negotiates power, and changes identity.

Chapter 4 theoretically positions the construct of leaders and leadership by reviewing how leaders have been discursively constructed through a selection of leadership theories relevant to this aim of the dissertation. Three prevalent ways of discursively constructing leaders are identified: the trait-oriented, behavior-oriented and process-oriented discourses. In the context of the dissertation, these discourses are understood to provide leaders with narrative resources from which to build leader identity. Furthermore, the management and leadership debate forms the point of departure to specify the application of the key *concepts of leaders and leadership* in the dissertation. Overall, the two theoretical chapters 3 and 4 position the research project in the intersection between narrative identity theory and critical management theory, and theoretically specify how different *discourses* and *narrative resources* are constitutive to the narrative construction of identity.

Chapter 5 consists of the narrative analytical framework of the dissertation, within which identity construction is understood to be embedded in particular social interactive contexts; the analytical strategy must therefore be developed to serve this end. As this dissertation investigates the construction of leader identity construction, I first provide a theoretical frame for approaching the leader occupation. Based on critical management theory, the leader occupation is approached as entailing; *tension, struggle and paradox*. Finally, I describe the three-step analytical strategy, with focus on *the thematic, the temporal and the relational aspects* of narrative construction processes, since the analytical strategy aims to explore both the what and the how of the narrative construction of leader identity in a leader development context and thereafter in interviews.

Chapters 6-10 present the empirical analyses structured in five individual stories of narrative identity construction, which were developed over a three year period.

Each empirical analysis is divided into a thematic analysis emphasizing the construction of identity in *problem stories* and *preferred stories*; a temporal analysis emphasizing narrative construction micro-processes in landscapes of identity and *storylines*; and a relational analysis emphasizing the *negotiation of subject positions*.

Chapter 11 presents the last empirical analysis, which is a thematic analysis made across the empirical material. I identify five common *patterns of paradox* across the empirical material analytically, and illustrate how the individual leader constructs identity in interaction with these specific paradoxes. I argue that the leader occupation accentuates particular paradoxes and tensions that can be identified in the leaders narratives of leader identity. On the basis of the analysis, I argue that when leaders engage in identity work, it can be understood as an attempt to manage particular paradoxes of the leader occupation.

Chapter 12 revisits the theoretical frame as a backdrop for the concluding reflections. It discusses the dissertation's contributions, especially to *narrative identity theory* and *critical management theory*. The possibilities and limitations of the investigation and of the analytical approach are considered as well as future research perspectives and implications.

## **1.4 Interacting with the Empirical Context**

In the following, I unfold the empirical context of the Executive Training Program (ETP); I describe the constituting parts of the program and the conditions for interaction that are created within the program on the basis of ideology and theoretical foundation, design, tools and facilitative interactions. The purpose is to illuminate the narrative construction of leaders promoted in this context,<sup>5</sup> and make transparent how the program acts as an interactive context for identity construction by facilitating some leader identity constructs and delimiting others. I have stressed making the account matter-of-fact, in order to position the Executive Training Program empirically. Later, in chapter 4, I position the program theoretically in relation to prevalent discourses in leadership theory.

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<sup>5</sup> The word context is here used to refer to a specific setting or a set of circumstances that surround a situation or event (Synonym.com, Princeton University. 04/22/08).



### **1.4.1 Right Management**

The provider of the Executive Training Program is the consultant company Right Management. In the late 1990s, the American-based consulting firm Right Management had a market position primarily in the US transition business. Right Management wanted to increase their market share in the consultant business and to grow in Europe; and their strategy was to buy and merge with locally based consulting businesses in different European countries. Following this strategy, Right Management was established in Denmark in 2000 by buying the Danish consulting company *Kjær & Kjerulff*, which was founded in the 1970s by the two entrepreneurs and psychologists Erik Kjær and Stig Kjerulff. Up through the 1980s, they built a successful and profitable consulting business with an average of 50-70 consultants offering tailored leadership development programs, primarily to leaders in private industry in Denmark and Scandinavia. Due to the merger, Right Management obtained a strong market position in the consultancy business in Denmark and continued to offer leadership development on the basis of a humanistic psychological and existentialist-oriented ideology.

In this dissertation, I investigate Right Management's *Executive Training Program*. The program has been a sustained business success for almost 15 years, in terms of positive evaluations, a consistent flow of participants from major companies, and economically. In this perspective and according to these parameters, the ETP program can be seen as an extreme case of seemingly successful leadership development; however, the question that remains is how do leaders understand and use the program in a short-term and long-term perspective.

In the Right Management portfolio, the Executive Training Program (ETP) is its most advanced leader development program. It targets experienced executive level leaders with a minimum of 10 years of experience. The program is an open enrolment program, which means that participants are leaders from different organizations, primarily from the private sector but also from higher-level public administration. In 2005, when I started this research, the program had been conducted more than 30 times. Inside Right Management, the program was considered strategically important. Erik Kjær had been primus motor in developing the program content and design throughout a 15-year period, and he was a key actor in conducting and facilitating the program. The program was only facilitated by experienced and formally educated psychologist consultants and a facilitator team, typically consisting of Erik Kjær and two other business psychologists.

In the program context, the open enrolment and the presence of leaders from various organizations are considered beneficial by exposing the individual leader to different approaches to leadership, and by challenging notions of leadership to thereby support a key notion of the program: *“That each leader has to find his own way as a leader and unfold his personal leader qualities”* (Right Management, Course Catalogue 2005). Diversity in organizational and cultural backgrounds is thought to inspire and provide insight into the many different ways of being a leader in different organizational contexts. Furthermore, open enrolment is believed to facilitate a safe and supportive environment, because the leaders are not part of the same competitive organizational environment. Such an environment increases openness and exploration of more facets of being a leader. Thus, the ETP aspires to an environment that both challenges and offers containment for the individual leader.

An ETP program consists of a cohort averaging 18 leaders from different types of organizations, in some cases with several leaders coming from the same company; the leaders are placed in different basis groups. The representation of women is about 25 percent, which is significantly higher than the general representation of women in top leader positions in Denmark in 2007. The program usually takes place in smaller groups of 6-7 leaders, each group including women when possible. The program is held at an historical estate at a peaceful location in the countryside, far from Copenhagen.

### **1.4.2 Ideology and Theoretical Foundation**

Erik Kjær has been the primary driving force in constructing the program, and his theoretical references have substantially formed the ideological foundation of the ETP program. The ideological foundation is to a large extent based on humanistic psychology, on what has been called the third force in psychology. The main contributors to the third force are Abraham H. Maslow (1968), Carl Rogers (1959; 1961; 1980) and Rollo May (1969). The third force focuses on the fundamental questions of what it means to be a human being, and it has contributed theories and explorations into a wide range of topic areas: motivation, need-psychology, self-actualization, individuality and identity, mental health, creativity, authenticity and meaning. Humanistic psychology emphasizes that development is a positive force inherent in human beings that needs to be “unlocked” or “found/discovered”. This is often formulated as unfolding inner potential, finding the genuine self, or self-actualizing. These terms have to a large extent been integrated into everyday

language and thinking about development. The ETP program catalogue states that the goal is to develop “*personal leadership*”, which reflects the notion of self-actualization; and the program's aim for the individual leader is that he finds his own way as a leader, i.e. actualize himself as a leader, to find the genuine self in the leader role. In the course catalogue, the purpose of the program is formulated as follows: “*ETP focuses on strengthening your personal leadership, because as a leader you as a person are the most important tool*” (Course Catalogue, 2005). This statement integrates the tool-box thinking of leadership, which perceives of leadership as the mastery of a set of tools, within a humanistic ideology. Right Management dismantles “tools” into a prerequisite for personal leader development; thus, leadership tools are not something external to the person, something that is metaphorically held in the hand. In the ETP program context, tools are described as something internal, personal and psychological: the leader is himself the tool, or at least the most important tool. Moreover, the ideological foundation of ETP draws from existentialist thinkers and writers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and psychologists Eric Fromm (1947) and Victor Frankl (1984 [1946]). In the program context, these ideas are used to emphasize the importance of choice, responsibility, and finding your own way. The existentialistic themes are interacted mainly in dialogue during the ETP program, where the existentialistic questions are often debated in relation to making choices and reflecting on freedom and responsibility and living a meaningful life and how to be courageous. These themes are not systematically taught, debated, or scheduled on the agenda, but rather emerge in plenary discussions and in dialogue with the participants on various occasions. During the program, the bearing notion of this existentialist ideology is that the leader has “to *find his way*”. This implies that the leader has to know who he is, what he stands for and where he wants to go. It also implies a reflective scrutinizing of himself, his behavior and relations, as well as his aspirations for life.

Like any practice, the ETP leader development program is a living organism, and new trends are continuously being incorporated. Most recently, the thoughts of Daniel Golemann (1995) on emotional intelligence have been integrated, and especially the notion of self-awareness and social skills, which supports the existing ideological foundation and thinking in the program context. The program is pronounced a-theoretical, and none of the above thinkers are necessarily named. The theoretical and ideological foundation was first explicitly formulated in three interviews with Erik Kjær in 2006. The theoretical influence and ideology can be

traced, however, in the course documents, design, and interaction, and through dialogue in the program context.

Hence, the Executive Training Program (ETP) represents a particular approach to leader development based on thinking that explicitly links personal development to leader development. The business philosophy is that personal growth is the foundation for leader development and for organizational growth, as expressed in the company slogan “*People in Growth Create Organizational Growth*”. Leader development in this context is strongly anchored in personal and psychological development. Facilitation carried out by only psychologists with the aim of developing “*personal leadership*” implies an emphasis on the personal, relational and psychological aspects of leadership within a business organizational context.<sup>6</sup> The basic assumption of the ETP program is that leaders will develop profound leader skills by engaging in self-reflection and through increased self-awareness, primarily by receiving feedback on social skills and interpersonal behavior.

In the ETP program context, leadership is perceived as a social practice in which the personal and interpersonal skills and competences of leaders are cardinal to effective leadership, e.g. “*who you are as a person will be crucial for how you act as a leader*”. Leadership is understood as an intrapersonal and interpersonal discipline in which the leader’s task can be defined in simple terms as making sure others get things done. The leader, as a person, is exposed to others in the social relations within the organization, and beyond the organization in external relations with competitors, allies, and other actors in society in general. How others perceive the leader and his interpersonal qualities therefore becomes important for accomplishing things in relationships and in socially interactive organizational contexts. In the logic of the program, these notions focus on social relations, but this does not imply that leadership tools, theory, and business knowledge are unnecessary or useless; it indicates that the use of these tools and knowledge is efficient only when they build on the leader’s self-awareness and his interpersonal skills, as perceived in a social context. Following this logic, competencies and tools are necessary, but is not sufficient for successful leadership, and therefore the emphasis is on personal psychological processes of development and interpersonal behavior in social interaction, as exemplified in the program gimmick that “*A fool with a tool is still a fool*”.

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<sup>6</sup> This idea is described in the marketing materials on the Executive Training Program, in the Right Management course catalogue 2006, and in the course catalogue 2004-2007.

The Executive Training Program is not a neutral and value-free setting for exploring leader development. Its facilitation by organizational psychologists also gives a certain psychological profile. The ideology with its inspiration in existentialist and humanist psychology is reflected in the pedagogical and didactic choices of the program, which is predominantly process-oriented and centered on exercises and tools that accumulate feedback, foster self-reflection and enhance self-awareness. The company slogan, “*People in Growth gives Organizations in Growth*”, catalyzes the belief that leader development is a prerequisite for an organization's economic growth. In practice, the ETP program does not explicitly define “good leadership” nor does it teach or present much traditional leadership theory. In contrast, the outset is that every leader should find out what it means to be a leader for himself, as a person, and in relation to his particular organizational situation, setting, and life circumstance. In this way, the program is seemingly open for the leader to work on whatever issues he wishes to bring to the table, but only within this implicitly and almost imperceptible logic and ideologically framed context of personal psychological development and interpersonal leadership.

### **1.4.3 Design and Pedagogical Tools**

In the following, I describe in more detail the program design and structure, and exemplify exercises and facilitative methods and tools. The purpose is to make the complexity of the program clearer and to communicate its concrete practices, thereby, concretizing how the program acts as context for the narrative construction of leader identity that is the focus of the dissertation.

The ETP program is introduced for the participants on the first day of the program as *something else*; it is different than what they might have experienced in other leader development programs. At first sight, the most evident difference is the minimal theoretical content, the lack of leadership definitions, and the strong emphasis on the psychological outset for leadership. ETP is highly process-oriented and focuses extensively on interpersonal behavior. It aims to facilitate self-awareness by providing continuous feedback through a variety of exercises and interactive situations. The program starts with the facilitators setting the scene by introducing the program's four guiding principles for interaction:

## Display 1-1 Executive Training Program – Guiding Principles

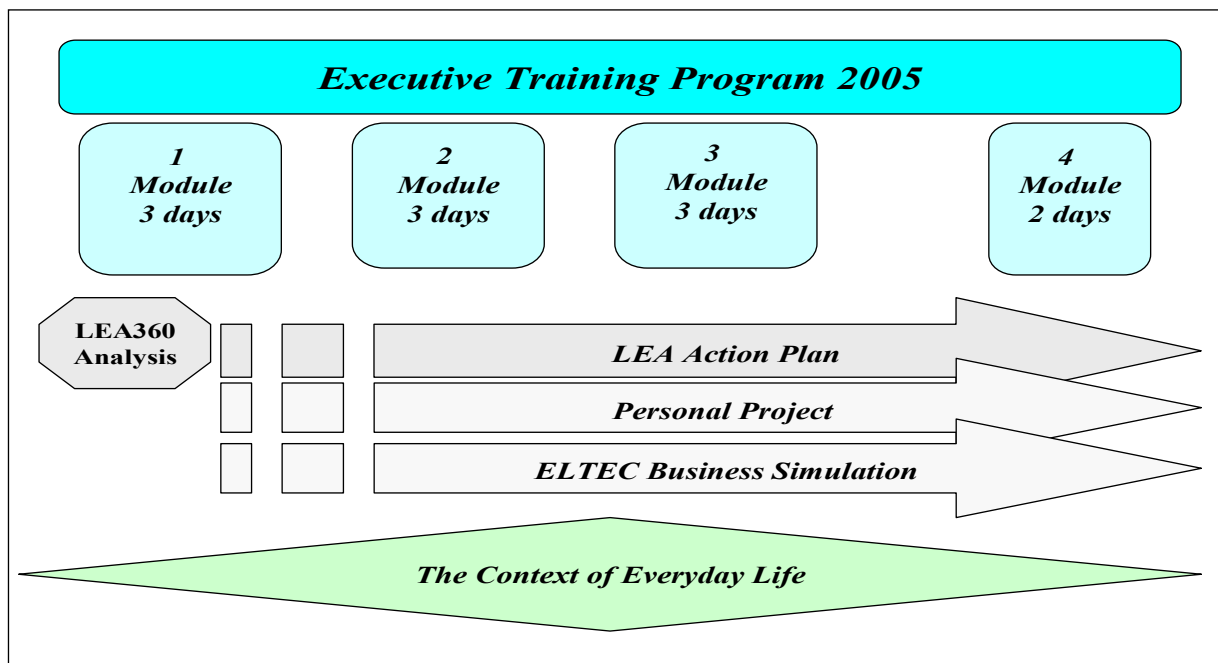
- *Presence: being personally engaged, the one who gives most to the process will be the one who benefits the most.*
- *Curiosity: placing yourself in a learning position by engaging in a shared laboratory and learning environment.*
- *Courage: having the courage to experiment and to go where the ice is thin.*
- *Openness: being direct and personal when communicating and supporting and challenging each other's developmental journey.*

*(The ETP Program – Facilitator Notes 2005)*

Generally, the ETP is notorious in providing the participants with only minimal information about the structure, form and content of the program. The program deliberately evades the normal procedures for leader development; thus, there is no written agenda for the first day, and in the following modules, the agenda consists mostly of three letter abbreviations: PP1, PP2 for personal projects, and W&T for walk and talk. These spare agendas do not make much sense, and during the flow of the program the schedule is often adjusted; but in the program context, this is part of facilitating the environment by removing the expected daily structure. The leaders never know exactly what is next, so they have to navigate in the situation here and now. This often challenges the leaders' sense of security and their need to control the situation, and it requires them to step into the laboratory with lesser control and more trust in others than when equipped with their usual authority and structural frame for interaction. Another important feature of the program is surprise; the program is designed to stir up the leaders' expectations as well as their worldviews. An example is the participant introduction on the first day of the program, instead of allowing the leaders to make their habitual presentation of company, department and title, education etc. The leaders are asked to make a 5-7 minutes speech about "*Why they are a good leader*". This exercise takes place 15 minutes into the program, in front of everybody, and it significantly lays the foundation for the individual being present in the program with "*something else*", i.e. in another way than making an impression through status and by impression management. In this exercise, the leaders are forced to step out of the comfort zone for the first time. They are then given facilitated feedback, and in this way, two of the essential mechanisms of the program – self-disclosure and feedback – are established early in the program context. Overall, the program is structured in three

parts: a *360 degree leader effectiveness analysis report (LEA360)* and process; a *business simulation* laboratory based on storytelling; and a reflective group process called *Personal Projects*. The program consists of four modules, three modules of three days duration, and the last module lasting two days. The program span is about 10-12 months, with a total of 11 days and an accumulated 132 hours of interaction in the context of the program. The first module has a nighttime *outdoor team-building* activity, and a repeated exercise is *Walk & Talk*, where in shifting pairs the leaders walk, talk and reflect on themes or issues that are significant for them. Most of the program takes place in smaller “*basis*” groups of 6-7 leaders with the same group facilitator.

**Display 1-2 Overview of the ETP Program**



**Design and Pedagogic Tools – The 360 Degree Leadership Effectiveness Analysis**

Since the 1990s, the 360-degree feedback analysis has been initiated as a popular instrument or tool used by organizations and consultants to improve and develop leader skills and competences. It typically provides leaders with written feedback from direct reports, colleagues, their nearest boss and themselves in a feedback report. The goal of a 360-degree feedback process is to increase leaders’ self-awareness, based on the idea that the leader, through feedback, will gain a better understanding of how he is perceived by various respondents. The purpose is to create awareness of own strengths and areas that need development, and eventually

to use the feedback to formulate a focused development plan for behavioral change. As such, 360-degree tools are used to initiate a step-by-step goal-oriented process of development focused on self-awareness and behavior. The Leadership Effectiveness Analysis 360 degree (LEA360) is an assessment tool from the MRGroup.<sup>7</sup> It is not a test, but as the name implies an analytical tool with which to assess leader behavior. The feedback report describes how a leader's behavior is perceived by others and by the leader. LEA360 measures 22 specific behavioral leader characteristics or “sets”, grouped into six core functions, which serve to define the leader role. The six core functions of leader behavior in the LEA360 model are: “*Creating a Vision, Developing Followership, Implementing the Vision, Following Through, Achieving Results, and Team Playing.*”<sup>8</sup> The “leader behavior set” is based on the human perceptual tendency to view situations and respond to them in a way that is consistent from one situation to the next. For example, some leaders usually seek the views of direct reports while others rarely do. Such behaviors are called “sets” within the LEA framework. Sets are relatively consistent in our minds, and they are often perceived as natural assumptions about the way the world works (MRG group 2005: 22).

LEA360 provides the leader with a “snapshot” of his current leadership as it is perceived by others and by the leader himself in a descriptive feedback report. This report is then used as the basis for reflective dialogue about the assumptions and perceptions that potentially influence the leader's behavior and effectiveness in his organizational context. However, a LEA360 report does not tell us anything about what the leader actually does in real life; it only describes how the leader and others perceive his behavior. The tool also shows the extent to which all the respondents agree on certain behavioral dimensions and the variation across the respondents. This is called inter-rater agreement, and the variation can be low, medium or high to indicate the extent to which the respondents rate each dimension of leader behavior in the same way.

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<sup>7</sup> Management Research Group (MRG) is an international firm specialized in assessment-based human resource development, and it is approved by the American Psychology Association to offer continuing education for psychologists. MRG products are delivered only by certified and trained professionals and all assessment instruments are research based with a high degree of established validity. The Leadership Effectiveness 360 degree Analysis used at ETP is based on 300,000 assessment-based profiles of leaders across a broad range of industries and functions (MRG2005:26).

<sup>8</sup> In the LEA questionnaire, respondents compare and weigh the importance of three different behaviors at the same time, and each behavior is compared to every other behavior. If a particular behavior is very important to an individual, he may rate it high every time it occurs. Thus, a leader's score on each behavior is determined by his preferences. The individual score is then compared to a selected norm group (a normative database, here, with Danish leaders) to show the relative amount of emphasis he gives to each behavior in comparison with a similar group of people (MRG2005:26).



According to the MGR group, LEA360 is developed on the basic assumption that there is no “one right way” to lead. Leader behavior that is effective in one situation can be ineffective in another. The instrument presents feedback in a non-evaluative way; thus, when assessing leadership behaviors, the LEA360 is a comprehensive and descriptive rather than prescriptive assessment tool. However, the LEA360 is described as a diagnostic assessment instrument, and the aim of the process is for the leader to gain insight into his current strengths and development areas. Such insights point not only to areas for change, but also indicate direction and describe possible actions to strengthen specific behavioral patterns. The analytical framework of LEA360 provides ideas and assumptions as to what leadership is about, but the feedback results in the LEA reports are presented in a non-evaluative way, describing both the liabilities and the possibilities of different combinations of set scores. At ETP, a LEA360 is administrated prior to the program start, and the leaders receive their report in the first module and then work with it intensively throughout the rest of the program.

The LEA360 feedback process is one of the three parts making up the didactic structure of the leader program, and the leaders work with the feedback report in different exercises in their basis group and with the facilitators. Moreover, the leaders bring the feedback into their home organization by conducting feedback seminars with the leaders’ own team/employees, and they meet with their nearest leader to discuss specific aspects of the report relevant to their relationship. The aim of these LEA360 meetings is to clarify the feedback, receive more insight into how others perceive their leadership, and engage in dialogue with the real organizational stakeholders in order to improve interaction in the organizational context. The organizational process's aim is to specify the expectations of others and thereby anchor the individual's developmental process in the home organization.

## **Design and Pedagogic Tools – Personal Project**

The second part in the ETP design is called *Personal Project*. This project is introduced as an opportunity for the leader to work with him on a deeper psychological level. The personal project is described in an extract of the handout guide as follows:

### **Display 1-3 Personal Project Handout Example**

*“When you decide on a personal project, you choose a personal theme or problem that is important and meaningful to you in the leader role. Your goal is to clarify what the elements of the problem are and the solutions that can be given. The problem can be something that is linked narrowly to the leader job, or it can be something that has a more general significance to you as a person.”*

*“A prerequisite for you to reach a result is that you are open and prepared to share your problem with others as a means to generate inspiration to work through your personal project.”*

*(©Right Management: Executive Training Program, ETP Personal Project, 2005:1)*

The personal project is thus described to be focused on a problem that the leader thinks is restricting him or would be beneficial for him to solve or change. Examples of former personal projects are: the need to be liked by others; trying to please everybody; fear of failure and performance anxiety; always being number two; experiencing sustained lack of motivation; and feeling paralyzed by worries. Each leader defines and works with a personal project throughout the program, primarily in the basis group. The leader describes the problem/issue for the basis group, and this is followed by a 2½-hour individual coaching process facilitated by the facilitator.

The systemic methods, Reflective Teams and Coaching, are used to facilitate the personal project process (Andersen, 1996), as the reflective team method separates listening and talking, thereby allowing time for reflection from many angles on the same problem or issue. The method maximizes the use of the resources present in the group, and it actively engages everybody, also when they are not working on their personal project. The focus person and the coach are metaphorically positioned in box 1, and the team is positioned in box 2. Only one person is activated at a time; when coaching is going on in box 1, the role of the team is to reflect on the issues being explored and to try to generate new interesting and

helpful perspectives, i.e. find new facets for the focus person to explore and maybe formulate interesting questions for the coach to ask. All of this is done in silence and through careful listening to and reflecting on the coaching dialogue. The group is situated metaphorically behind a transparent screen and is not allowed to comment or intervene. After some time, the facilitator takes a *time out* and the focus person is now placed in the listening position and instructed not to answer or comment on the group reflection and input. The group now shares and discusses ideas and insights. The facilitator makes sure that the group does not generate solutions too prematurely but remains in an exploratory mode until sufficient progress have been made in relation to unfolding and clarifying the problem. The facilitator also insures that what is said is understood and that the dialogue is respectful and appreciative throughout.

This stringent process of shifting positions between listening and talking aims to foster reflection and inhibit the need to justify and explain – for example, why the others are mistaken when they propose ideas or perspectives that the focus person instantly disagrees with or dislikes. The method maximizes the creation of input by involving all resources, and it trains participants in empathy, in placing themselves in another person's shoes, changing perspective and communicating ideas in a supportive and respectful manner. The reflective team model is supported and used in combination with a four-stage coaching model. This method is introduced in the first module and also helps guide the leaders in the reflective process of exploration, supported by the facilitator.

### **Design and Pedagogic Tools – Business Simulation**

The third part in the ETP program is the business simulation laboratory of the fictive company called ELTEC. In the business simulation, each of the three basis groups of 6-7 leaders functions as the board of directors of ELTEC. The board of directors includes a role for each leader, and each one has one turn to be the CEO and lead the board meeting. Besides the CEO, the roles are: “*Financial Manager, Production Manager, It and Logistics Manager, HR and Communications Manager, Sales Manager and Marketing Manager*”. In the program context, the business simulation is presented as a laboratory – a place for experimentation – where the leader has to deal with leadership problems of different kinds. All leaders take on the role of CEO at some point, leading the meeting and handling the actual leadership problem. The participants are instructed not to “role play” but to step into the role with their knowledge of what people in these specific positions would be concerned about in relation to the problem or task to be solved at the board

meeting. The other leaders are instructed to respond to the CEO's leader behavior as if it were genuine, with their own sensitivity and reactions. The idea is that they should contribute to realistically solving ELTEC's problem/task. They should argue and relate to the problem within the perspective of the role. For example, a leader in the HR Manager role would be concerned with issues of turnover, motivation, competency building and legal procedures. A leader in the Production Manager role would be concerned with issues of productivity, quantity and quality of the product, and the flexibility of the workforce. In the program context, this facilitative framing is aimed at making the simulation feel more “real” for the participants, and the intention is to train the leaders in identifying how different organizational positions and perspectives relate to common organizational issues and problems.

Storytelling is a significant element in setting up the cases and in making the business simulation work in practice. In the program context, the fictive business ELTEC is described with all the necessary factual organizational information necessary for the leaders to imagine leading the ELTEC organization through its challenges. The story of ELTEC is of a family-owned electronic company situated in Jutland, producing high quality prints used in the airplane, space and car industries and in robot technology. The competitive advantage is high quality products and distribution logistics. The annual turnover is 600 million DKK. The company is owned entirely by the twins, Julie and Alfred Knudsen, and they act as the unofficial board. Their mother, the ageing Mrs. Knudsen, is the unofficial executive chairman and her stance and values significantly influence company values, such as “*partnership with the local community*” and “*ethics in the workplace*”.

The following factual description of the storytelling and the ELTEC business simulation do not do justice to the colorful characters who inhabit the ELTEC story or the many humoristic phrasings and absurdities of the cases and the storytelling set-up. In the program context, the humor and absurdity but still realistic scenarios and the leader dilemmas in each ELTEC case engage the leaders, making it an entertaining and challenging laboratory experience for them.

The business simulation is structured in seven cases or plots, each of which involves an organizational challenge and often more than one leadership dilemma. From a development perspective, the CEO is the focus person in each case. The case is introduced in plenary by a storytelling sequence describing ELTEC's current situation and the problem and tasks to be solved at the coming board

meeting. This is followed by a 1½-hour board meeting in the basis groups, all of which are videotaped and monitored by the facilitators. They are placed in a separate room but are watching and following the progress of the group process on monitors. The facilitators are able to intervene in the process by phone or in person. A common intervention is to interrupt the board meeting by introducing different ELTEC story characters: the stuttering shop steward, the local priest Pastor Mortensen, the wife of an unfaithful member of the board etc. These characters are played by the facilitators in various disguises and are integrated roles in the seven different stories and dilemma cases. Interventions are also made by shifting leaders around and into other groups, and e.g. introducing a leader as the new Sales Manager and thus accentuating group inclusion and exclusion processes.

Generally, each ELTEC case has a cover story that is introduced to everybody in plenary along with a specific task the leader has to deal with at the particular board meeting. But every case has another story or a different plot that is not introduced until later, during the board meeting. The introduction of the second plot (or more plots) increases the complexity of the case and presses the leader to take a stand on difficult leader dilemmas. Some of the cases involve a group member who is secretly instructed to play a certain role at the board meeting or to take on a specific attitude in relation to a certain topic – for example, in relation to such an ethical dilemma as in ELTEC CASE 3: “*Should ELTEC accept a financially lucrative order for producing land mines?*” Each ELTEC case is elaborate and has a number of pre-planned interventions that the CEO and the other leaders do not know about. Interventions are timed and introduced by the facilitators by evaluating the group processes and leader behavior at the board meeting. Interventions are never used exactly the same way but are flexibly timed and interacted with the actual participants and the progress of the group process. Another intervention is phone calls from the ELTEC owners, the Knudsen family, (or other characters) that introduce a whole new angle or dilemma into what the leader is already struggling with. Interaction with Knudsen shapes the subsequent dialogue and the rest of the board meeting. New interventions are sometimes invented to match a specific situation, or themes that have emerged in the group and that the facilitators have not experienced before. In this way, there is a lot of improvising, acting and processes of facilitative work as the program is running live.

An ELTEC case is followed by a one-hour facilitated feedback and discussion session in the group with focus on the CEO's leader behavior in conducting the meeting and handling the case, interventions and dilemmas. Later, in plenary, there

is a shorter follow-up session during which the groups gain insight into how the other groups approached the same dilemma, and the facilitators draw parallels across the groups and summarize learning points on the leader dilemma or on group processes in handling the dilemma. Below is an example of an ELTEC business simulation case. All cases follow the sequence of introducing the current situation, the problem, and the task(s) of the leader. In the program context, this is the first ELTEC case and the interventions are milder and the plot less complex, since the main focus is to make the leaders familiar with the flow and structure of the simulation method; later the complexity and the drama increase.

#### **Display 1-4 Business Simulation – ELTEC Case Example**

##### ***ELTEC - CASE 1***

###### ***Introduction in plenary***

*The Knudsen twins have agreed to handover the leadership of the company to the new CEO and leader group. The new leader group has just been formed and the current situation and problems are:*

- *The Knudsen twins are convinced that ELTEC needs a new leadership with an international perspective. They have decided to abdicate from board work and return to the golf course.*
- *There is a need for the new leader group to make a new agenda for the organization.*
- *Economically, the bottom line has red numbers and the arrow is pointing downwards.*
- *There is increased competition from Asia and Eastern Europe.*
- *There is a need for international partnerships (to make large-scale operations, optimize logistics and reduce production costs).*
- *There is a need for professionalism in the production line, sales and marketing.*
- *There is a need for certifications in the newest quality standards.*
- *80% of the earnings come from 20% of the customers.*

*The task for the CEO is to constitute the group and mobilize a strong and close-knit leader team for the company to face the financial challenges and the economic decline appearing in the horizon.*

###### ***Instruction to alternative plot***

*This case has no hidden plot as it is the first case; this business simulation is a less complex case.*

###### ***Interventions***

*Intervention A: Alfred Knudsen phones to request the plan for the constitution of the leadership team: He invites the CEO and wife to the Knudsen residence, and he*

*slowly and thoroughly goes through unimportant details of the menu, descriptions of his trip to Skåne with his mother etc. And he would like the plan to be faxed to Sweden A.S.A.P. The conversation drags out, and the CEO has to find a way to finish without compromising the relationship. Meanwhile, the group is watching, listening in, and waiting for the meeting to continue.*

*Intervention B: Another phone call from Knudsen. Knudsen thinks the first call was stopped a bit abruptly and he wants to stress the importance of them having a good dialogue and relationship. Then, Knudsen continues as before, with lots of irrelevant talk about golf courses, golf handicaps and Swedish localities, and Knudsen again reminds the CEO to send the team and business plan.*

### **Feedback**

*Thematically, ELTEC Case 1 raises questions and reflections on how to establish and use authority and credibility as a leader. The dilemma is establishing leadership and authority in a group, while simultaneously being passed by and overruled by Knudsen's interference on the phone. The authority theme is also at play in relation to the leader group in which the "CEO" has to position himself at the meeting in interaction. In addition, the theme of establishing a strong team in relation to the leaders' communication and interaction is typically in focus in the feedback of case number 1. An example of the team-oriented themes is how to accommodate different needs in the group – some are task oriented and others want to get to know each other better before turning to the task.*

*(Right Management: ETP, facilitator notes: 2005/2007)*

In 2005 at the beginning of the research project, Erik Kjær was central in facilitating the program, and especially with regard to the business simulation, he would story-tell the introduction and plot setup without a manuscript, improvising and including current information from the daily newspaper or debates in the media. In the context of the program, this serves to blend reality and the imaginary frame of the business simulation and mix what is real and what is an imaginary story. The case was also introduced using real life anecdotes – for example, detailed factual information on technical issues involved in using electronic print in the airplane industry or specifically referring to the work of a German professor in organizational culture. These storytelling devices add realism and relevance, as well as absurdity and humor, to the storytelling processes and the setting up of the ELTEC cases. Overall, the facilitative processes can be characterized as creating and supporting a group climate that enhances openness and self-disclosure, helps identify both development areas and strengths, and provides psychological insights (theoretically based) into the here-and-now situation regarding individuals and the group process. The process also produces acknowledgement that the facilitator is

also a leader and an interactive actor in the individual and group processes and progress in the ETP program context.

With this positioning of the empirical context of the study, the next chapter describes the research project with regard to the research processes, the application of methods and the concrete craftsmanship involved.



## 2 Constructing the Field

This chapter describes the research process, methods and the concrete craftsmanship involved in undertaking the study. A method is “*a way of thinking about something*” says Holstein and Gubrium (2000: 81); thus, the choice of methodology and methods<sup>9</sup> for the dissertation implies a specific way of thinking about and constructing leader identity. In this sense, choice of methodology and methods construct in significant ways the range of contribution, as well as the limitations, of a particular research project. The chapter moves from a meta-theoretical perspective into methodological reflections, and ends with the specific choices and concrete application of methods. The structure is inspired by Peter Dahler Larsen’s (2003:24) view that “knowing” always accentuates fundamental assumptions and a particular perspective from where it is possible to choose, interpret and organize data. The chapter is thus structured in four parts:

- A Meta-theoretical Perspective
- A Moderate Social Constructivist Position
- Application of Methods and Self-reflections
- Approaching Analysis

The first part reflects on meta-theory and paradigms as the backdrop of the research design and application of the concrete methods. The meta-theoretical perspective, on which this dissertation rests, is described by contrasting a realist essentialist position and an anti-essentialist constructivist position and the different ontological and epistemological foci of these two positions (Bransholm Pedersen and Drewes Nielsen, 2001). In the second part, I describe the characteristics of a social constructivist oriented study (Wenneberg, 2000), emphasizing a reflexive methodology and a reflexive researcher position (Alvesson and Skjöldberg, 2000). In the third part, the longitudinal research design and my concrete interaction with the field are described and reflected upon, including the specific methods of study: observation, interviewing and document analysis, and their applications. Finally, I

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<sup>9</sup> Methodology describes and constitutes the connection and internal coherence between the different scientific levels of the research project: from the meta-theoretical assumptions to the concrete approach and methods. Methods constitute a more limited part of the overall research design as methods are the concrete tools or instruments of investigation (Asendorpf and Valsiner, 1992). Ideally, there is coherence or consistency between the methods, methodology and the meta-theoretical perspective within the research design, and most importantly the methodological setup has to be relevant in relation to the research interest and investigative focus.

specify how I have selected the unit of analysis, interpreted the data and gone about authoring and transforming the research process into a research dissertation.

## 2.1 A Meta-Theoretical Perspective

The positivistic research tradition introduced the idea that we can only know what we can immediately apprehend. This tradition established the verification criterion, which implies that the ideal of science is to verify and determine absolute truths about studied phenomena (Fuglesang and Bitsch Olsen, 2004:17). Assuming one value-free and rational road toward the production of scientific knowledge, it significantly influenced the establishment of science as an objective, true and practically applicable practice (see also Brier, 2005: 23-24). These ideals, to represent the world as it is, are rejected by social constructivism, which is formulated as a research approach in opposition to essentialism, realism and positivism (Gergen, 1985, 1997). Social constructivism challenges the scientific ideal of objectivism and realism, and it cautions the researcher to be suspicious of prevalent assumptions about what the world appears to be and to question what we take for granted (Burr, 2003:3).

My study is based on the assumption that no research is accomplished from a platform of neutrality, and that every researcher has to make her choices and her own positioning clear, which is what this chapter is about. Deciding on methodology and methods involves important choices in the research process, and as emphasized by Jette Fog (1997:12), the concrete issue or problem of investigation is the determining factor in the argumentation for the choice of certain methods. In other words, the choice of method and methodology must be explained by the functionality of the method to bring about the insight necessary to answer the research questions. This also implies that the research goal, and specifically the research interest, has to be clear before the *how to do it* question of methodology can be answered (Bransholm Pedersen, and Drewes Nielsen, 2001). In this project, the research interest is to explore the narrative construction of leader identity. A social constructivist position facilitates exploration, making it possible to learn more about *how* identity evolves. To investigate the *how* of narrative construction processes, I need explorative methodology to unfold complex processes of multiplicity. In addition, the reasoning and argumentation for the choices I make are no longer given nor can be taken for granted; however, as a researcher, I have to acknowledge that my arguments are anchored in particular paradigmatic perspectives and positions, which I cannot escape but only approach through constant reflexivity (Alvesson and Skjöldberg, 2000). As a consequence, I have to

begin by taking a step back in order to briefly unfold the meta-theoretical point of departure and the paradigmatic characteristics and implications, before I specify the characteristics of my researcher position as a moderate social constructivist position. The concept of paradigm can be helpful for examining the fundamentals of our construction of the world. The concept *paradigm* has been defined differently by different theoretical schools. Guba and Lincoln (1998:200) define paradigm very broadly, as a worldview or as an individual's basic convictions. Hence, basic conviction has the character of belief. It is *basic* in the sense that you cannot prove what you believe to be true about reality or human nature; you can only make plausible what you believe (Bransholm Pedersen and Drewes Nielsen, 2001:26). The paradigm, the basic convictions, is the point of departure, which shapes the view; it fundamentally forms the basic understanding of ontological, epistemological and methodological aspects of a study and research process.

Briefly stated, ontology is concerned with what can be said to *exist* in the world. It deals with the philosophical question of what we believe to be the relation between reality and humans (Brier, 2005:13-14). In a realist essentialist position, you believe that the world exists regardless of the human perception of it, and you assume that “reality” can be approached and investigated as it is – that it is possible to produce true knowledge about humans and reality through scientific rigor and procedures. This position exemplifies a “one truth notion” and an understanding of knowledge as objectively representing the reality with which it is concerned. Within a constructivist anti-essentialist position, the world cannot be captured as it is, independent of human subjectivity and interpretation. Reality is assumed to be a construction, as are research results. This understanding implies that any knowledge is subjective and dependent on social interaction with actors and with localized contexts.

Intertwined with the researcher's ontological position is the question of epistemology, which can be regarded as an attitude towards what knowledge is about, e.g. the study of knowledge and theories of what can be known (Brier, 2005). In a research study, this involves determining what kind of data material is relevant to the investigative focus. And it involves clarifying assumptions on *how* you as a researcher can achieve certain knowledge, bringing to the fore the researcher's relation to the issues studied. From a realist essentialist position, the researcher is perceived to be separate from the investigated reality, which is important in order to achieve the research goal of objective, value-free and unbiased explanations and results. Researchers are understood to find causal

connections; explain essences and relations in the world. From a constructivist anti-essentialist position, knowledge is thought of as relative and situational, depending on social interaction and the contexts in which it is produced. In fact, data is no longer data; in order to avoid the objectifying connotation of the word data, has to be called empirical material. Gergen exemplifies this in the following quote:

*“What we take to be experience of the world does not in itself dictate the terms by which the world is understood. What we take to be knowledge of the world is not a product of induction, or of the building and testing of general hypotheses” (Gergen, 1985:266).*

Thus, empirical material is perceived to be co-produced in the interaction between the researcher and the participant in the interplay with specific research contexts. Therefore, as a researcher, I have to focus on the specific context in which a social phenomenon emerges and examine how the social phenomenon is perceived and constructed by different people in a given context at a particular historical point in time (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000).

Today, qualitative methods are widely accepted as a valid scientific method, and positivism has acquired a rather negative connotation in the social sciences (Kvale, 1997). Nevertheless, positivistic notions about science and research are still very much present and intertwined with our basic assumptions about “what science is”. This surfaces both in everyday conversation and in scientific discussions, where the positivistic ideals and the idea of “getting proof” and “knowing the facts” relentlessly slips into the language of everyday conversations. At the same time, there is increasing public distrust and criticism of experts, which has opened the way for a more critical view of “truths of science” by making explicit the paradigmatic assumptions, premises and methods behind what we call research contributions and conclusions (Bransholm Pedersen and Lana, 2001:24; Sørensen and Barlebo Rasmussen, 2005:30). Within the scientific community, it has been argued that research results are often communicated as if they come from a detached outsider position, as if research conclusions are universal, have objective status, and are value free. This position is what Sørensen and Barlebo Rasmussen (2005) call “*a view from nowhere*”, advocating that research traditions of the natural sciences and scientific rhetoric have contributed to the illusion that it is possible to view reality from a neutral outsider position and thereby attribute scientific knowledge a special status and a potent voice of authority. However, the “*productive illusion*” in recent years has been criticized and unmasked, and has been replaced to a large extent by the acknowledgement that knowledge is

entangled in subjectivity, language and societal context (Sørensen and Barlebo Rasmussen, 2005:29-30).

Accordingly, the aim of research is refocused: Instead of making inquiries into the nature of people and things, the focus is on the processes through which certain forms of knowledge are achieved by people in interaction (Burr, 2003:9). In other words, different meta-theoretical perspectives imply very different assumptions, raise different questions and involve different choices of research design and methodology. Research is evaluated on the inner coherence between the methods chosen and the ontological assumptions and epistemological point of departure (Bransholm Pedersen, and Drewes Nielsen, 2001:27). Contrasting the two meta-theoretical perspectives brings to the fore the fundamental ways in which different paradigmatic points of departure influence every following step and choice in the research process. In the next part of this chapter, I specify my researcher position and argue how this approach renders the exploration of the narrative construction of leader identity probable.

## 2.2 A Moderate Social Constructivist Position

First of all, social constructivism is taken as the meta-theoretical point of departure, because it enables the investigation of identity as dynamic and relational, and because it supports the explorative examination of the *processes* of construction, e.g. how leader identities are continuously constructed in narratives. However, social constructivist approaches are many,<sup>10</sup> overlapping and hard to distinguish. American social psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen has contributed to a clarification of social constructivism.<sup>11</sup> Describing social constructivism as an orientation to knowledge and as a challenge to the conventional understanding of science, he suggests that social construction is more like a “*shared consciousness rather than a movement*” (Gergen, 1985:266). In line with this thinking Vivienne Burr (2003)

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<sup>10</sup> Social constructivism draws from a number of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology and linguistics (Burr, 2003: 2). Dimensions of social constructivism are reflected in symbolic interaction (George H. Mead, 1934; Herbert Blumer, 1962), in modern sociology (Erving Goffman, (1959)), and in the sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1992 [1966]). Currently, social constructivism is used as an overarching term for various and different studies emphasizing discourse in interaction (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Harré, 1995; Davis and Harré, 1990). In psychology, K.Gergen’s (1973) paper: “Social Psychology as History” is a marker of the emergence of social constructivism in psychology (see Burr, 2003:13-15)

<sup>11</sup> Gergen (1985) uses the word social constructionism to avoid the confusion that the term “constructivism” causes, as it can be used to refer to Jean Piaget’s development psychology, cognitive constructivism (Gergen, 1985:266). In quoting Gergen, I adhere to his terminology; but in the following I use the term social constructivist throughout, as it applies to the general use of the term in the social sciences (Wenneberg, 2000).

uses the analogy of “*family resemblance*” to point out how studies claiming to be social constructivist are like a family, where members differ in the family characteristics that they share, but where there are still enough recurrent features shared among different family members to identify them as belonging to the same family (Burr, 2003:2). A common denominator in social constructivist studies is the emphasis on investigating the processes of how people make sense of actions and events and create meaning in their life world.

*“Social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live” (Gergen, 1985:266).*

Numerous studies have demonstrated how concepts we operate with as “naturally occurring” in everyday life are being deconstructed to reveal the social, cultural and contextual processes involved in their construction. Such studies have predominately had an emancipative research interest focused on marginalized or suppressed groups, while only few social constructivist studies have focused on the identity construction processes of resourceful people.

### **2.2.1 Moderate and Radical Social Constructivist Positions**

The broad application of the term social constructivism raises some methodological questions that must be answered in order to focus and differentiate the usage of social constructivism in general and in this study. The first question is *what* is believed to be constructed. Søren Barlebo Wenneberg (2000) proposes three possible construction sites:

- The natural physical world
- The social world
- The subjective world

The question can be rephrased to ask whether it is knowledge about reality or reality itself that is constructed. The answers to these questions illustrate the degree to which certain social constructivist perspectives take on an epistemological position or an ontological position. An ontological idealistic position would answer that what is constructed is reality itself. An epistemological position would answer that it is knowledge about reality that is being constructed, regardless of whether knowledge is about the natural world or the social world, and acknowledging that knowledge also becomes part of that social reality (Wenneberg, 2000: 131-132). Instead of approaching this in terms of either-or, I position myself in line with

Wenneberg's (2000) suggestion that different positions signify different "degrees" of social constructivism, indicating that social constructivist positions can be more or less radical. Thus, I adhere to a position where knowledge in society is generally understood to be socially constructed, but scientific knowledge about the natural world is not *only* socially constructed (Wenneberg, 2000:138). This stand makes my social constructivist position moderate; attempting to hinder a leap into an extreme or radical social constructivism that dissolves reality and leaves us astray in subjective relativism. To sum up my view: Material reality does exist as separate and different from human perception and knowledge of it. And to large extent, humans construct knowledge about the physical world in much the same way as humans construct knowledge of the social and subjective world; hence, a moderate social constructivist approach has the potential to investigate exactly these meaning-creating processes.

### **2.2.2 Characteristics of a Social Constructivist Position**

So far, social constructivism has been described in rather broad terms as an orientation, and as a shared consciousness; however, some guiding principles will make the focus of the approach more precise (Burr, 2003:4-7, Rasborg, 2004:351-352). Social constructivist positions can be characterized by:

- Focus on social processes in everyday interaction
- Focus on critical reflections about what is taken for granted
- Focus on language and meaning as historically and culturally situated
- Focus on social action and relations of power

*Focus on social processes in everyday interaction:* Social constructivism relocates problems from the inner psychological disposition and turns to social processes (Burr, 2003:9). Traditionally, psychology has looked for explanations of social phenomena inside the individual, conceptualized as traits, drives and motives, often resulting in labeling such as pathological and abnormal. The psychological concept of "personality" is translated into the less pre-determined concept of "identity", and studies are refocused from the individual to examine social processes and everyday practices. Everyday social interaction becomes the arena for the construction of identity, with a strong emphasis on language use and discourse. Research is perceived to be co-produced products of social interaction, which adds complexity to the research process in that it implies that the researcher is an active constructor of the research project as much as the phenomenon under study. Thus, any

scientific production, such as this dissertation, is a socially constructed product communicating to specific audiences.

*Focus on critical reflections about what is taken for granted:* Social constructivism challenges the objective basis of conventional knowledge in science and in everyday life and attempts to place knowledge within the process of social interchange and interaction. This involves looking at the *way* social phenomena are produced, institutionalized, and turned into tradition by humans (Berger and Luckmann, 1992 [1966]). Social constructivist inquiries doubt the taken-for-granted-ness of our everyday world and question commonly accepted categories and conventional understandings. For example, social constructivist studies criticize and question the way traditional psychology implicitly or explicitly has taken many of the cultural and societal concepts of the Western world for granted and has applied concepts in a normative fashion and thereby affirmed the Western cultural norms and presented them as part of the right and only version of reality (Burr, 2003:7).

*Focus on language and meaning as historically and culturally situated:* Social constructivism is concerned with how our understanding of the world and ourselves is engendered and constrained by linguistic conventions. And social constructivism advocates that the terms and concepts in which people understand the world are to be understood as social artifacts – products of historically and culturally formed interchanges among people (Gergen, 1985:267). Inspired by the philosopher of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein, language is understood as a precondition of thought, e.g. the way people think is based on language categories and concepts, which give people a framework for meaning creation (Burr, 2003:8). Wittgenstein says language is always “*at work*”, implying that humans are continuously reconstructing language. Hence, as a researcher, I need to consider what language *does* and *how* it is used in everyday life, in Wittgenstein’s terminology – e.g. that language should not be allowed to “*go on holiday*” (Wittgenstein, 1953:8, in Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 83). Furthermore, Wittgenstein (1953) emphasizes that a word derives its meaning from the connections made within the *contexts* of its use. In practice, “*language games*” and social conventions specify how things work and how meanings can be ascribed and connected in everyday life; language games are rule-like directions to what goes with what, but they are not specified formally. Nevertheless, language games provide working rules, point to proper moves in the game, and to certain courses of action. In other words, talk and action become interwoven and inseparable in constructing social practices (Barginaga, 2002; Burr, 2003).



*Focus on social action and relations of power:* If reality is produced and reproduced by people acting on their interpretations and their knowledge of reality, then empirical validity is no longer the explanation of the degree to which particular concepts prevail or are sustained through time. This makes negotiated understandings of *what reality is* critical to social life and practice, as descriptions and explanations, as already mentioned, constitute forms of social action. Descriptions and explanations form various social patterns, and particular understandings support some patterns while excluding others. Therefore, whenever people alter their descriptions and explanations, certain patterns will be threatened and other patterns will be supported (Gergen, 1997). In prevalent societal discourses, understandings are constantly negotiated and power distributed. Understandings of what it means to be a woman, American, insane, or a leader emerge through social processes of negotiation and are not pre-given natural entities. Even though gender is biologically given, the meaning creation of what it means to be a woman or a man is constructed and varies tremendously. This might be rather subtle within cultures, but becomes obvious when we look across cultures; nevertheless, gendered identities are always constructed, charged with power, constantly negotiated and privileged in interaction in families, at work and elsewhere (Søndergaard, 1996). It should now be evident how a social constructivist position provides a view of the concept of identity processes that is very different from natural scientific approaches and traditional psychology's search for explanations of social phenomena. This dissertation opposes the essentialism in much traditional psychology that "*...traps people inside personalities or identities that are limiting for them and are sometimes pathologised by psychology, which then becomes an even more oppressive practice*" (Burr, 2003:6). Traditional psychology has typically regarded language to be a passive vehicle for expressing thoughts and emotions. In this dissertation, language is seen as a constructive resource and a form of social action, through which the world is constructed and made to make sense (Burr, 2003: 8). This project applies narrative psychology and narrative therapy as a theoretical and analytical framework for approaching identity construction in order to enhance the analytical sensitivity to processes, language and complexity. Thus, attention is refocused on the social processes and the structures of human interaction, and the concept of self is relocated: "*...removed from the head and placed within the sphere of social discourse*" (Gergen, 1985:271).

Social constructivism poses the risk of relativism, however, of dissolving knowledge into a grey zone where everything is equally important or valuable. When many and different truths co-exist, it becomes much more difficult to navigate the sea of knowledge. This accentuates a social constructivist position as a balance act: on one hand, the risk is to adhere to relativism, e.g. that “anything goes”, that all conclusions are equally viable; on the other hand, the risk is of falling into the trap of halfway objectivism. Gergen (1985) proposes that the risk of relativism is off balanced by the normative rules of the knowledge communities, and the inherent dependency of knowledge on certain knowledge systems. He emphasizes that because social constructivism offers no basic rules of validity and is in this sense relativistic, social constructivist research must be evaluated, legitimized and judged in social settings (Gergen, 1985: 273).

*“The degree to which a given form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not fundamentally dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social processes (e.g. communication, negotiation, conflict, rhetoric)” (Gergen, 1985:268).*

In practice, a social constructivist position can be difficult to uphold due to the limitations of language. In speaking of “*remnants of substantialism*”, Gergen (2004) says that if we are to use a language of nouns, it is hard to escape the essentialism inherent in our language. His pragmatic solution, which I can only endorse, is to understand that all propositions can be de-constructed and then get on with the conversation, only interrupted by moments of critical reflexivity.

### **2.2.3 Reflexivity**

A reflexive approach looks at theories as discourses, as different ways of structuring and ordering the empirical material. Alvesson and Skjöldberg distinguish between reflexive and reflective, viewing reflexivity as a particular specified version of reflective research (2000:248). Reflexivity is typically concerned with the complex relationship between the processes of knowledge production in a context, as well as the involvement of the knowledge producer (Alvesson and Skjöldberg, 2000:5). Pinpointing this double focus of reflexivity, they quote Calás and Smircich: “...*reflexivity that constantly assesses the relationship between 'knowledge' and 'the ways of doing knowledge'*” (1992:240). Reflexivity becomes a core factor in conducting research, and even more so when the researcher is considered an active co-constructor. Alvesson and Skjöldberg (2000) stress the interpretative and co-constructing relation between the researcher and the researched. They suggest that interpretations come to the forefront of

research, that data construction be reframed as interpretation and text production reframed as authorship. Interpretation and reflection are seen as two core elements of a reflexive methodology. They say: “*There’s no such thing as unmediated data or facts, these are always the result of interpretations*” (2000:9). And interpretation must be an underlying activity in all aspects of the research process and not limited to a phase in the research design:

*“Interpreting one’s own interpretations, looking at one’s own perspectives from other perspectives, and turning a self-critical eye onto one’s own authority as interpreter and author” (Alvesson & Skjoldberg, 2000: vii.)*

Alvesson and Skjoldberg (2000) advocate that any scientific method must create transparency throughout the research process; hence, the ability to self-reflect and to make choices evident are ways to create transparency for the reader. My researcher position as a consultant within the field of study has made a reflexive method a prevailing choice of methodology from the outset. This position makes me an interactive part of the empirical context, especially in the first phases of the study in 2005. A reflexive methodology is at the core of evaluating the quality of social constructivist inquiry, because by demonstrating the research process in writing, quality can be assessed by others and be achieved interactively. Therefore, being critically self-reflexive is at the core of demonstrating the value of a social constructivist research frame; reflexivity as the ability to break away from a frame of reference in order to see what it is *not* saying (Alvesson and Skjoldberg, 2000:246).

Three aspects can be used to evaluate the quality of research and research contributions made within a social constructivist position. The question of validity really reaches down to deeper layers of the research process, since it relates to philosophical questions and paradigmatic assumptions discussed earlier in this chapter (Brier, 2005, Fuglsang and Bitch Olsen, 2004). The criteria of validity and reliability of the natural sciences have been adopted to a large extent by the social sciences and been taken for granted in evaluating the quality and rigor of research conclusions and results (Andersen et al., 1995). Two major weaknesses of methodology have been stressed: the attempt to objectify the researcher, and the perception that the research process approximates a rational process (Andersen et al. 1995:232). Nevertheless, there is a need for qualifying “good research”, and social constructivist research needs to consider the questions implied by this term: for example, are the methods suited to answer the research questions; what is the status of the empirical material; and are conclusions made plausible and legitimized

in relation to the research process. However, social constructivist inquiries do not ask if knowledge is true or valid; instead, they ask how and why knowledge is produced or constructed in particular contexts (Wenneberg, 2000:37). Bent Flyvbjerg (2004) sees it as a condition for social sciences providing concrete, context-dependent knowledge that research should be explorative and focused on generating increased understanding of social phenomena.

*“As for predictive theory, universals, and scientism, the study of human affairs is thus at an eternal beginning. In essence, we have only specific cases and context-dependent knowledge” (Flyvbjerg, 2004:122).*

Legitimacy in social constructivist inquiry is achieved by making the craftsmanship of the research process transparent for the reader. This is done by describing, arguing and clarifying the researcher's reflections about choices and the steps in the research process. *Transparency* is making research methodology and methods explicit, e.g. transparent to the reader, making explicit the inner logic of the research method relative to the research question and the research process. Transparency is obtained if the reader is able to follow and understand the argumentation as an integrated and well-argued story. The goal is to make the analytical conclusions and the research findings plausible for the reader by describing and bringing to the surface the reflexive and analytical processes that brought them about (Alvesson and Skjöldberg, 2000). Furthermore, legitimacy is achieved by communicating findings and contributions in a convincing and accepted way according to the standards of specific research communities. Olsen (2002) argues for quality assurance through two validation<sup>12</sup> processes, of craftsmanship and communication. Research contributions are legitimized through demonstrating *craftsmanship*, by applying the methods and techniques of the trade and interpreting statements in context; and research is legitimized through communication in the interactive negotiation of the research process and the results (Olsen, 2002). Finally, credibility and plausibility are enhanced when researchers demonstrate having “been there” in the field, by providing situational resonance and *thick* description. The reference is to the terminology of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973:13), that thick and dense description is produced by rich and detailed data rather than by generalized categorizations. Hence, generalization transforms into *situational resonance*, implying that the researcher is able to make sense of a phenomenon within a particular context. The researcher must make evident the

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<sup>12</sup> The terms are translated from Olsen's (2002) concepts "håndværksmæssig og kommunikativ validering".

value and status of an account within a specific situation in the broader context of culture and history (Gergen, 1997). Social constructivist inquiries can be seen as a particular social practice that investigates the research process and knowledge produced and emphasizes transparency, craftsmanship, and thick description or situational resonance critically reflected upon and put into perspective.

## **2.3 Application of Methods and Self-reflections**

In the following, I describe the concrete steps and choices made in this research project to make transparent how the research design and research process has unfolded.

### **2.3.1 Case Study Design**

According to Flyvbjerg (2004), the ideal of representative sampling and generalizations has resulted in devaluating in-depth case studies and the strength of the example. Yin (1994:3) has defined a case study as a research design; Stake suggests, however, that a case study is not only a matter of methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied. Stake emphasizes that case study research is characterized by an “...*interest in individual cases rather than methods of inquiry*” (Stake, 2000:435).

This research aims to understand more about the qualitative particularities involved when people ascribe meaning to experiences and construct narratives of identity. A case study design gives access to in-depth examination of specific cases and generates empirical material that enables an investigation of highly complex processes and dynamics, whereas generating a large amount of quantifiable material could not approach the phenomenon. First, I present a high level view of the overall research design and methods used in this study, before going into more detail with my specific cases.

The design is based on triangulation, applying multiple approaches to the study of complex phenomena and using a variety of angles, different approaches and supplementary methods (Yin, 1994). Triangulation introduces multiple sources to enhance different perspectives in this case study. My multiple methods approach involves observation, facilitation, semi-structured individual interviews, and document analysis. In addition, written material is used, particularly the participants’ action plans and personal project descriptions, which were made throughout the one- year program and until the second interview in 2007. Below is

an illustration of the research design and overview of the different methods used for generating the empirical material.

**Display 2-1 Research Design and Methods of Generating the Empirical Material**

<b>Methods</b>	<b>Empirical Material</b>
<p><b>Observation / Facilitation</b></p>	<p><b>Observation and Facilitation<sup>13</sup></b>            I facilitated 9 ETP programs as a Right Management Consultant in the period 2000-2006. Empirical material for the research project was generated by observation and facilitating one program in 2005. ETP programs are 11 days in 4 modules of 3/3/3/2 days during ¾ year, accumulating approx. 110 hours of interaction.</p>
<p><b>Interview</b></p>	<p><b>Individual Interviews 2006 and 2007</b>            I interviewed five leaders from the same ETP group. Each interview lasted approx. 2½ hours, accumulating 12½ hours of interviews and 160 transcribed pages. In 2007, I interviewed four<sup>14</sup> leaders. Each interview approx. 2½ hours, accumulating 10 hours of interviews and 120 transcribed pages.</p> <p><b>Focus Group Interview 2006</b>            Focus group interview with all five leaders: 2½ hours and 34 transcribed pages.</p> <p><b>3 Interviews with Founder of Kjaer &amp; Kjerulff A/S, Erik Kjaer</b>            Three interviews were conducted: two focused on the facilitative, pedagogical aim of the ETP program. One was conducted with a colleague, focused on historical foundation and culture of the original company Kjaer and Kjerulff A/S founded by Erik Kjaer and Stig Kjerulff. These interviews were used as basis for internal workshops for the leader development section on company values and future direction.</p>

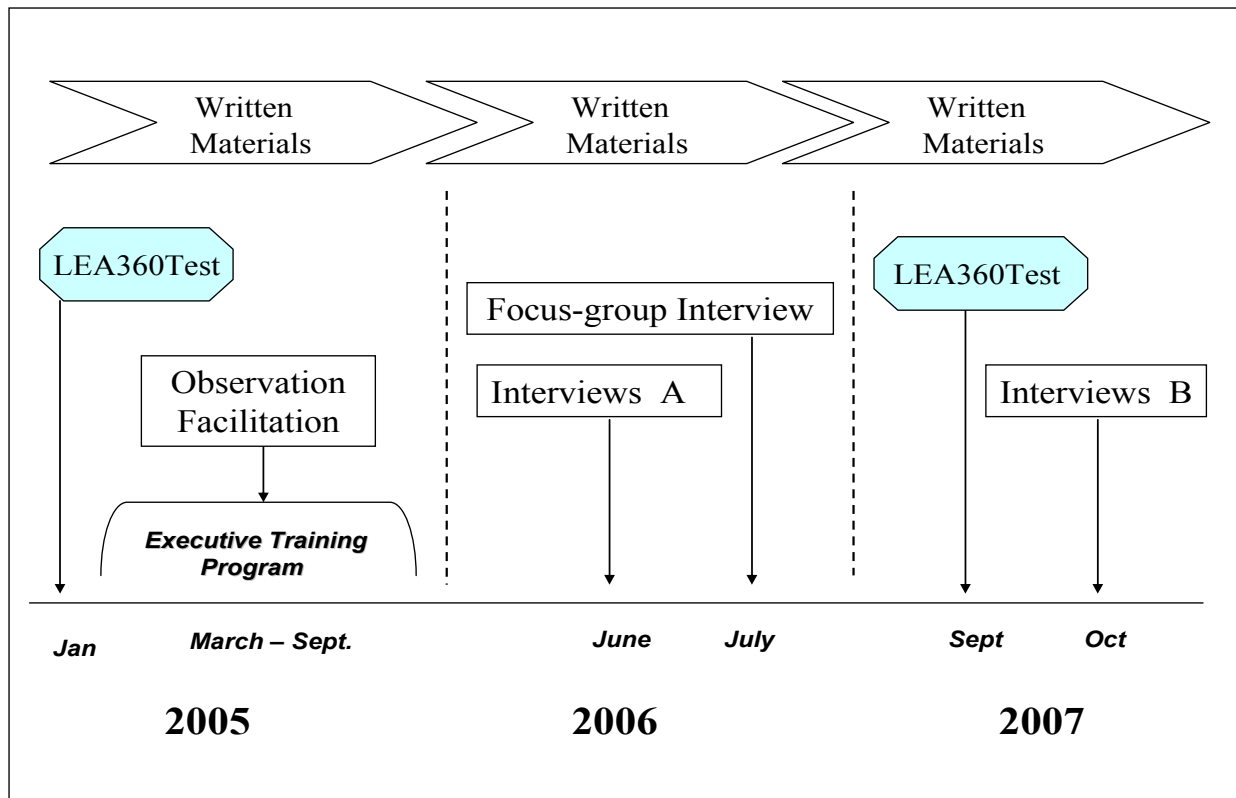
<sup>13</sup> Later in the section “Establishing a research relationship and researcher role reflections” I discuss these two methods and their relative application in this study, as well as my researcher role.

<sup>14</sup> Except one of the leaders Ben, who got stuck in the LEA process and never made it to the second interview, in spite of numerous follow-up phone calls/emails and his expressed good will and intentions to carry through. Ben’s identity narrative, “The Story of Coincidence”, found in chapter 8, will give more insight into the dynamics of this interaction from an identity construction point of view.

<p><b>Document Analysis</b></p>	<p><b>Leadership Effectiveness Analysis (LEA360) conducted in 2005 and 2007</b></p> <p>Two LEA360 analyses were administered in the leaders’ home organization, each resulting in a 100 page report, including feedback from employees, colleagues, boss, and a self-assessment. The 2005 reports were an integrative part of the ETP program, and a re-test was made in 2007 and part of the 2007 interview.</p> <p><b>Documents:</b> Personal action plans based on the LEA360 report, personal projects, participant notes written by the leaders during ETP in 2005, course evaluations 2005, Right Management internal documents: marketing material, course catalogues, ETP program materials, handouts and instructor guides.</p> <p><b>Recording Storytelling for Business Simulation and Instructor Guide</b></p> <p>In 2005, I recorded all the storytelling sequences used at ETP to facilitate a business simulation laboratory. Recordings were transcribed, analyzed and integrated into an instructor guide for future facilitation. The guide is a step by step facilitation instruction for all four modules and is now the property of Right Management.</p>
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Overall, the research project and empirical work stretches over three years, and empirical material was produced in three waves. First production took place at the ETP program’s four modules in 2005: observation and facilitation in the context of the leader development program, including generation of the first written documentations from the participating leaders; the LEA360 analysis reports; personal action-plans; and personal project descriptions. The second production took place eight months after the program ended and involved five individual interviews and a focus group interview and additional documents such as copies of the leaders’ action plan revisions. The third production took place almost two years after the program ended and included interviews and a re-test with the LEA360 feedback analysis. Below is an illustration of the longitudinal design and the production of empirical material in three waves:

## Display 2-2 Longitudinal Research Design and Methods



### 2.3.2 Choosing the Case and the Participants

In this section, I describe and reflect on decisions made regarding methods and project design. This includes reflections on: choice of case, opportunities to learn, open enrollment programs versus internal programs, issues of confidentiality, choice of participants, and the importance of time.

The choice of case is inherently connected to the research interest and aim. However, deciding on a case confronts the researcher with the insecurity of not knowing at the outset if a case will prove to be a good one in relation to the research aim. Flyvbjerg (2004) suggests that the average or typical case is often not the richest in information, and he proposes instead that extreme cases are more suitable to forcefully making a point and presenting strong advocacy. Extreme cases can be identified as cases which are unusual; they can be either especially problematic or especially successful cases of the phenomenon studied. According to Flyvbjerg (2004), selecting extreme case for studies is important: "*Atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied*" (Flyvbjerg, 2004:127). In the early phases of this research, I considered making The Executive Training Program the case of my study. In the history of Right Management, the ETP program had been an especially successful program, in terms of both economic earnings and a



consistent record of very positive evaluations from participants. In 2005, more than forty ETP programs had been conducted in twelve years, and no fundamental changes had been made to the program content or structure in that time. This evoked my curiosity about this particular program, but later, with the progressive development of the project and after my specification of the research question, I realized that I had to reconsider my choice of case. In the terminology of Stake (Stake, et al., 1994), my interest in and choice of the Executive Training Program as a case was initially guided by an *intrinsic interest* in better understanding this particular case. However, in the process of doing research, my research aim became redefined to an *instrumental interest* in examining the narrative construction of leader identity in a leader development program and beyond. In order to examine this question, the narratives of the participating leaders had to be made the focus of study. This made the ETP program a context for facilitating the understanding of something else – e.g. for studying the narrative construction of leader identity. In addition, the narrative construction of leader identities became the investigative focus, and the five leaders became the cases in this study.

Hence, in this study, I have *opportunity to learn* as my leading criteria when selecting the case context and participants. This is parallel to Stake's (2000) emphasis on learning from atypical cases and on the value of choosing variety over representative sampling when deciding on a case. Stake suggests: "*Potential for learning is a different and sometimes superior criterion to representativeness. Isn't it better to learn a lot from an atypical case than a little from a seemingly typical case*" (Stake, 2000:446).

The Executive Training Program is an open enrollment program, which means that the program is not part of an internal organizational development strategy. In contrast, internal organizational leader development programs do not have the same voluntary basis. They are often prerequisites for leaders to be socialized into organizational culture, or ways for leaders to climb the career ladder. Instead, in an open enrollment program, each leader volunteers and actively chooses to participate, which allows the assumption that the participating leaders are motivated to engage in identity work. Nevertheless, all leader development programs entail and accentuate different power relations, such as comparison, competition and negotiation of status, regardless of whether the program is internal or external. ETP is also an expensive program, which might motivate "getting value for money", even when the program is paid for by the organization. The ETP program targets experienced leaders with at least 10 years of experience.

All participating leaders occupy top or higher level positions in their organizations and all have many years of practical experience in leading positions, which can be assumed to indicate that they have thus far had some success in being leaders. Investigating experienced leaders would contain learning potential in relation to the field of leadership studies as well as narrative studies. Furthermore, experienced leaders already have extensive experience from different leader positions in different organizations and would have experienced challenges to their leader identity over time, making the empirical material more nuanced.

Still, the leader development program context is important and contributes to the uniqueness of this study. Generally, leader development programs are hard to gain access to, for confidential and ethical reasons. *Confidentiality* is at play in several ways: Providers of programs, often consulting firms, are in a competitive market and do not want their program design and tools known or made public for competitors to copy; hence, from a marketing perspective, some inaccessibility and secrecy is preferable. From a facilitative pedagogical perspective, programs like the Executive Training Program (ETP) rely on generating experiences of suspense, surprise, and novelty within the program, which would be jeopardized by too much openness and transparency. Leaders from Danish companies continuously participate in ETP, and facilitators explicitly instruct these leaders not to disclose the “business simulation plots”, since this would limit the experience for the next cohort of leaders. Moreover, the mere presence of a researcher observer could constitute a disturbance in the context – e.g. by distracting attention from the course and disrupting the establishment of an environment of trust and openness for the participating leaders. Being identified as a *research observer* could interfere with establishing the necessary engagement in developmental work.

The five leaders in my sample were all part of my “basic group” in the ETP program in which I functioned as an interactive participant in the empirical context, since I co-facilitated the program in 2005. I reasoned that in order to learn more about how leaders make sense of themselves as leaders, experienced and seemingly successful leaders would be an interesting and also a rather unexplored group, especially when investigated within a narrative constructive approach from a social constructivist position. The leaders came from different industries and organizations within the Danish private sector. In accordance with Stake’s (2000) argument that variety not representation should guide the choice of samples, I thought of the variety of industries as an asset. This could provide insights into a

richer and more varied empirical material, since more ideas and organizational experiences of leader identity would be brought together.

Furthermore, assuming that identity construction does not happen instantly but is a slowly progressing process, *time* becomes an important dimension in studying the narrative construction of leader identity. Since I wanted to understand how leaders' narrated identities were being de-constructed and re-constructed in the temporal dimension, I needed to access identity construction processes at different moments in time (see also Boutaiba, 2003). Choosing ETP as context enabled me to explore in real time by observing and interacting with the leaders as they were engaged in *identity work*, e.g. de-constructing identity constructs and re-constructing who they were and wanted to become as leaders (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Moreover, I saw the ETP program's pedagogical emphasis on interactive group learning and on process to be supportive for examining identity construction processes in the making. I also hoped for access to the messiness of the process – the tensions, frustrations and doubts. Hindsight shows that the messiness of the processes is often reduced or diminished in the interview, and tensions might be wrapped up in neat categories that more smoothly perform a coherent narrative for the interviewer. Bearing the research question in mind, I hoped to learn more about the potential struggles of identity work by researching from an active and participative position (Andersen et al., 1995).

### **2.3.3 Researcher Role Reflections and Establishing a Research Relationship**

Methodologically, this study is distinct in that I investigate a context in which I am an active and involved part. Andersen et al. (1995) argue that field research depends strongly on the individual researcher's interest in the field and ability to be accepted into the field, to communicate in the language of the field, to express empathy and interest in dialogue, to navigate social arenas and cultures, as well as the ability to avoid offending or embarrassing people in the context, which could lead to undermining the relationship or jeopardizing openness. My involvement with the field has been close to being a "*complete member*". I was the facilitator of the leader development program, and as such, a complete member of the investigative context; but I was not a complete member in the sense of being in the same position as the leaders who participated in the program (Adler and Adler, 1987:33, in Andersen et al., 1995:184). However, empirical studies where the researcher is both highly familiar with and has access to a relatively closed field are relatively rare. This researcher position accentuates the methodological balance of utilizing closeness to approach rich empirical situations, while avoiding becoming

too involved and thus e.g. not being able to see the forest for the trees (Alvesson, 2003). The balance remains important throughout the research process, requiring acknowledgement that the ability to reflect upon anything requires distance and that self-reflection continues to be a tricky matter that is entangled in subjective interpretation of the relationship.

Hence, the matter of how to “gain access” to a field is not something that you do once and for all; rather it is a relation that has to be negotiated throughout the research process (Boutaiba, 2003). Still, when you investigate in your own “back yard”, the question of access is turned upside down in several ways. To the researcher who is part of the field,<sup>15</sup> the negotiation process is somewhat displaced from the empirical field into the research community context. This means that an involved researcher position can be perceived as slightly suspicious to the research community, making it even more vital to negotiate the involvement with the field in order to demonstrate the plausibility of research findings. The researcher who is part of the field and highly familiar with the investigative context is therefore in a constant process of negotiating with the field of study as well as with the research community (Boutaiba, 2003).

Three different roles are significantly at play in this study: the role of consultant, facilitator and researcher. I distinguish between the terms consultant and facilitator in order to differentiate two important interactive dimensions. First, in the consultant role, I am positioned in an asymmetrical position where I act as the conductor of the program, with pronounced and explicit authoritarian power and influence. In the facilitator role, the relationship is still asymmetrical, but the execution of power is much more subtle, and I am positioned more as a supportive yet directive helper in interacting with the participants. The facilitator role is more closely connected to group work and individual facilitation, whereas the consultant role is connected to the plenary sections and overall program leadership. Secondly, both roles position me as the knowledgeable subject-matter expert, but the exercise of knowledge is different. The consultant role involves the educating expert who gives mini-lectures and contributes content, whereas the facilitator role focuses on the processes of development and applies questioning and indirect, influential approaches, though still positioned as the expert in relation to group process or development of the participants. The researcher role in this study is understood as interactive and co-producing; thus, interacting with participants as a researcher is a

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<sup>15</sup> Often the terminology insider/outsider is used to signal if the researcher is investigating a field in which she/he is part. The insider–outsider dichotomy is to a certain extent dissolved in social constructivist research and replaced by a terminology of negotiated interaction and levels of involvement.

socially interactive and mutually influential process. The researcher role, however, is also an asymmetrical positioning, the most significant difference being that the researcher does not necessarily possess any knowledge of the field of study. The leader development context is also a business context in which the aim is to succeed, and though all three interactive positions share a goal-directedness, it has a particular aim with the interaction. The researcher is not evaluated regarding her contact with the participants, whereas the participating leaders also have an evaluation role in relation to judging the contribution of their consultant and facilitator, which in a way reverses the power relation. In the following, I use the terms consultant and facilitator to indicate these differences in the interaction, and I describe in more detail the specifics of my researcher position.

Access is not just about entering the physical organization, participating in the meeting, or entering a particular context; in this study, it is much more about the leaders allowing me access to their thoughts and stories. These borders of access are interactively engrained in whether the leaders trust and believe that I will treat their stories with confidentiality, and in whether it is useful or seems relevant for the leaders to share their stories with me. The continuation of the relation with the participating leaders also had to be negotiated in every encounter, but here on the level of trust, confidentiality, and relevance. Moreover, participants have expectations to the interaction formed in the leader development program context, and these expectations are likely to be carried on into the research context. The interaction with and within the field can easily be blurred and has to be handled through constant self-monitoring and reflection in the interaction process in concrete situations (Alvesson and Skjöldberg, 2000). The researcher positioned and involved in the field might be blessed with easier access and a closer encounter, but might be cursed if different roles collide and cause role confusion or create disappointment.

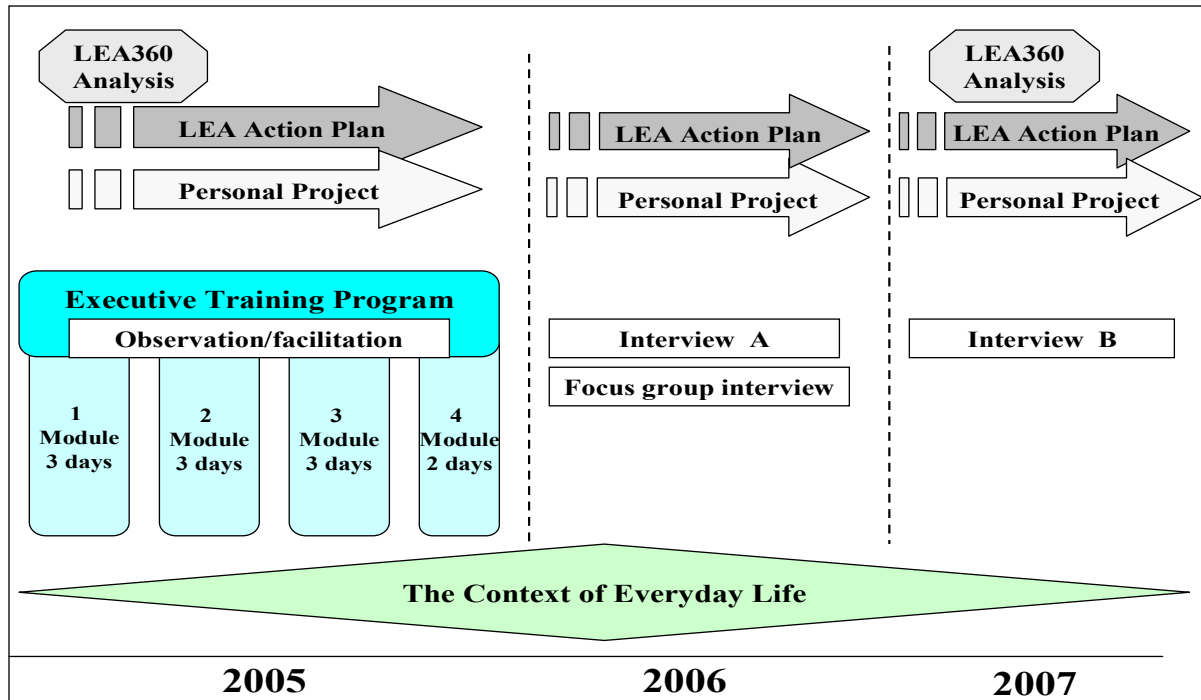
As a researcher, I can choose to interact with the empirical field in various ways, for example by expressing empathy with the empirical field as suggested by Schutz (1962), or by conducting the interview as an exploratory dialogue in which the researcher and the interviewee engage in a mutual process of understanding (Schutz, 1962 in Andersen et al., 1995:187). Qua my facilitator role providing me with extensive knowledge of the leader development context and language, my intent was to establish a dialogue that would make the interview a project of mutual understanding in which the leader would feel safe and willing to share his sense-making processes. I saw being empathetically present as a prerequisite for

approaching such an exploration. However difficult it might be to understand how another individual understands himself, the aim was in keeping with the following extract: “...*But merely lifting a corner of the veil covering the universe of another human being, which is possible by transforming the interview into a dialogue, will reveal to the researcher the worries, the hopes, the projections, and the criteria for self-esteem (in-order-to-motives) to which the interviewee resorts to explain himself*” (Andersen et al. 1995:188).

The ETP program started in January 2005 with the preliminary LEA360 analysis, and the program itself began in March and ended late September 2005. The leaders returned to their organizations and daily work, and I did not have any contact with the leaders during the following seven months. In May 2006, I wrote to six leaders from the basis group, broadly described the research project and made a first request for their participation. The response was very positive from the five men, but the only woman in the group had unfortunately been given a serious diagnosis, and after a follow-up conversation, she decided it would be better to use her energy to get well. At the time, the group had already arranged a meeting, and it was agreed that I should participate and introduce the research project. At the meeting, I was very aware that my relationship with the leaders had to change from that of active facilitator to a researcher role, which would allow me to ask questions but not actively engage in the leaders’ development efforts. To prepare them (and myself) for this change of roles and to manage their expectations, I explicitly talked about my new role at the meeting and how it would change our relationship. I stated that I would not “work” with them as a facilitator, and they could expect me to be more passive and questioning in the role of researcher.

Later, in the interviewing process, it was harder than I thought to hold back facilitative questions or perspectives, especially when the leaders were actively struggling or frustrated with different issues in the interviews. At the meeting, the five leaders did not seem very interested in the formalities of the research project but wanted to move on updating each other on their development processes. I stayed, observed, and took notes. I saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate my new researcher role, and with my behavior, signal that I would not intervene or comment on their discussions as I had previously done in my role as facilitator. Below is an illustrative overview of the course of events for the participating leaders throughout the three-year period.

**Display 2-3 Illustration of the Course of Events for the Participating Leaders**



### 2.3.4 Different Contexts of Interacting

In this section, I discuss briefly some significant aspects of the participants' interplay with the Executive Training Program, since in this study the norms of the ETP program have been influential in establishing baseline norms of interaction. With regard to the interaction that later took place in the interviews and which has made a difference in establishing this particular research, I include quotations from the participants in order to illustrate and support the argumentation. The participating leaders emphasized “openness” as a significant norm in ETP, and the following is an interview sequence from 2006, in which one of the leaders, Jim, talks about his first meeting with this aspect of the ETP context.

#### ***Example - Jim interview 2006***

*Jim: When I drove home after the first module, I was deeply shocked!*

*Gitte: Yes, what were you shocked about?*

*Jim: Deeply shocked!*

*Gitte: Yes?*

*Jim: I was shocked that I had spent time with total strangers and I had learned so much about them – so I thought that it was terrible that they had no one else to talk to.... that really shocked me, and I went home to talk to my wife about it...hmm, that I just couldn't imagine...”*

*Gitte: So, the openness in what you had been told about the private (life ?) and regarding leadership?*

*Jim: Yes, yes – I just couldn't - that is the strangest thing - you are with a bunch of people who have not had or have not wanted to talk to other people about it – it is scary – just very scary to me. What I try to do here, and what has become even more clear because of this course, is to make my leaders say “things like they are” to me, so when we sit and discuss purely business – I try to get into the personal, how they are feeling at home – how they are doing and if they are taking care of themselves....Hmm, instead of just talking business with them...”*

The norm of openness shocked and made an impression on Jim. Nevertheless, he describes transferring aspects of the openness norm into his home organization, exemplified by how he leads and communicates with the next leader level. Jim's expressed reservations about being open are discussed further in the case of Jim: The Story of the Perfect Match, in the analytical chapter 7.

The norms of the ETP program are to a large extent formed and interacted in a small group setting; about one-third of the program takes place in groups of 6-7 leaders. Right Management facilitators continually switch between all groups (typically three) at a particular cohort. Thus, the group norms will be influenced by all three facilitators and their slightly different facilitative styles. Each group, however, has one regular facilitator who works with the “personal project” and the more intensive coaching of the group members. As a consequence of this program setup, my interaction with the leaders mainly took place in the basic group setting. In the program practice, the way in which I, as a facilitator, interact with and respond to each leader is evident to the rest of the group. This means that in my facilitator role I introduce the norms and culture of ETP, not only by telling about norms like “openness”, but even more by interacting and demonstrating the norms in the group setting. In the facilitator position, I act as a role model, and have to respond to the group members in such a way that they feel invited to be “open” and motivated to “share significant issues” with me and with the rest of the group. The groups enact their own group norms and adopt in various ways the norms of interaction of the ETP program context. The roles of facilitator and participant are asymmetrical roles, as are the roles in the interview situation (Kvale, 1997). The relational asymmetry is enhanced by the fact that all facilitators are psychologists and supposed through their education to have specialized knowledge of human interaction, communication and group processes. The following is an example of



how norms and culture are negotiated between the program's group members. This example is narrated by Jim during the 2006 interview; the episode illustrates the group reaction when one of the group members, Adam, is perceived to violate the norm of openness. The episode enacted the norm of openness and rendered the norm visible to the group and to me. We enter the interview in a conversation about feeling *safe*<sup>16</sup> at ETP.

***Example – Jim interview 2006***

*Gitte: what was it - that made you feel safe?*

*Jim: It was that everybody else was being open about their situation. It was the openness.*

*Gitte: Yes?*

*Jim: It is my impression that none of the others had hidden agendas – only once when Edith really erupted and said she felt cheated by Adam. That was really where it became obvious. And the others also agreed that Adam's agenda; not wanting to be open – that we didn't like it. And then of course you can always discuss whether the others had gotten to the bottom of me or not? I don't know, there are these layers you have – and I don't know, but I felt I got into the others and people were dealing with real issues...like Ben...hmm, and also Milton, and Edith - but we felt cheated by Adam.*

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*Gitte: What do you think this episode did to the group?*

*Jim: The rest of us became very close, but Adam, I don't know if he felt like an outsider or became one – I think he did, but.....Hmm I didn't really care that much, because it was his own lack of effort; it was not our lack of effort – we tried to be open and to help, and if you don't want to receive, if you want to make your own rules which are not the rules of the group, then it is up to you – He is a grown up...*

This can be interpreted as a very explicit example of how group norms are enacted in practice in the program and illustrating group pressure to adhere to the norm of openness and to engage in dialogue with the group about significant issues – what Jim calls “*real issues*”. The sharing in the group and the strong emotional reaction towards the violation of the norm of openness was mentioned by three of the

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<sup>16</sup> The word *safe* is translated from the Danish word: *tryk – at føle sig tryk*.

leaders in the individual interviews as an especially emotional experience that made a strong impression in the program. Furthermore, when the group requests some level of “authenticity” of its members, the example underlines group sensitivity to what could be considered impression management dialogue. Hence, the norm of openness interacted in the ETP program functions within the leader development program context as a mirror for the individual leader and initiates self-reflection. But the norm also entails pressure to accommodate the norm within the group setting, causing group members struggling with openness or unwilling to adapt to become only peripheral members and perhaps feel inadequate. In the research context, the established norm of openness, in combination with the familiarity and prior consultant-participant relationship, may have generated a special dialogue that to a greater extent could elicit stories involving problems or inadequacies than would be likely in the average interview. This is a significant feature of this particular study, which colors the investigation and its findings but also contributes a unique insight into the struggles leaders must deal with that are not often brought forward.

### **2.3.5 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are always important, and the value of the research can never outweigh any injury through personal exposure (Stake, 2000:447). Here, I consider three critical ethical aspects of my study. First, I have to consider how to accommodate what is shared with me in an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality with the research requirement of transparency and empirical richness. This is truly a balance act when, for example, one leader shares reflections about his recent divorce and another worries about his son’s development that reflect his role as a father. These might be thematically important for an understanding of the life changes and circumstance of the leaders, but they are also in an ethical grey zone in relation to the level of personal disclosure acceptable. I have chosen to leave very personal details to the private sphere, but to make significant life changes known to the reader (e.g. undergoing divorce), because such life circumstances significantly influence identity construction processes.

Secondly, I meet the participants in the ETP program context in the role of facilitator and “subject matter expert”, which makes ethical considerations regarding the unequal distribution of power in the research relationship important. Although the context later changed into the context of the research project, the leaders continued to a large extent to relate to me and interact with me in much the

same way as in the ETP program. Both contexts accentuate asymmetrical roles of power, and the distribution of power was interacted very differently in the interview setting. For example, in the 2006 interview, Adam continuously used my name, illustrating to me the power interacted between us; I, as a psychologist researcher, was positioned as in power and maybe even as a threat to self-esteem or identity. Thus, naming can be understood to evoke familiarity and relationship, and might be a way to manage the asymmetrical relation, making it more equal or less threatening. Jim also used my name several times in the 2006 interview, but in a different more patronizing way: “*Gitte, you have to understand...*”, perhaps attempting to position himself in power and in control of the situation, which is in line with the identity narratives unfolded in Jim’s case: *The Story of the Perfect Match*, in chapter 7.

Besides having caused me to consider how to use empirical material without ethically violating personal integrity, this relation has also contributed to the richness and thickness of the empirical material. In the writing, this problem also concerns how the leaders are portrayed in the dissertation. The leaders’ narratives seem to be predominately negative and focused on what is not working. Thus, when presenting the leaders’ identity narratives, it appears as if the leaders are overwhelmingly unprofessional and insecure. This cautioned me ethically as a researcher to present and author their narratives as balanced and as multifaceted as possible, still allowing the dominate narratives to be transparent and unfolded as part of a whole, and by making the reader aware of this aspect.

Finally, ethics are also to be considered in relation to the Right Management organization and my facilitator colleagues. The Right Management organization might appear unprofessional in not having the most basic documentation for a program that has contributed significantly to the company's turnover for years. In addition, the extreme process-orientation and improvisational facilitation style of the ETP program could be perceived as a liability instead of an advantage, in that it turns upside-down traditional management thinking about serious goal-directed work for producing reliable outcomes. In general, this study adheres to the ethical principles for psychologists issued by The Danish Board of Psychology. In accordance with these principles, the leaders are anonymous and organizational details have been dimmed, and I have done my utmost to adhere and consider the ethical implications of my choices, balancing the richness of the material, the trust in the relationship, and the ethical considerations in relation to the participants.

### **2.3.6 The Specific Methods of Inquiry**

Selection and application of methods have been aimed at supporting interactively the production of detailed, thick narratives, as narratives are one of the predominant ways of constructing identity. Three methods are applied in this study: observation/facilitation, interviewing and document analysis.

#### **Observation and Facilitation**

Observation is one of the most common ways to approach organizational settings and is a method for generating empirical material used predominately in sociologically and anthropologically oriented studies. Observation seems to imply or require some distance to the observed phenomena, which can lead to the perception that observation produces very reliable empirical material. However, this may be slightly misleading – first, because any observation is made from an intentional position in alignment with a research focus and aim; and second, because the practice of observing in an organizational context usually involves social interaction (such as conversations, small talk or questions) that places the researcher in an interactive and influential role in relation to the field. As such, the researcher is always interactively part of the field, even when observing in a restrictive sense; the researcher is another actor in the field, influencing interaction and enhancing self-reflection in the observed, as well as influencing the very words and use of words in a given context (Barinaga, 2002: 167).

My researcher position as an organizational psychologist and consultant in the ETP leader development program clearly defines me as an active participant. The question is how to act as both a facilitator and research observer in the same context. In practice, sequencing of the two activities has been essential. At one point in time, I was interacting and facilitating interaction, and at another observing and taking a reflexive position – reflecting on the interaction and reflecting on my facilitation in the current situation. This has been possible because the program design varies between periods of intense interaction and periods when other actors or facilitators take the lead. Hence, during an average 14-hour program day, there are hours and moments of actively engaging with the leaders in a direct facilitative way, and hours and moments of observing the leaders from a distance. The argument is that the researcher can do both, in the same context, but not at the same time.

Furthermore, the ETP program relies on the facilitators' ability to observe and reflect upon her emotional reactions and interaction with the participants while

being in the situation. In systemic counseling, this is called meta-positioning, which distinguishes between being positioned as an interactive part of a situation, and reflecting on this interaction from a position outside the situation. This is a common core skill and competency of psychologists working with group processes, and I was able to use this differentiation in my research process and in juggling the two roles of facilitator and observer (Andersen, 1996). Central to the ETP program is identifying relevant issues and the *zone of proximal development*<sup>17</sup> for the leaders. The facilitative intentions of the ETP program are not specific and are only formulated in very broad terms: to facilitate *self-awareness* and *developmental processes* within an existential and humanistic psychological frame. This means that as a facilitator, I do not operate with very fixed goals about what the leaders should accomplish in the program. To a large extent, the leaders themselves provide the content, making the facilitative intentions open and responsive to what the leaders bring forth and only the overall program ideology, design and pedagogic is settled a priori, as described in chapter 1.

Typically, when you have worked with an area for a long time, some of your former reflected knowledge becomes tacit, intuitive and un-reflected. This has been described as a development from novice to subject matter expert (Sørensen and Barlebo, 2005). This research process has rendered my own invisible and tacit knowledge more visible, and has forced me to reflect again on various aspects of my own practice – For example, when describing the ETP program ideology and when tracing back interactive sequences in the interviews. Reflecting in more depth on the structure, design and facilitation has provided the study with much detail and process knowledge, which would have been hard to achieve otherwise. In this perspective, the research design is an attempt to make the most of my unique access and researcher position.

## **Interviewing**

The intention of the interviews was to make possible the generation of rich narratives in which the leaders made sense of themselves as leaders and e.g. unfolded the meaning of their social practice as leaders and the identity construction processes. Since the researcher is understood not only to be contributing to the data but to be an active participant in the construction of the

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<sup>17</sup> Zone of Proximal Development is a concept of psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) and can be defined as the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). It signifies the zone of optimal development for an individual.

empirical material, this implies that the empirical material can only be considered inter-subjective products (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Rasborg, 2004, in Fuglesang and Bitsch Olsen, 2004:37). Czarniawska (2004) goes so far as to claim that narrative interviews are manipulated conversations with the potential to generate a rich source of knowledge about social practice, insofar as the interviews produce narratives. In this particular study, I conducted semi-structured interviews inspired by Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) *The Active Interview*. Active interviews are socially constructed experiences, always situated and embedded and emphasizing the researcher's co-productive processes. The active interview makes the interviewee a researcher in his own right, consulting repertoires of experiences and orientations, linking fragments and pieces into patterns, and offering his own theoretically coherent descriptions, accounts and explanations. My established relationship with the leaders during the leader development program made it possible for me as interviewer to position myself in the role of "*empathic fellow traveler*" in relation to the narrator (Gabriel, 2000).

Hence, the interview was framed as a place of narrative production, suggesting that the interviewee held the position of storyteller (Bruner, 1986b, Riessman, 1993). The storyteller is at the same time sensitive to the situation, improvising somewhat and co-creating with the interviewer, but he is not just making it all up. Elements of improvisational narration emerge in which the interviewee combines aspects of experience, emotion, opinion, and expectation to connect disparate parts into coherent, meaningful wholes (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 28). Storytelling is collaboration in the sense that the interviewer and the interviewee interact dynamically to produce meaningful stories. Storytellers draw on their audiences to deliver what they think their audiences (the researcher) want to hear. Accordingly, the leaders' awareness of me as a psychologist, as well as the developmental context and norms, may have inclined them to tell stories about problems and emotional struggles and to tell stories of self-disclosure.

I interviewed the leaders in 2006 and again in 2007. Each interview lasted from 2-2½ hours. I carried out all interviews except one at the Right Management office in Copenhagen. The interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and subsequently transcribed. The transcription included non-verbal signs of communication: sighs, pauses, and laughter, in order to give as full a description as possible of the interactive atmosphere during the interviews. The active interview is not so much dictated by a pre-designed set of questions; it is more loosely directed and constrained by the interviewer's topical agenda, objectives, and queries (Holstein

and Gubrium, 1995:29). I approached the interview as a dialogue, and the challenge was to make the leader relate to and reason about the themes of study. Andersen et al. (1995:186) state that to establish dialogue a general rule is that “*the less you need to say the better*”. My intention was to allow room for the leaders to narrate in their own words and language. Therefore, I tried to minimize my own influence by limiting my use of conventional leader terms and concepts and the amount of talking I did during the interview, while sustaining dialogue within a frame of relevance to the investigative purpose.

Concretely, I prepared an interview guide with open and broad questions aimed at providing a broad non-directive frame for the 2006 interviews. The first question was: “How did you become a leader?” This is purposefully a very open question that does not point out any particular starting point in time or delimiting answers to the leader occupation. The leaders responded by giving very different starting points; two told stories of childhood experiences and family background, while three started their stories in high school, referring to work. However, my interview style differed from semi-structured interviews and was more in line with the introduced “empathic fellow traveler” position and metaphor. Thus, I asked broad, open questions to frame the conversation, and then listened, rephrased and primarily made reinforcing remarks to encourage further storytelling and narration.

The second interview in 2007 had two parts: In the first part, I engaged in an active interview, and in the second part, I integrated the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> LEA360 reports in the interview. The questions again aimed to generate narratives and questions focused on how the leader made sense of events or ascribed meaning to his actions and experiences as a leader. The first part focused on the leader's current situation and significant events from the past year with focus and reflections on the leader's developmental progress so far. Because I knew their action plans and personal projects from the ETP program, I could ask specific questions about the leader's particular developmental focus. The second part was a walkthrough of the LEA360 degree report from 2007, examining one leadership dimension at the time. The discussion of the report included the new feedback scores, and I wrote the 2005 scores into the report from all respondent groups (i.e. direct-reports, colleagues, boss and self). Then, the leader was able to see the exact feedback score on a particular leader dimension in 2005 and in 2007, making any changes visible to the leader. The leader would then offer his reflections, thoughts and explanations about the feedback and would typically relate feedback to concrete events, situations and experiences, or to his goals and aspirations. Hence, in the first part, I interacted in a

traditional researcher role, whereas the focus on the LEA360 report results in the second part of the interview bore resemblance to the consultant role. Even though I did not interact with the participants as a consultant (i.e. did not coach or facilitate on the basis of the LEA360 feedback report), the relationship in the last part was framed by the leaders' relating to the LEA360 analysis. Moreover, as this is not a comparative research inquiry, comparison of the two analyses are not the focus here; the focus is how the leader makes sense of his leader identity in narratives in interaction with the feedback tool, possibly providing insights on how leaders create meaning about identity by using tools such as the LEA360, which is a commonly used tool for facilitating development in leader development programs.

This approach was only possible because both the leaders and I had substantial knowledge of the LEA360 tool, which made it possible for the leaders to relate to the feedback scores without using too much time understanding the tool. I engaged in this process in order to elicit narratives on how the leaders, when confronted with the feedback, could incorporate it into their function as leader. How would the leader construct meaning of his identity as a leader and his processes of reconstruction in the face of this temporary feedback from people in his home organization? I had also conducted a focus group interview with the group in 2005, after the first individual interviews. The five leaders repeated to a large extent, or reproduced, narratives very similar to those told in the individual interviews. This brings to the fore how narratives, once they are told, are remembered again, thereby sustaining themselves as central identity constructs. Ending the focus group meeting, I expressed my appreciation for their participation, and Jim responded that I need not thank them, because "*...we are not doing this for you – we are actually doing it for ourselves*". He thus implied that the leaders perceived the research project as a way to continue their development process and maybe to maintain focus and gain support to turn good intentions into action. As a consequence, I did not have to do much persuasion, since the leaders perceived the research intervention as a continuation of the program. This could potentially disappoint the leaders, if they later experienced that they did not receive more active facilitative involvement from my side, but on the other hand, just the shared experience of telling about your developmental goal can be considered "therapeutic", since the self-reflective processes initiated in the interviews seemed to fulfill the leaders' need for continued development focus. The very act of meeting someone on a regular basis to talk about your development as a leader can be considered an intervention and can be seen as sustaining the developmental focus. These reflections made me feel comfortable and consistent in my passive and questioning



researcher role, reassured that the active interview in itself would be sufficient to meet their expectations, and would motivate them to continue participating in the research project.

### **Document Analysis**

In this dissertation, the following written material is included: the two LEA360 analyses and feedback reports; personal project descriptions for each leader; copies of participants' log books with personal notes and reflections made during and after the program; and in addition: my observation notes from the program and meetings; Right Management documents; marketing materials; course catalogues; internal written documents on the ETP program; and course evaluations.

Moreover, as an Industrial PhD, I have been obliged to make deliverables to the host Right Management. In addition to the workshops already mentioned, I documented the entire ETP program, including the extensive storytelling sequences. In 2005, only limited documentation existed and only few consultants facilitated the program. From a business perspective, this was a very vulnerable situation, and Right Management wanted to preserve the program independently of individual facilitators. This process included the recording of the storytelling sequences of the ETP business simulation and writing a detailed instructor guide. The documentation made me distance myself from the interactive role of facilitation and approach the familiar program as an unfamiliar phenomenon. I had to reflect on what we were actually doing in the program and why, and I had to document this so others would be able to facilitate the program in the future. This work resulted in an extensive ETP instructor guide, which is now the intellectual property of Right Management.

## **2.4 Approaching Analysis**

Every researcher has to deal with the incontrovertibly traumatic transformation of the research process into a research dissertation. This transformation takes place mostly through the analysis of the empirical material and the writing of the final text, which is often the only presentation of the product as a whole to a larger public audience. Needless to say, this presentation is vital in order to make the research process and insights available to research communities and others. In this section, I briefly reflect on and describe the concrete choices made in transforming this research process into writing, under the headings: selecting, interpreting, and authoring.

### 2.4.1 Selecting

One of the most important choices in the research process is to decide on the units of analysis. Especially in narrative research, determining the borders of the narrative units is difficult, since not everything that is being said can be accumulated into a narrative. The cardinal question is how to discern narrative segments for analysis, and how to select which segments to analyze. Decisions have to be made about where a narrative starts and where it ends, while realizing that to place boundaries around narratives is very much a matter of choices, definitions and research decisions (Riessman, 2002:699).

The concept of *stanza* developed by sociolinguist James Gee (1986, 1991) has supported my choice of analytical units to extract and select story units from the empirical material. Gee (1986) describes a stanza in the following way:

*“Each stanza is a particular “take” on a character, action, event, claim, or piece of information and each involves a shift of focal participants, focal events, or a change in the time or framing of events from the preceding stanza. Each stanza represents a particular perspective, not in the sense of who is doing the seeing, but in terms of what is seen; it represents an image, what the “camera” is focused on, a “scene” (Gee, 1991: 23-24).*

Riessman (1993) also emphasizes a particular perspective of similarity or soundings of similarity as a significant analytical boundary maker in her definition of stanza:

*“ Stanzas are series of lines on a single topic that have a parallel structure and sound as if they go together by tending to be said at the same rate and with little hesitation between the lines” (Riessman, 1993:45).*

In my analysis, I focus on the way leader identity is constructed and experiences are made meaningful in ontological narratives. The oral transmission of stories is an integrated part of my interpretation. The analytical terminology of the dissertation is inspired by and draws from narrative therapy conceptualization, but narrative therapy is not a research method nor is it an analytical approach. Therefore, to provide a working definition for analyzing and identifying analytical units, and to provide stringency within the narrative analytical terminology, I have applied the framework of stanza and scenes, which parallels the meaning of the narrative therapy concepts of story and storyline. The stanza concept I apply

emphasizes parts of narratives that “*sound as if they go together*” (Riessman, 2002). Hence, a stanza can be defined as a part of a sentence, one sentence or a couple of sentences that are interpreted to go together, whereas a scene is formed when a cluster of stanzas or a group of stanzas with a common focus or distinct meaning are linked or seem to support the same creation of meaning. Thus, Gee provides an applicable definition in which the concept of stanzas and scenes makes it possible to place some borders around the analytical unit. I find that the concept of stanza provides some important boundary markers for identifying stories and defining when a story starts and where it ends. However, in the terminology of the dissertation, the concept of stanzas applies to what are called “stories” and the conceptual definition of scenes applies to what are called “storylines”, i.e. clusters of stanzas, parallel to Gee’s concept of scene.

Distinguishing between stories and storylines provides insight into the micro-processes of narrative construction and brings analytical flexibility. I argue that significant identity stories do not necessarily meet the formalized criteria for defining narrative, as described by Bruner (1990) (see also chapter 4). Storylines are not necessarily constructed according to traditional definition, and significant identity constructs can be found in half stories, in quarters of a sentence, and in narrative metaphors. However, I have also attempted to avoid an overly inclusive definition of the unit of analysis. I find the concepts of stories and storylines to be an operational unit of analysis, while still providing enough flexibility to explore and unfold the richness of the empirical material.

### **2.4.2 Interpreting**

Social constructive inquiries focus on meaning and on how people make sense of their life world. Findings are significant when they are meaningful or able to increase understanding of human behavior in specific contexts. Embedded in the field, I tried to avoid premature rigid categorization of the empirical material by involving a second interpreter. My first analytical step was to engage in a *fragmentation analysis* of the 2006 interviews. This involved cutting up the five transcribed interviews into smaller text pieces or clippings that comprised the answers given. The deconstructed interview transcripts consisting of the smaller pieces of text were laid out on a table and a colleague (a Right Management consultant) and I spent several days thematically analyzing the material. I wanted to learn how another interpreter made sense of the material; therefore, my colleague selected a clipping and told me what the answer was about thematically. The

purpose of this first organizing analysis was to separate the meaning creation from the individual leader and to separate the interpretation of the empirical material from me as researcher. I saw the fragmentation analysis as a process to control my early interpretations through comparison with another less involved interpreter. The result of this analysis was that most of the categories were reproduced, but a new interesting theme surfaced, which included stories of how the leaders struggled with the very process of developing themselves. These stories pointed to the importance of key constructs such as courage and determination, but the stories also revealed interesting paradoxical subject positioning and brought the interplay with the home organizational contexts to the surface as important for constructing leader identity (this is discussed further in the analytical chapters 6-10 and in chapter 11, with focus on the paradox of subject positioning).

### **2.4.3 Authoring**

Narrative researchers write narratives about narratives, consequently this dissertation is a narrative product consisting of layers of narratives constructed in and by multiple voices. In relation to the written text, I consider two issues here: the ability to distinguish voices, and the ability of the interpreted text to speak in a convincing voice to the reader. Czarniawska emphasizes that in social constructivist inquiries, stories are not collected or found but are instead understood to be produced or constructed interactively: “*Stories are not collected like mushrooms, but every narrative becomes new with each re-telling and the 'petrification' of stories*“ (Czarniawska, 2004:38).

Hence, empirical material does not speak for itself; instead, contributions are negotiated in interaction with the research community, which determines the credibility and value of the research. In this interaction, the research community holds the upper hand of judgment (Søndergård, 1996). This investigation into the life world of leaders builds on the premise that human understanding is embedded in language (Brier, 2005:30). This implies that what is examined has already been interpreted and made sense of by the people studied. In narrative studies, because of the *multi-phonic voices*, it is crucial to be able to distinguish the leader's own interpretations from the researcher's analytical interpretation of the leaders' interpretations. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1975) distinguishes between *experience-near* and *experience-distant* concepts. The first are concepts people in the field use to describe spontaneously how they see, think and feel about things, whereas experience-distant concepts are the concepts researchers employ to

describe what people in the field are doing and referring to. In chapter 5, I describe the theories constituting the analytical framework and provide the experience-distant concepts with which I seek to understand the leader's experience-near accounts of their life worlds. Thus, interpretation is an ongoing process (Czarniawska, 2004), and researchers are interpreters engaged in making "...*interpretations of interpretation*" (Alvesson and Skjoldberg, 2000).

One of the complicated questions raised in narrative interpretation (Riessman, 1993:40-61) is what aspects of narratives should serve as the basis for interpretation, e.g. who decides what a narrative means and what other alternative readings might be possible. How do you preserve the original speaker's words in all their ambiguity and interpret the meaning of those words without effacing the original flavors. Answers are not unequivocal, and each researcher controls meaning to a great extent by analytically selecting, reducing and authoring the empirical material. When the researcher determines the meaning of a story, more or less attention can be given to the narrators wording, sequencing and structuring. The researcher can strive to make the narrative analysis explicit, so that the reader can see how it is done and to make the version provided by the researcher plausible (Riessman, 1993:42). In most cases, though, it is not an option to make the full narrative available to the reader, due to confidentiality, the extent of the material, and to practical format and layout restrictions. In this dissertation, I have chosen to make the original transcribed interviews available to the committee in an appendix binder in consideration of the necessary demands for confidentiality. In presenting my analysis chapters 6-11, high priority is given to extensive quotes from the empirical material, because the creation of meaning by the leaders is the focal point of analysis. In addition, the extensive use of quotations enables readers to draw their own conclusions and to make better sense of the voices of the empirical field. The leaders' own interpretations of meaning are presented in quotation marks and *italics*, and my interpretative voice is explicated and made transparent as part of the main text.

In writing the final texts, I mostly follow Riessman's suggestion to include the speaker's own evaluations, analyze the organizing metaphors of the narratives, and present the structure schematically (Riesman, 1993). This narrative analytical strategy is unfolded in chapter 5; it enables the exploration of identity as a process of narrative construction; and it emphasizes the relational, situational and contextual aspects of identity construction. It also facilitates a multifaceted view and opens up a broader range of possible insights, which I hope provide an

opportunity to learn and understand more about the processes of the narrative construction of leader identities.

## **2.5 Summary**

Research studies investigating “leaders” have mostly been made from a managerial perspective, predominantly with a normative orientation from an outside-the-field position, and over relatively short time spans. In contrast, this study is longitudinal, examining leader identity over a three-year time span from an interactive researcher position. The purpose is to generate rich and detailed empirical material in order to learn more about the processes of narrative construction of identity. Based on a social constructionist perspective and a reflexive methodology, I position the study as a moderate social constructivist position, emphasizing an explorative interest in examining the narrative construction of leader identities. A moderate social constructivist position is characterized by focusing on social processes, everyday interaction, and language and meaning creation as historically and culturally anchored. It emphasizes social action, power relations, and a critical stance to what is taken for granted. The methodological design is longitudinal, examining leader identity construction processes over time based on a case study of five leaders participating in the leader development program, ETP. Triangulating of methods is accomplished through observation/facilitation, interviews, and document analysis. Interviews are semi-structured and inspired by active interviewing and conducted as an explorative dialogue from a research position as empathic fellow traveler.

# 3 The Narrative Construction of Identity

This chapter aims to provide clarification regarding the central concepts of identity, narratives and the narrative construction of identity. I prioritize a broader theoretical review to make evident the interdisciplinary range of theoretical contributions on narratives.

The narrative identity concept is anchored both in narrative and social psychology literature, and is reviewed accordingly. The review therefore reflects the emerging field by including theories and studies from different fields, but emphasizing psychology and social psychology studies in order to gain further insight into the narrative construction processes of identity. I also draw on narrative therapy literature, which previously has had only a limited application in academic narrative studies, but which nevertheless has contributed substantially to the understanding of identity construction processes in narratives, in both theory and practice. However, a literature review does more than lay the ground for the work at hand. It is also a process marked by choice, preference and practical limitations. As such, this and the following chapters are my construction of the theoretical landscape of identity, which establishes a particular optic and conceptual framework for how identity has been conceptualized and made sense of in earlier theoretical work. In that perspective, this work simultaneously constructs a dissertation with a particular focus, and constructs a researcher position from which to investigate.

The chapter is divided into three major parts. In the first part, I review the emergence of the identity concept by unfolding significant theoretical conceptualizations of the early ideas of the self, the modern identity concept, and the postmodern turn and its implications for our understanding of and investigative approaches into identity. In the second part, the concept of narratives is placed within the general linguistic turn in the social sciences, and I briefly unfold how to make sense of narratives and reflect on the distinguishing qualities of narrative and stories.

In the third and final part, I position “narrative identity” and the process of “narrative construction of identity” at the center of this investigation. This part is structured in four interrelated functions that represent four ways in which a narrative identity construct functions in the everyday practice of work and life, as a means by which people:

- Make sense of self
- Understand social reality
- Negotiate power
- Change identity

### **3.1 The Emergence of the Identity Concept**

The story of identity is an extensive story that stretches back through history in the philosophical development of human thinking about the self and the human condition. Hence, this review focuses on the construction of identity found in theories in the intersection of psychology and social psychology, and to a lesser degree in sociology.

The identity concept appears first in 1570 as “identitie”, defined as “the quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness” (OED, 2002, in Benwell and Stokoe, 2006:18). In Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary (2006), identity is defined as: “the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity”, and the Latin origin is “identitas”, which derives from the Latin idem meaning “the same”. In both these definitions, identity is to be understood as a whole, a unity with absolute qualities, indicating that identity is consistently the same regardless of different contexts.

Identity is also approached as personal, collective, social, and organizational or as a combination of these, but in the Western world the tradition is to construct the individual as the object of study when investigating identity (Shotter and Gergen, 1989). As exemplified by the following quote, this individualized view of identity is anchored and constructed in a particular cultural context:

*“The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinct whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural*



*background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures” (Clifford Geertz, 1973: 229)*

Historically, the identity concept has had a broad interdisciplinary foundation, and the use of the term “identity” is ubiquitous in contemporary social science, as well as psychology, psychoanalysis, political science, sociology and history. However common, the usages of the term are ambiguous and varied, even when considering only the way the term is used within the social sciences. In psychology, early research traditions had a behaviorist and natural science orientation; later, there followed a psychodynamically orientated psychology, which also had a significantly impacted contemporary idea of the self. In development and personality psychology, identity has been investigated by seeking to uncover individuals' idiosyncrasies and personality traits in order to distinguish each individual as unique. Paradoxically, this has evolved into a strong tradition in universal regularity theories of human development, which propose universal and generic phase models for identity development, often based on single case studies (Freud, 1948; 1975; Erikson, 1968; 1980; Piaget, 1954). In social psychology, with influence from sociology, identity has been investigated focusing on role behavior, identity negotiation, group membership, identification and self-categorization processes (Tajfel, 1981; Turner et. al, 1987). In social psychology and in newer sociological approaches, a substantial body of research has been based on identity theory and social identity theory, based on the early American pragmatist tradition and its notions of a social self in social symbolic interaction (James, 1948; Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969).

### **3.1.1 Early Perspectives of the Self and Identity**

*“Self” is a surprisingly quirky idea – intuitively obvious to common sense yet evasive to definition by the fastidious philosopher” (Bruner, 2002:63).*

The first challenge is to decide where to start when doing a review of identity. Throughout human history, the questions of what we are, who we are, and how we change have been on the philosophical and religious agenda. Regardless of the difficulties, a review of the early ideas of self seems necessary and essential to understanding how the early ideas, the roots of the historic foundation, influence our thinking about the contemporary concept of identity as well as the words we use when we discuss *who we are* in everyday language. The aim is to clarify some of the key concepts of self and the contextual emergence of identity historically, as

reflected in a selection of dominant theories on identity and self: the transactional self, the psychodynamic self, and the self-actualizing self.

### **The Transactional Self**

The transactional self was born out of the European Enlightenment and resulted in a construction of the self as an idealized, abstract platform from which concepts and judgments emanated. The self is understood to transcend society, standing prior to, apart from, and philosophically above life's everyday struggles (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000:4). The Enlightenment in Europe was based on faith in human reason and rationalism, and when the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650) stated in a famous seventeenth-century dictum "*I think, therefore I am*", the self was established as a logical, cognitively driven entity. A highly sustainable notion was formed of a separate and logically distinct self at the center of philosophy. This notion of "*disengaged reason*" and Descartes' concept of "*self-mastery through reason*" also implies separating the mind from the body and makes way for a construction of self as subjectivity that is independent of or separate from external influence (Taylor, 1989:143). The later philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) also emphasized conscious reasoning and reflexive thought as the means towards morality, personal integrity and a coherent life, implying that people are rational beings and that human action is directed by thinking. People influence the world, and the world is perceived as objective and measurable (Cerulo, 1997). A pronounced dualism between mind and body, perceived as two separate entities, is one of the significant contributions of this period, and this concept still remains in everyday language and impacts contemporary meaning creation and practices. However, these ideas neglect and to a high degree ignore or minimize the emotional aspects of self, as well as the impact of contextual factors.

### **The Psychodynamic Self**

In the psychodynamic tradition, Erik Erikson (1968, 1980) investigated identity formation across the individual lifespan. His influential theory on ego identity formation builds on the epigenetic principle, which implies that human beings develop through a predetermined unfolding of our personalities in specific stages, and that developmental progress is determined by how successful people are in resolving the specific psychosocial developmental tasks at each developmental stage. Stages are progressively sequential, and if the individual fails to learn the task at one stage, consequences occur at the next stage. Each stage has a certain optimal age range within which the stage has to be successfully completed. In Erikson's framework, a successful accomplishment of a task at a developmental

stage leads to or establishes a certain psychosocial strength (or virtue), which supports and facilitates the individual through the rest of the stages. Erikson is an ego psychologist who to a great extent accepts and develops the Freudian notions of a psychodynamic self governed by subconscious processes and internalized social norms, in contrast with more recent studies on the identity status paradigm that emphasize choice and commitment more and assume that all individuals' sense of identity is determined by the choices and commitments made to particular personal traits and social traits. The degree to which an individual displays commitment to the choices he or she have made are pivotal (Marcia, 1980).

Erikson does however acknowledge the interactive aspects of identity construction and the influences of culture and social environment. His identity development theory is still a universal model that aims to provide a generic developmental path guided by age, time and interaction. Thus, Erikson's theory is not explicitly sensitive to variances in individual developmental or cultural differences. Individual variance is described in a language of maladaptation or maladjustments. Hence, the development model becomes a normalization device, implying that identity can be developed along a right or a wrong developmental path, and individuals are identified according to the extent to which they are aligned with or deviate from the universal development path.

### **The Self-actualizing Self**

Humanistic psychology was established as a concept in 1958 by a group of psychologists led by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970). In "Association for Humanistic Psychology", prominent psychologists such as A. Maslow, G. Allport, C. Bühler, R. May, C. Rogers broke with behaviorist theory and research ideals and with classic psychoanalyst theory's deterministic view of human beings. Humanistic psychologists have their roots in phenomenology and existentialism; they emphasize what is distinctly and uniquely human, and construct the self on the basis of the central concepts of self-awareness and self-knowledge. Carl Rogers (1959; 1961) developed theory and concepts from his client-focused therapy. With a positive and optimistic view of human nature, Rogers focuses on the present as the point of departure for development, in contrast to the psychoanalytical focus on the past. Rogers defines the self as:

*" The Self is an organized consistent set of perceptions and beliefs about oneself. It includes my awareness of "what I am", "what I can do", and influences both my perception of the world and my behavior; we evaluate every experience in terms of it and most human behavior can be understood as an*

*attempt to maintain consistency between our self-image and our actions” (C. Roger, 1961, in Gross 1987: 224).*

Assuming that human behavior is the result of human perception and interpretative understanding of external events, Rogers introduces the term *self-image* in contrast to action. Self-image is a central functionality of Rogers’ key concept: “*incongruence*”. The way people experience themselves and their intentions are often not congruent with how others perceive them. According to Rogers, people prefer to have congruence between their actions and feelings and their perceived behavior. Incongruence appears when a person’s actual feelings are not the feelings the person thinks he/she ought to have (the self-image). For example, a person feels relieved because of a recent divorce or death, but she thinks she should feel sad or sadder than she does. If the gap between the actual feelings/behavior and the self-image increase, the person’s ability to grow is inhibited and the person becomes frustrated and vulnerable, and will potentially develop unbalanced behavioral patterns. The bigger the gap between the self-image and the actual self, the greater the anxiety and the emotional problems. In contrast, the congruent person is characterized by the ability to flexibly adapt new experiences into a realistic self, implying that the ways in which the person thinks, feels and acts are congruent with the self-image. Rogers claims this is the most promising position for realizing a person’s full potential, which he describes as “self-actualization”. In humanistic psychology, also called the third wave, Rogers and Maslow share a positive notion of human nature and a belief in each individual’s potential for personal growth, implied by the concept of self-actualization. Maslow (1968, 1971) describes self-actualization as: “*Becoming everything that one is capable of becoming*” (Maslow, 1971 in Gross, 1987: 651) and Rogers (1959) emphasizes: “...*the inherent tendency of the organism to develop all its capacities in ways which serve to maintain or enhance the organism*” (Rogers, 1959 in Gross, 1987:224). They both understand self-actualization as an inherently motivational force within all humans, and if social relations or context are not delimiting, each individual will strive towards realizing their full potential, i.e. will actively engage in self-actualization (Rogers, 1959, 1980; Maslow, 1968, 1971).

This thinking of self-actualization and the development of full potential is prominent in organization discourses and serves as the basic ideology of leader development programs. The ETP program’s notions of leader development have been described in chapter 1. In this chapter on the discursive construction of leaders

in leadership theory, I unfold how theoretical discourses become narrative resources for the construction of leader identity.

Early philosophical influences position the self as transitional and separate from society, and the body as separate from the mind. This self that is governed by reason and logic was in contrast to the self of the later psychodynamically oriented theories, which construct the self as simultaneously governed by unconscious, emotional and societally internalized dynamics. The psychodynamic constructs a self that is preoccupied with balancing these forces; it is a self that is subordinate to outside structural forces on the one hand and to internal but unconscious processes on the other. On addition, the psychodynamic theories contribute the idea that development of self follows universal and predefined developmental paths, which simultaneously construct any departure or variance from this predisposed path as problematic and label them as maladaptive behavior or “wrong” development, thus simultaneously establishing a normalization dogma for judging and evaluating constructs of self and identity development.

Humanistic psychology oriented theories have been influential in constructing the self as an inner essence that can be discovered. The idea of self-actualization underlines that developing a self is an individual project that is achieved through finding and actualizing an inner and genuine self. Change and development increasingly become the responsibility of the individual. Each person is responsible for success or failure in finding and realizing his/her genuine self. The self is conceived as an inner quality and a relatively consistent whole, which implicitly excludes the ambiguity of being in opposition to the genuine self and constructing a false, or incongruent, self. This perspective of consistency has been very persistent over time and is found in everyday language usage. A quick look at the magazine shelf and the manifold self-help literature shows that the project of finding your “real, inner or true” self remains relevant.

Benwell and Stokoe (2006) exemplify this tendency in reality television, where hosts – typically “experts” – assist people to find “who you really are”. When we consider the varied theoretical approaches, however, their persistence on sameness and unity is pronounced and is characteristically found throughout very different research fields and theories. These early theories also predominately locate the self in the individual realms of cognition, experience and psychological dynamics.

## Display 3-1 Early Perspectives of Self and Identity

### Early Perspectives of Self and Identity

- Focus on identity as coherent
- See identity as a consistent manifestation across situations
- Perceived identity as a unity
- Ambiguity is excluded

### 3.1.2 Modern Perspectives of the Identity Concept

The modern identity concept is founded on the philosophical thinking of the enlightenment period in which the self was constituted by cognitive thinking and the ability to exercise rational thinking in relation to an objective and measurable outer reality. In philosophy, the rationalist, materialist and positivist movements established a primacy of reason and realism, indicating a dualism between body/mind and mind/matter, understood as independent and separate entities. The term *modernism*<sup>18</sup> describes movements that attempt to overthrow or reject the constructs of scientific rationality. However, the modernist perspective still rests on an epistemology of objectivity and is founded on the belief that the world exists independent of our knowledge of it. In a modern perspective, judgments about the accuracy and truth of theories are based on empirical comparisons of the theoretical hypothesis and the empirical data collected to test it (Giddens, 1991; Gergen, 1997). Epistemological positions are important because they form a particular optic, and specific identity constructs can be traced back to different epistemological positions and assumptions about how we can know the world, and to the ontological question of what can be known. An epistemology of subjectivity implies that all knowledge of the world is filtered through the subject, and that the world can only be understood from the point of view of the individual. Thus, knowledge is relative to the subject and is processed by cognitive, social and cultural filters. This position is found in symbolic interaction oriented theories, and it is extended in the later postmodern perspectives where reality is defined to a high

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<sup>18</sup> In this dissertation, the unsettled and ongoing discussions of the modern and postmodern positions are not central to exploring narrative identity construction processes. The aim of this introductory division is to illustrate the central philosophical and social scientific positions and describe how the concept of self /identity and society has changed and is understood differently from these two positions. Philosophers and social scientists use the term postmodern to describe the social and cultural implications of life in the late 20th and early 21st century, and the social and political ramifications in society. In this dissertation, I use postmodern to signify both the state of being and the societal and philosophical influences, because they influence my position that the construction of identity is unavoidably a societal and contextual activity.

degree by the individual's subjective experience under social and cultural influence, and where the concept of identity itself is understood as a construction. The concept of social self reviewed here under a modernist heading has in its early theoretical development a subjectivist epistemological position, but later theoretical developments, especially in social identity theory, have moved slightly towards an objective epistemology.

### **The Social Self**

American pragmatism<sup>19</sup> developed in opposition to the philosophically oriented European thinking and emphasizes everyday life as an object of study of interest. William James (1948[1892]:43) proposes that the self is to be understood as an entity whose existence in the world, knowledge of itself, and sense of well-being derive from experience, and he coined the concept of the “*empirical self*” (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000:17). Here, the term empirical is used as a reference to general experience and not, as in contemporary usage, as a particular research method. James suggests that when individuals claim a particular identity, they think and behave in ways that demonstrate and elaborate that identity. Another prominent idea of the social self is investigated in studies of the “*the looking glass self*“, which suggests that the self operates in the imagination, drawing from, reflecting upon, and responding to real and imagined others<sup>20</sup>. Charles Horton Cooley (1964[1902]) formulated this as three overriding components of the looking glass self:

*“The imagination of how our appearance looks to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Cooley, 1964:184).*

The self is responsive to “itself” and to how the self imagines this self from the perspective of the other. In other words, in order to see ourselves, we look to see our reflection in the reactions of others in the social context. What our imagination makes out of that reflection is the central contribution to our looking glass self. In Cooley's terminology, the responsive process of including the perspective of the other gives rise to a sense of self-feeling in the individual. Cooley states that

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<sup>19</sup> The American pragmatists are William James, Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer. The American pragmatist school divided into the Chicago School and the Iowa School (Côté and Levine, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> The looking glass self has developed into a therapeutic method with a one-way screen or mirror in which others can see you, but you can not see them. This method is used today or therapeutic training in systemic therapy and for leader development training at the Center for Creative Leadership.

although it is the central element for understanding the self, self-feeling can only be understood through experience:

*“But as this feeling is quite familiar to us and easy to recall as the taste of salt or the color red, there should be no difficulty in understanding what is meant by it. One need only imagine some attack on his “me”, say ridicule of his dress or an attempt to take away his property or his child, or his good name by slander, and self-feeling immediately appears. Indeed, we need only pronounce, with strong emphasis, one of the self-words, like “I” or “my”, and self-feeling will be recalled by association” (Cooley, 1964:172-73).*

George Herbert Mead (1934) disagrees with Cooley’s emphasis on the self-feeling concept, criticizing what he thinks is a construct of self that is only secondarily social and essentialist. In responding to Cooley’s self-feeling concept, Mead clarifies: *“The essence of the self, as we have said, is cognitive: it lies in the internalized conversation of gestures which constitutes thinking, or in terms of which thought or reflection proceeds. And hence the origin and foundation of the self, like those of thinking, are social” (Mead, 1934:173).*

Cooley’s self-feeling concepts revive conations from the philosophical roots of self, those that equal individual and inner experience to the self rather than unearthing an external and social self. Much theory on identity in sociology and social psychology can be traced back to the early work of George Herbert Mead (1934). He coined the social self concept and claimed that the self is *“essentially a social structure”* (Mead,1934:140). Still, Mead stresses that self-consciousness, rather than feelings, provides the core of the self, since thinking has a prominent position in the development of self. Mead perceives self-consciousness as the inner representation of an external conversation of significant gestures. Hence, thinking is an inner conversation with oneself, while social interaction is an external conversation with others, and both are socially symbolic and reflectively interactive (Mead, 1934:173-174). The self is located *within* communicative action, where the self reflects on itself, either in the course of inner conversation, called thinking, or as an openly reflexive product of social interaction. Mead refines the conceptual framework of the “I” and the “me”, in which he defines the self, which *“arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process”* (Mead, 1934:135, in Hatch, and Schultz, 2002: 992). To be able to know *who I am*, he argues, we need experiences that provide us with means and meanings through which we can become conscious about our self.



Consciousness per se cannot be the self's object without substantial experiences upon which to reflect (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000:29).

Furthermore, self-awareness is conceived as fundamental for humans in this tradition. The ability to think about what we do and simultaneously to be the one who is doing the thinking is a unique capability that makes humans able to be both the subject (the one who thinks) and the object (the one I think about). This unique way of relating to "the self" is basic to self-awareness and is discursively present in everyday language when I refer to my self as "*I*" when I am the subject and "*me*" when I am the object of my self-awareness. Mead's notions of the social self and the interaction of "self" and "society" later paved the theoretical ground for development into two distinct identity research approaches: identity theory founded on a role-based identity construct, and social identity theory founded on a group-based identity construct.

### **Identity Theory and Role-based Identity**

Identity theory was first formulated in 1966 by Sheldon Stryker and has subsequently been developed into two distinct theoretical directions within an overarching program called: structural symbolic interaction. The first direction is still represented by Stryker (Stryker, 1980; Stryker and Serpe, 1982) and focuses on how social structures affect self, and how structures of the self influence social behavior. The second direction represented by Burke (Burke, 1991; Burke and Reitzes, 1991) focuses on the internal dynamics of self-processes as these affect social behavior. Hence, each direction provides a context for the other in investigating the reciprocal relationship and linkages between self and the social world (Stryker and Burke, 2000).

Identity theory has contributed significantly to identity research; in identity theory, Mead's notion of "*social behavior*" is specified to "*role choice behavior*". Social roles are defined as expectations attached to positions occupied in networks of relationships; and identities are defined as internalized role expectations. In order to explain why an individual chooses a particular role at the expense of another, identity theory introduces the term "*identity salience*". Identity salience can vary by degrees and exactly how salient a role is to the individual determines the choice. A social role is more identity salient if a person chooses it across a variety of situations, or if most people choose it in a given situation. In the progressive development of identity theory, the society dimension became specified further as

commitment – the more important the role is to the person, the greater the commitment to the role and the effort to sustain the role.

Thus, in this framework, identity refers to a group-based self, indirectly acknowledging that individuals' have multiple and potentially conflicting role identities (Stryker, and Burke, 2000: 285-286). Generally, identity theory investigates role identities. Stryker and Burke, (2000) recognize a duality in this approach, since the role is conceived as being external, linked to social positions within the social structure, whereas identity is conceived as being internal, consisting of internalized meanings and expectations associated with the role (Stryker and Burke, 2000:289). Furthermore, people hold multiple roles and are connected to multiple roles, social groups and relationships. In other words, people are believed to have multiple identities, and multiple identities compete, conflict and can complicate the relationship between a person's role commitment, identity salience, identity meanings and identity standards (Stryker, 2000). Identity standards are sets of culturally prescribed meanings held by the individual that simultaneously define a person's role identity in the situation. To explain how identities produce behavior or operate within a context, Burke and Reitzes, (1991) propose that the link between identity and behavior exists only when the meaning of identity corresponds to the meaning of the behavior – i.e. only when I am committed to my identity as a researcher and it is meaningful to me will it predict my behavior (e.g. completing a PhD or going to college).

Self-verification is the term used to describe the process of bringing self-relevant meanings into agreement with the identity standard, either by altering the situation or by seeking or creating new situations in which perceived self-relevant meanings match the identity standard (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Thus, when a person perceives through comparison that meanings within a situation do not match the meanings of his identity standard, then the person engages in one of two behaviors: to bring the situational perceived self-relevant meanings into agreement with the identity standard (e.g. self-verification), or to try altering the current situation or seeking a new situation where the match between identity standards and the perceived situational meanings is better (Stryker and Burke, 2000: 288; Burke, 1991). This understanding gives the individual significant agency in the identity construction process, but it also proposes that a mismatch or an increasing discrepancy (problems with self-verification) will result in negative emotions or emotional tensions that will somehow move the individual to act engage in construction and reconstruction processes.

## **Social Identity Theory and Group-based Identity**

Social identity theory was developed in the 1970s by the social psychologist Henri Tajfel, and later in cooperation with John Turner (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; 1985; Turner, 1975, 1982, 1984). Social identity theory involves three central ideas: categorization, identification and comparison.

Categorization is based on the economical principle of human perception: that we categorize objects in our environment in order to understand them, maximize information processing speed, and minimize stimuli input. All these are aimed at optimizing human perceptual performance and overall functioning. In similar ways, we categorize other people and ourselves in order to understand our social environment and to understand ourselves. Hence, we basically use social categories because they are useful if we can assign people to categories that give us a priori information about the other person, what to expect from the interaction, and how we should behave in the particular situation (at work, at the doctor, or in school). Categorization eases social interaction and supports self-knowledge – we understand ourselves by knowing the categories we belong to. Categories help us define appropriate behavior by referring to the norms of the particular groups we belong to. This implies, of course, that you know and accept your group category and the group members. Groucho Marx of the Marx Brothers is known to have jokingly pinpointed group membership accept and status by claiming that he did not want to be a member of a club that wanted him as a member.

Identification is the process of identifying the groups we perceive ourselves to belong to. Sometimes we think of ourselves as group members and other times as individuals. The first is referred to as social identity, encompassing salient group classifications; and the second is referred to as personal identity, encompassing idiosyncratic characteristics such as bodily attributes, abilities, psychological traits, and interests. Both the social identity construct and the personal identity constructs are part of an overriding self-concept (Ashforth and Mael, 1989: 21). Thus, social identification provides a partial answer to the question “who am I” by providing categorical answers: I am a woman, young, Danish etc. (Stryker and Serpe, 1982). However, the social identification process is by and large a “relational and comparative” process in which you define yourself in relation to individuals in other categories, such as men, old, American (Tajfel and Turner, 1985: 16). Furthermore, self-categorization and identification processes are delimited by the socially and culturally available categories we have. We simultaneously connect to

the social and distinguish ourselves from it through categorization; paradoxically, categories create both difference and likeness.

Social identities can be based on ethnicity, gender, or occupational position and can also be more temporal and context specific, such as participant, team oriented, or business minded. Whether it is the social identity or the personal identity that is most predominant varies across situations and depends on specific contextual circumstances. Categorization and identification processes enhance the person's ability to recognize new situations, and link expectations to particular situations. In this sense, social identities are devices for both making sense of the social environment and providing a means of reflexive identification by which the individual locates his or her self, i.e. identity in relation to the social environment (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004: 154). Comparison is a central function in social identity theory, deriving from Festinger's (1954) notion of social comparison and indicating that in order to assess and evaluate ourselves, we compare ourselves with similar others. Festinger's theory is based on the premise that a positive self-concept is part of normal psychological functioning. A significant amount of research has been done on comparisons of in-groups (groups we identify ourselves with) and out-group (groups we do not identify ourselves with). Research shows that people choose to compare their group with other groups in ways that reflect positively on them and their own group (Tajfel and Turner, 1985). Social identity theory indicates an affiliation with a social group with a particular social and cultural category of people. Group membership is not something external to the person, something which is tacked onto him, but is a real and vital part of individual identity. In social identity theory, (group) affiliation is charged with emotional significance; affiliation has strong personal meaning for the individual that is established in the process of identification. Tajfel defines social identity as:

*"...the individual's knowledge that he belongs to a certain social group, together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership"*  
(Tajfel, 1972: 292 in Hogg and Terry, 2000: 122)

In addition, the self-categorization theory developed by Turner (Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987) proposes that our social identities (deriving from the groups we perceive ourselves to be members of) are as true and basic to self as personal identity (derived from views of ourselves as a unique individual). The extent to which we define ourselves at the personal or the social level is both flexible and functionally antagonistic. This means that people can flexibly change their self-perceptions according to the situation, which is the fundamental assumptions of the

theory; however, the social identity concept resembles the concept of role in that it indicates the individual's affiliation to a particular social group. People have several social identities, and these are called upon depending on the situation and the context. According to social identity theory, the group has a personal meaning for the individual, which is not necessarily a defining characteristic of a role. You can be a little sister or a member of the Danish church without this role being significant to your identity construction. Moreover, identification can persist even when a group affiliation is experienced as personally painful, when other group members are disliked, or when group failure is likely.

The identification concept describes predominately the cognitive side and not the antecedents or consequences of the cognition (Ashfort and Mael, 1989). Most often people slide easily from one identity to the other and conflict is only perceived when identity discrepancies are made salient. For example, when people are simultaneously forced to assume conflicting social identities as parent and leader; then, cognitive strategies come under pressure or might break down. Role conflicts are not resolved by cognitively integrating social roles but by ordering, separating and buffering them. This is described by Ashforth and Mael in four strategies: development of a social identity hierarchy, defensive avoidance, value separation, and sequential compliance (Ashforth and Mael, 1989:30).

### **Possible Selves as Incentives for Change**

Identity theory and social identity theory provide a conceptual framework with which to understand identity variance across different groups and situations, but the categorization, identification and comparison processes do not explicitly describe incentives for identity construction processes. Social psychologists Markus and Nurius (1986) suggest that possible selves construct as a personalized cognitive carrier of the dynamic aspects of self and the incentive for change. The idea is that people possess possible selves, which they understand as a possible link between the identity concept and motivation. They argue as follows:

*“An individual's repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears and threats. Possible selves provide the specific self relevant form, meaning, organization and direction to these dynamics” (Markus and Nurius, 1986: 954.)*

Possible selves are on one hand individualized and personal, and on the other hand, distinctly social, as they are tied into socialization, culturally available categorizations, and processes of social comparison. According to this

understanding, the individual is only relatively free to create possible selves, because the pools of possible selves are tied into the cultural and historical context, implying a dialectic relation between individual agency and social structure restrictions. Thus, possible selves represent individuals' ideas about what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming (Markus, and Nurius, 1986). Possible selves emphasize emotional aspects of self that have been subdued in previous identity research that has followed the American pragmatist tradition. Furthermore, the possible self concept is more dynamic and stretches identity out into the future as imaginative (feared or preferred) selves. Markus and Nurius (1986) suggest that this sense of what it is possible to be, to feel and to experience is within the self concept. This makes the idea of possible selves central to self-change processes, since it provides possible paths and direction for action and development. Possible selves can metaphorically be perceived as a cognitive bridge between the present and the future, which helps specify how individuals may change from what they are now to what they will become in the future (Markus and Nurius, 1986:960-961). The authors underscore the social anchoring of possible selves, since “*the now self*” is always evaluated and interpreted in a social context, as is the range and variety of the possible selves available to the individual.

The self concept Markus and Nurius propose is both stable and changeable at the same time. They conclude that because possible selves are imaginative and less tied to behavioral evidence and social reality restraints, they may connect to parts of the self more responsive to change. The now self is in their view part of the individual's current social reality and is exposed to social feedback and social comparisons in interaction with the individual's need to present a coherent self. All of this might make the now self more stable and less receptive to change (Markus and Nurius, 1986:964). The theory of possible selves emphasizes self-consistency and the categorization of different selves in different time periods, but it has a more dynamic view of the self than found in traditional identity theory categories. Markus and Nurius' (1986) theory argues for the dynamic changeability of the possible self concept as an incentive for action and for constructing imaginative future possible selves.

In a social self perspective, individuals hold many and potentially conflicting categories of self, and rather than being located outside the individual, the individual is understood as “*social structure*”, to rephrase Mead (1934). The ideas of the social self evolved into identity theory and social identity theory, making the

social central to the development of identity and self. Identity roles are attained by processes of identification that build identity hierarchies based on identity salience. Identity categories are cued by particular situations and contexts, but they are restricted by the available symbolic means, which are culturally and historically dependent.

The social identity construct varies across situations, and identity is conceptualized as multiple, socially defined and acquired by processes of categorization, identification and comparison. The theory of possible selves contains aspirations for a more dynamic construction of self, oriented towards imaginative future selves and providing a theoretical frame for linking identity change processes to motivation and for emphasizing emotional aspects of identity construction processes.

**Display 3-2 Modern Perspectives of the Identity Concept**

**Modern Perspectives of the Identity Concept**

- Focus on identity as consistent within different roles
- See identity as a differentiated manifestation in different situations
- Perceive identity as multiple identities, roles or identity categories
- Ambiguity between different identities, roles or identity categories

**3.1.3 The Postmodern Turn and its Implications**

The postmodern is a positional umbrella that includes contemporary research. However difficult it is to define, the implications of the postmodern perspective for the conceptualization of identity have been profound. The most radical postmodern views claim that identity, or even the individual, has disappeared or vanished as a result of this research approach:

*“...In postmodern culture, the subject has disintegrated into a flux of euphoric intensities, fragmented and disconnected” (Kellner, 1992:144; in Hatch, and Schultz, 2004:431).*

When new social technologies increasingly dominated the social and occupational landscape in the twentieth century, identity came under siege and resulted in what

Gergen (1991) calls a “*saturated self*”. Gergen’s description of the impact of saturation illustrates key aspects of postmodern perspectives on identity:

*“Emerging technologies saturate us with the voices of humankind - both harmonious and alien. As we absorb their varied rhymes and reasons, they become part of us and we of them. Social saturation furnished us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self. For everything we know “to be true” about our selves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. This fragmentation of the self-conception corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships. These relationships pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an “authentic self” with knowable characteristics recedes from view” (Gergen, 1991:6-7.*

Anthony Giddens (1991) places the emergence of the identity concept in the postmodern period, and has critically described the individual identity as embattled and troubled:

*“The concept of individual identity is in itself a typical institution of “high modernity” and persists through an ability to narrate one’s life, formulate it into a narrative composed of terms that will be accepted by a relevant audience” (Giddens 1991: 410).*

Holstein and Gubrium (2000) agree about the emergence of identity, but they oppose thinking of the postmodern self as embattled. They suggest that the tensions plaguing contemporary experience derive in part from a continued belief in a coherent self, while being confronted with society's need for myriad identities. In their opinion, there is no reason to believe identity will be overwhelmingly saturated by competing social definitions (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000:13).

The postmodern gathers a movement away from personality and trait orientation towards an inter-personal and relational-oriented concept of identity; another dualism is subscribing to individual agency or social structure. The agency position proposes that people should hold on to significant agency of their own construction and self-definition processes, whereas theories with a stringent structure positioning are less optimistic about individual constructive freedom and claim that structural forces, whether unconscious processes or institutionalized power structures, restrict the way individuals can eventually construct identity. Watson (2006) makes a conceptual distinction between dualism and duality to bring to the fore the integrative process of co-construction that takes place in the interaction between the



individual and the organization or between the constructor of identity and a particular context. A dualism perspective indicates linearity and that identity is analytically approached as the existence of two separable entities, i.e. an individual identity and an organizational identity, conceived as two separate things, whereas a duality perspective implies that the organization and the individual are two sides of the same coin and essentially inseparable, which again makes analytical examination of the interaction the relevant focus of investigation (Watson, 2006:85-87). As early as 1968, Gergen suggested that:

*“...identity is an amalgam of loosely coupled identities, and that the popular notion of the self-concept as a unified, consistent, or perceptually “whole” psychological structure is possibly ill-conceived” (Gergen, 1968: 306).*

Nevertheless, the issue of coherence is still present in the research field, more or less explicitly. In a social constructivist perspective, identity is something you perform, and performance is evaluated by audiences. Hence, in a postmodern perspective, coherence is under maximal pressure since the social constructivist approach implies that identities are temporary and fragmented, i.e. developed in an ongoing construction process. In critical management research, changes in the conceptualization of identity are described in the following way:

*“Recent developments suggest that identities can be more productively viewed as social accomplishments rather than naturally occurring entities. Identity is a relational concept, it is a construction. There is no such thing as a pure identity –no essence or substance that sums up what identity is about. It is seen as multiple, fragmented, processual and situational rather than coherent, fixed and stable” (Kärremann, and Alvesson, 2001:62-63).*

Language is the core of any construction of reality and identity, as it connects the individual with other people, with culture and with the larger historically based human foundation, and language is seen as an actively used device for reality construction (Gergen, 1997, Czarniawska, 2004). Derrida (1976) suggests that in radical social constructionist positions, the self is no longer an essence, but has become a description:

*“...there is nothing beyond the text: reality is always a representation, and therefore it is language that constitutes the “I” of the subject and brings it into being through the process of signification” (Derrida, 1976 in Benwell and Stokoe, 2006:31).*

The assumption of a universal and linear road for identity development is replaced by variability. Longitudinal research on life stories has shown that discontinuity in the development of identity is more often the case, described as multiple pathways (Josselson, 1996), second chances that are felt to initiate new segments in a life (Kotre, 1984), personal support and encouragement for change (Mishler, 1999). This assumption of variability proposes a “multi-causal” model of development, where change arises not due to a specific age or stage in life, but rather within a certain contextual, historical time interacted situation. I have already discussed the four characteristics of this tradition, when approaching identity in chapter 2, in the section on *Characteristics of a Social Constructivist Position*, which focuses on everyday interaction, critical reflections of what we take for granted, language and meaning as historically and culturally situated, and finally on social action and relations of power. Therefore, the following review concentrates on and emphasizes positioning theory as an example of a postmodern perspective.

Positioning theory is a rising research field within the social constructivist paradigm that attempts to articulate alternative ways of understanding the dynamics of human interactions. It provides a system of concepts through which “the creation of meaning” can be analyzed and interpreted. Overall, role theory and positioning theory serve some of the same sense-making functions by ordering perceptions of social reality, and by providing interactive scripts to guide social interaction. The concept of “*positioning*” was developed by Davis and Harré (1990; 1991), who defined it as a “...*process whereby selves are located in conversation as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines*” (Davis and Harré, 1991:48).

Hence, a position is a performance of a certain identity – for example, if I position myself as ignorant or confused. I would be performing an identity in which I am powerless and perhaps cannot to be held accountable for my actions. The social positioning in stories, i.e. individuals choose to position audiences, characters, and themselves in their stories can take on many forms, but whatever position is taken, the positioning is contributing to a narrative construction of identity:

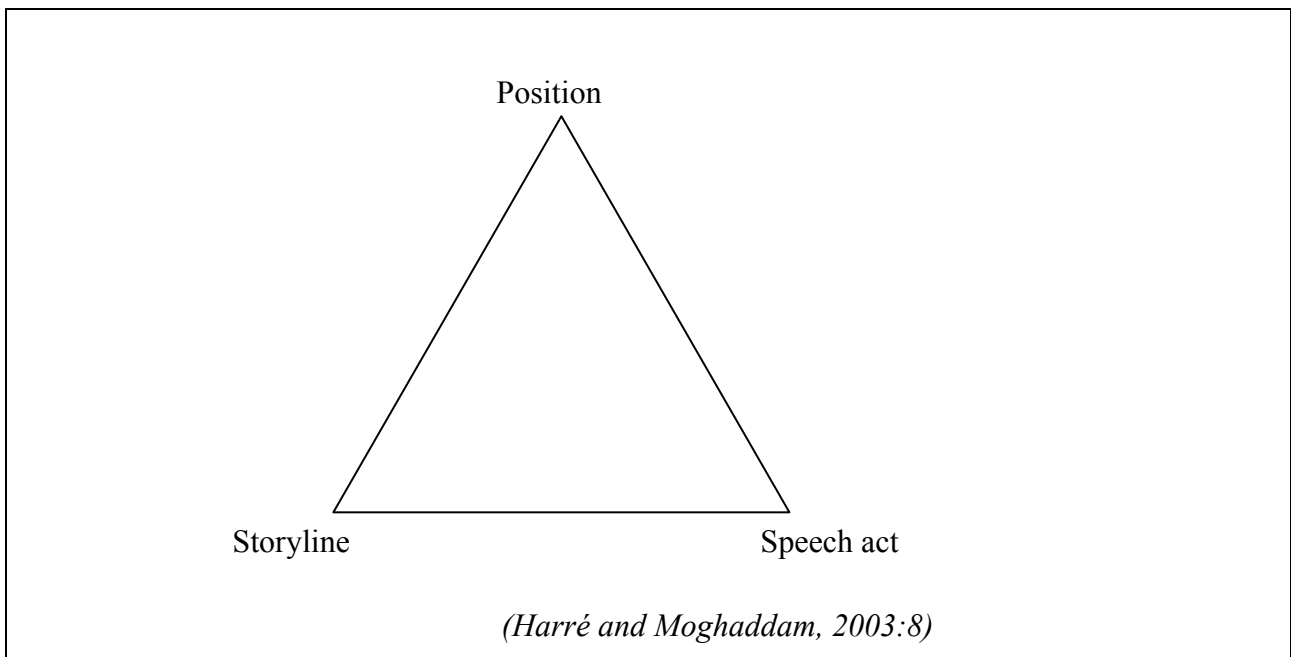
“...*positioning of the self in personal narratives signifies the performance of identity*” (Riessman, 2002:702 in Gubrium, J. F. and Holstein, J. A. 2000.)

The focus of this dissertation is ontological narratives and these are given legitimacy and accept in negotiations of different narrative positions via social

interactive processes (Gergen, 1997, Riessman, 1993). Narrative identity constructs emerging from positioning processes are not neutral, but are deeply rooted in the specific social context. Ontological narratives are given content and form by the narrative resources and discursive context from which they draw and simultaneously supply (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004).

The positioning triad is a central analytical model in positioning theory; it consists of three interrelated elements: position, storyline and speech act. A position is linked to the actions of a person in a certain position. A speech act is what the person is actually saying – what the person can be heard saying. Positioning and the speech acts are both linked to the storyline. And storylines are understood to have a base in various conventional discourses, some of which the person is in the process of living out (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003:7-9).

**Display 3-3 The Positioning Triad**



Positions are socially and culturally anchored in temporal social conventions, and are distributed in current discourses, for example about “what leaders do” and “what leadership is about”. Most often, leadership discourses are indistinguishable from or are woven into other societal discourses and as such are part of the broader context of life. In this dissertation, societal discourses are understood as narrative resources that are available for the individual. Temporary discourses of leadership derive from various sources, such as popular management literature and published research, and can be a narrative resource from which leaders draw when constructing leader identity (see chapter 4 for a review of discourses that construct leaders in leadership studies). The conceptual development of positioning theory is

based on a critique of the role concept and makes a distinction between a role and a position. Positioning theory criticizes the concept “role” to be relatively static, without reflecting the way social relationships are actually experienced and enacted by participants.

The concept of role fails to represent the fluid character of social actions and experience, whereas positioning theory sees the interpretation of role characteristics as being negotiated in the immediate context, and individuals as being actively engaged in constructing identities outside what is considered the role. The role concept is also criticized for indirectly communicating a dramaturgical language,<sup>21</sup> thus, giving the impression that scripts and speech acts are already written and determined more by the play than by the actors, who in role theory are presented as having limited choice in forming the role and in playing the parts of particular contexts (Davis and Harré, 1990; 1991). Hence, the identification of “role” marks out a sub-domain of a person's life, where notions of role and job are typically closely linked, and can be so prolonged that the role identity is maintained after retirement and into other domains than the profession (e.g. when a job title is mentioned in a death notice).

**Display 3-4 Postmodern Perspectives of the Identity Construct**

<b>Postmodern Perspectives of the Identity Construct</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focus on identity as construction processes and social performance</li><li>• See identity as transiently manifested in context by negotiating subject positions</li><li>• Perceive identity to be simultaneously fragmented and coherently performed</li><li>• Ambiguity is the core of identity and consensus perceived as issue specific and temporal</li></ul>

This chapter has moved through decades of thinking about self and identity, and obviously such a review has limitations. The intent of this condensed review has been to bring to the surface important theoretical contributions to and movements in our conceptualization of the construction of identity as well as significant theoretical concepts, and to illustrate how conceptualizations have changed

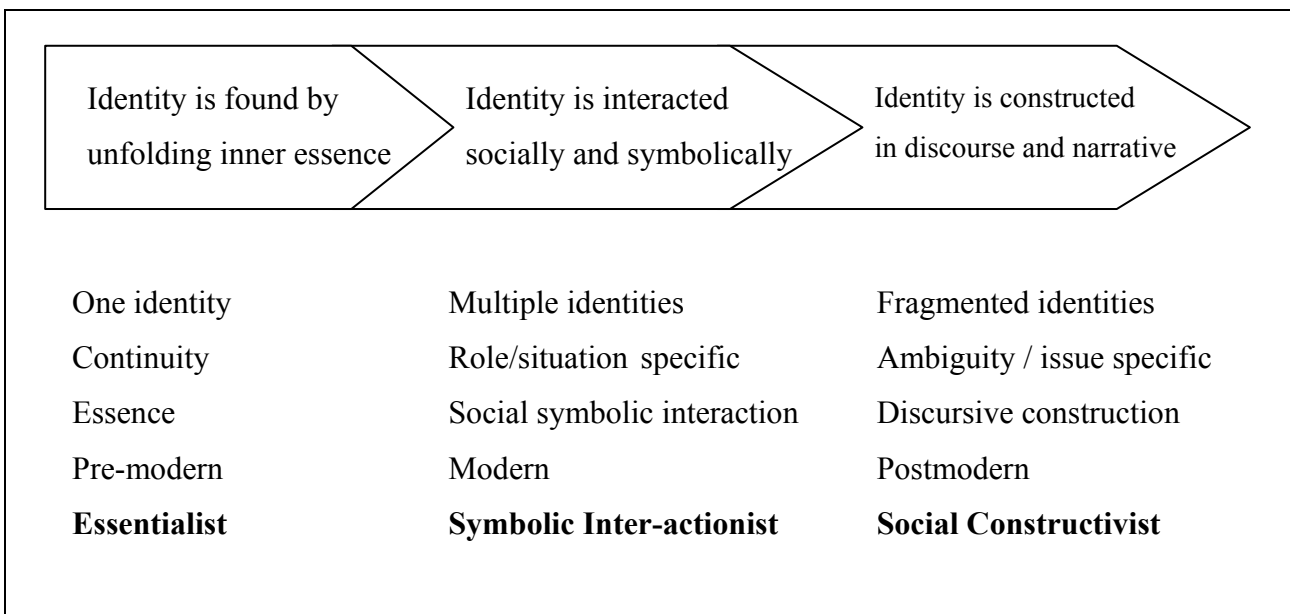
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<sup>21</sup> The notion of identity as performance traces back to sociologist Erving Goffman (1953; 1981) drama metaphoric language, and the idea that individuals act as social actors who stage their performance to present desirable selves; that identity is understood to be performed for an audience and in social settings.

markedly over time. Perspectives interact and continuously produce change, however, making it difficult to narrate a very stringent case. These significant changes construct the phenomenon very differently, which ultimately has consequences for the way we investigate identity and for the way we in leadership development programs attempt to approach identity construction processes.

The review also illustrates how the three perspective frameworks unfold throughout history, showing that where earlier perspectives tended to favor an integrative process, perspectives of the modern period tend to favor differentiation, and postmodern perspectives seem to be marked by more or less radical views of fragmentation. The overarching aim has been to illuminate the transition of the identity concept through this extensive period with an emphasis on significant changes in the way identity has been constructed over time. With the limitations in mind, early perspectives have constructed identity as an internal project of the self, focused on agency, stability and the maintenance of unity across situations. Modern perspectives focus on the social foundation of the self in its symbolic and interactive constitution, examining multiple identities that are situationally anchored and socially activated, and formulating a social identity concept. Postmodern perspectives conceive identity as a social construct and construct identity as ambiguous and fragmented. Identity is constructed in language, in contemporary discourse and narratives, giving new directions for how to approach and study the construct we call *identity*. Below is a summary of these essential characteristics.

**Display 3-5 Developmental Paths in the Construction of the Identity Concept**



One conceptualization does not replace another completely, however; former notions of identity intermingle and continue to direct studies and contemporary conceptualizations of identity. Hence, early conceptualizations of identity, as well as modern notions of identity, are still prevalent in contemporary conceptualizations of identity.

## **3.2 Making Sense of Narratives**

In the next part of this chapter, I situate the narrative approach within a general linguistic turn in the social sciences and reflect on the distinguishing qualities of narrative and stories. I describe how to make sense of narratives and unfold how a narrative identity can be understood as functional in the everyday practice of life. The review is structured in four interrelated functions of narrative identity: making sense of self, understanding social reality, negotiating power, and changing identity.

### **3.2.1 The Linguistic Turn and Narrative Research**

In the social sciences, the linguistic turn arose in the 1980s as part of a change in general orientation that included an awareness of the importance of language. The linguistic turn marked an increasing interest in and study of language and was taken up within different disciplines, such as sociology, social psychology, communication theory and cultural anthropology (Alvesson and Kärremann, 2000b). Due to the very broad and varied interdisciplinary background, this turn resulted in highly differentiated theoretical approaches with only general common denominators, such as the shared notion that societies, social institutions, cultures and identities could be better understood if viewed as discursively constructed in texts (Alvesson and Kärremann, 2000b:137). Narratives and stories were defined as a study domain within the organizational discourse approach (Grant, Hardy, Oswick and Putnam, 2004:5). Discursive studies and discourse analysis<sup>22</sup> generally have a literary and textual orientation where narratives are analyzed as prevalingly symbolic and rhetorical devices.

In conventional research, the representative idea of language is predominant, and it is assumed that the relationship between reality and language is like a mirror where words represent and correspond to objects. These objects can be people's inner

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<sup>22</sup> Discourse analysis is a specific direction that focuses on the detailed study of language use in a social context (Potter, 1997, Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Alvesson and Kärreman emphasize however that discourse is generally defined in a variety of ways by different researchers, thus arguing that it is a more scattered and fragmented field (see Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000b).

lives: intentions, values and feelings; or their external lives: social practices, relations and interaction. This is what Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b) have called the “*language-as-mirror-logic*”. In contrast, the narrative approach conceives of language as more complex and problematic, anchored in and dependent on social interaction and context. As a consequence, the research interest shifts towards focusing on *how* an account is produced and what it accomplishes (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000b:137-138); however, the representational idea of language is not completely abandoned, since narrative research entails a critical and reflective view of the complexities of language.

In the field of narrative psychology four central publications have marked the turn to narrative: *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* edited by Theodore Sarbin (1986); Jerome Bruner’s: *Actual Minds: Possible Worlds* (Bruner, 1986); *Acts of Meaning* (Bruner, 1990); and finally, Donald Polkinghorne’s (1988) *Narrative Knowing and The Human Sciences*. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the interest in narrative diffused into personality and human development studies (McAdams, 1988), where narratives investigated self-definition in a lifespan perspective, and into clinical psychology, where the rising field of narrative therapy was exploring individual life stories.

Narrative studies investigated identity at the ***individual*** level of analysis, examining a broad range of life and autobiographical stories. Among others significant contributions were those made by Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich, who co-edited an influential series of books devoted to narrative research and narratives studies of lives in transition (McAdams, et al. 2001; Josselson, et al, 2003; Lieblich, et al. 2006). Narrative studies with an individual level of analysis have focused on a broad range of subjects such as: social mobility and identity formation (Rosenwals and Ochberg, 1992), dealing with illness (Crossley, 2003), craftsmanship (Mishler, 1999), and adolescence (Lieblich, McAdams, and Josselson, 2006). Narrative studies investigating identity, with a ***group or collective*** level of analysis, have been conducted primarily in social identity and identity role research, building on the notion that people hold multiple identities related to gender, race, nationality, profession, age, and various other social roles.

Studies with a discursive and narrative orientation and an organizational level of analysis have been done in organizations focused on organizational identity (Hatch and Schultz, 2002; Czarniawska, 1997; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Other focus areas have been organizational policy, strategy and storytelling (Boje, 1995; 2001),

and examination of organizational processes and organizing practices (Gabriel, 2000). In the field of history, Hayden White has been influential in advancing narrative research through his investigations of how historical accounts are made from different discourses representing particular positions and points of view (White, 1973; 1987).

### **3.2.2 A Tentative Conceptualization**

In everyday speech, the concept of narrative is equivocal; however, also in narrative research and studies, the application of the concepts of narrative and story are ambiguous. In an interdisciplinary and emerging field, the attempts thus far to specify and distinguish these concepts have resulted in uneven and sometimes contradictory conceptualizations. According to the terminology used in the Encarta Encyclopedia (2006), a narrator is defined as “*a storyteller; somebody who tells a story or gives an account; or a narrator is a talking character in a work of fiction, who is presented as telling the story and who refers to himself or herself*”. And the verb “*to narrate*” is defined thus: “*to tell a story or give an account, usually in detail*”. Here again, narrative and story definitions intermingle and are defined by each other.

In narrative research, narratives have been defined in very inclusive ways, referring to any spoken or written presentations (Polkinghorne, 1988; 13). Some researchers, such as Czarniawska (2004), have criticized too inclusive definitions of narrative, because this indicates that everything told is a narrative or can be approached as such. However, narrative research has to a large extent used stories and narratives interchangeably and applied the concept of story as equivalent to narrative (Czarniawska, 1999, 2004; Riesmann, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988; Watson, 2001a).

In the context of this dissertation, I use a narrower definition in order to facilitate exploration of the construction of narrative identity in conversation, which in my study implies a micro-process orientation and generation of rich empirical material. Also, in the light of the interdisciplinary field, a conceptual distinction seems necessary to navigate analytically, because of the multifaceted disciplines with subsequent “language problems” and conceptual *mélange*. I attempt here to clarify the use of narrative and story in this dissertation, drawing on historian Hayden White (1973; 1987).

Hayden White (1973; 1987) distinguishes between annals, chronicles, story and narrative. In annals, events are simply listed as a registration of facts; in the



chronicle, events are presented and some kind of causal connections between events are provided, but no description of plot and no meaningful structure are provided in a chronicle. A narrative is a description of events in a meaningful structure, which involves temporal sequences of interrelated events or actions undertaken by characters. This definition, in focusing on meaning, sequence, actions and characters, is similar to Bruner’s (1990) narrative features, which are described in the next section. According to White, a story is distinguished by recounting events and their connections according to a *plot*. The plot “knits events together” and allows us to see the *significance of an event, in contrast to the significance of other events*. While a narrative simply describes and makes sense of what is happening, the introduction of a plot creates a story. Hence, a story needs to have a plot to be considered a story (Hayden White, 1973; 1987). Below is an example to illustrate the introduction of plot as the distinguishing characteristic of a story:

**Display 3-6 Narrative and Story – An Illustration**

Concept	Example
<b>Narrative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I went to the baker to buy some bread.</li> <li>• I fired 30 people during the first three months as leader.</li> </ul>
<b>Story</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I went to the baker to buy some bread, because I’m in love with the girl in the baker's shop.</li> <li>• I fired 30 people during the first three months as a leader, and that is when I began to keep a distance to people.</li> </ul>

In the narrative field, there seems to be some agreement to define and make sense of a story through the presence of a plot. Polkinghorne, (1988) emphasizes this:

*“The plot functions to transform a chronicle or listing of events into a schematic whole by highlighting and recognizing the contribution that certain events make to the development and outcome of the story” (Polkinghorne, 1988:18-19).*

Ricoeur coined the term “*emplotment*” to describe the process of bringing order to disorderly events by organizing them into a sequence according to a plot (Ricoeur, 1984). Furthermore, drawing on Bruner (1986; 1990) Czarniawska (2004) stresses how plots can be understood to embed and reflect cultural and societal conventions

(Czarniawska, 2004:8). However, when Bruner (1990) claims plots are central for determining the meaning and power of narratives, he contradicts the hitherto logic of distinguishing stories by the presence of a plot, and illustrates the conceptual confusion in the field. Regardless of the disputes, a complete separation between plot and meaningful structure seems to be ambiguous, which is probably why most researchers use both terms without entering into clarifying distinctions.

This dissertation seeks to consistently distinguish between story and narrative. Both render events meaningful through some organizing meaning structure, but a story is characterized by creating meaning according to a particular plot, whereby the narrator is seeking to communicate a significant meaning. When applying the distinction in practice to actual conversations in the empirical material, it becomes clear that it is a delicate interpretive balance to determine when a narrative meaning structure evolves into a story with an identifiable plot that enriches the meaning of certain acts or events.

In the context of this dissertation, I have prioritized making this distinction, because it makes it possible to break down the analysis into smaller analytical units. I believe this is important in order to get closer to the everyday construction of identity in conversation where the richness of identity construction processes do not necessarily comply with the construction of fully developed narratives that fulfill all the defining features of narrative (e.g. Bruner, 1990). In chapter 5, in describing *The Narrative Analytical Framework*, I specify how the conceptual distinction of narrative and story is applied in analyzing the empirical material.

### **3.2.3 Making Sense of Narratives**

In this section I review relevant theories that focus on how to understand and make sense of narratives. The aim is to focus the investigation of the narrative construction process, and to anchor the investigation in earlier theoretical research. In order to specify and make sense of narratives, Bruner (1990) proposed central characteristics of narratives, which are presented in the following.

#### **Narratives are Accounts of Events Occurring over Time**

A classic formulation of narrative is an account with a beginning, middle, and end, implying that a narrative has a finished structure. In contrast with an open-ended piece of discourse, a narrative offers an integrated account of an event. In telling a story, the narrator, aware of the ending, constructs the story from there so that the

narrative consists of an interrelated sequence that leads from beginning to end. Narratives are thus retrospective accounts and, at the same time, they are always constructed anew in the situation. This makes narratives provisional and ever changing as new information becomes available, and either adds to the narrative or redirects focus in every telling or reconstruction.

Narratives thus focus on past, present and future events. They are not necessarily told in chronological order, but are likely to include flash-backs and flash-forwards. Bruner (1990) emphasizes that events can be mental states and happenings involving human beings as characters or actors, and events can be real or imagined. The courses of events in a narrative are often perceived and narrated from a certain position and perspective in time. Therefore, when interpreting narratives, it becomes important to specify the time dimension. This can be done with the distinction of story time and discourse time; discourse time is the time it takes to listen to a narrative, whereas story time refers to the actual duration of the narrated event in real time. Events experienced to be central to the plot are often narrated in more detail, prolonging the discourse time so that it approaches story time. The degree to which this is happening provides a focal point for understanding narratives and time (Genette, 1980).

### **Narratives are Retrospective Interpretations of Sequential Events from Certain Points of View**

Sequencing, which is a distinguishing feature of narratives, has been emphasized by many researchers as necessary and important but not sufficient for defining narratives (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). Different frameworks for understanding sequence have been developed. Labov and Walentzky (1967) argue that stories follow a chronological sequence; events move forward in a linear path through time. Young (1987) proposes a consequential sequence, where one event causes the next, but not necessarily chronologically. Thematic sequencing implies that the narrative is sequenced by themes more than by time, which is the hallmark of episodic narratives. According to Riesmann, this is less likely to be found in Western, white, middleclass interviewers' accounts and analysis<sup>23</sup> (1993:17). This point stresses how conventional wisdom (and ignorance) creates blind spots and co-constructs the object of study in well-known and conventional terms (See also Bruner, 2002). Narrators impose the plot by selecting, prioritizing and ordering

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<sup>23</sup> Riesmann (1993) points out how cultural context shapes research, and how Western society's predominately linear thinking is not universal but contrasts story structures found in other cultures. Examples of how culture creates blind spots see Linde's example of Burmese story telling structures.

events into a sequential and meaningful whole, seen from a certain position in a particular context. The plot can be understood to provide an interpretative frame of meaning within which to make sense of actions and events; for example, the plot of romance and the plot of tragedy provide two completely different frames for understanding and interpreting events and actions. However, narrative accounts cannot provide causal explanations nor can they be the basis of generalizations, because of their local situational anchoring and context dependence (Søderberg, 2003). Thus, the telling of a narrative always takes place after the fact, and events are recounted in time and in sequential interpretations from a certain point of view.

### **Narratives Focus on Human Action, the Actions of the Narrator and the Actions of Others**

Narratives reflect their sources and circumstances, but also take shape through their active narration (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 106). Narratives are about events, experiences and actions of individuals, and they specialize in the shaping of links between the exceptional and the ordinary. This suggests that people construct themselves by communicating different narratives about who they are, and by telling what they do. Bruner proposes in *Acts of Meaning* that “*how to tell the story of your self*” is also a prescription for how to construct one’s life (Bruner, 1990: 206). It also indicates that when we communicate a self in narratives, we choose to tell about ourselves, and these stories are likely to be experiences of life transitions or maybe even traumas. Narratives of experiences and events are often structured around a central theme, or are told in a certain genre, to stress certain meanings or central constructive turning point for the narrative self. In narrative therapy, this is called storyline or dominant story. Dominant stories are understood to significantly influence the lived life and actual actions of the narrator (White and Epston, 1990). Still, Gabriel emphasizes that “*creative ambiguity*” gives stories two unique possibilities: creating a plot and presenting a representation of reality. He stresses that plots can be either factual or imaginative and can be products of both events and fantasy (Gabriel, 2004: 64; 2000: 239; Czarniawska, 1999:15). Gabriel seems to imply that whether a plot is imaginative or a real event will not make any difference in the potential constructive impact of a story on an individual’s identity construct. Gabriel describes these ideas in relation to his concept of “*poetic license*”, which is a psychological contract made between the narrator and the listener that allows the narrator to mould material for effect by using a range of poetic interventions. Their use is justified by “*giving voice to experience*”, but it is still necessary to balance poetic license with the story’s verisimilar status in order for it to be accepted as a story that makes sense to the listener (Gabriel, 2004:64).

Conventional scripts and existing cultural frameworks of narrative construction have a double nature: on one hand, they benefit the individual by providing cultural scripts and plot structures on which to base narratives so that it is not necessary to make up everything from scratch. On the other hand, cultural scripts and meaning structures limit and restrict individual meaning construction. So no narrator has to invent everything for the first time, or tell everything from start to finish. Narratives we tell have a more accumulative constitutive character, entangled in social action and building on conventional scripts, as proposed by Bruner:

*“Our self-making stories accumulate over time; even pattern themselves on conventional genres” (Bruner, 2002:65).*

Furthermore, narratives function to bring order to disorder; in telling the story, the narrator is ordering, organizing and making sense of events. Narratives are attempts to make sense of challenges and restore some sense of order in the chaos of everyday life. Events or experiences that break the routines of everyday life, contradict the expected, disrupt or challenge us are likely to increase the production of narratives. Bruner also describes how narratives can be used to forge links between the exceptional and the ordinary, emphasizing the importance of the unexpected as crucial for the generation of narratives (Bruner 1990:47). He states that: *“For there to be a story something unforeseen must happen”* (Bruner, 2002:15). This view is supported by Riesmann (1993), who suggests that people often tell stories of events where there has been a breach between ideal and real or between self and society. She argues that people make sense of experiences by telling stories and casting the experience in narrative form, but narratives also function as guiding principles for understanding and acting in the world. In a similar way, Bruner (2002) emphasizes how conventional wisdom guides and is embedded in stories:

*“Stories reassert a kind of conventional wisdom about what can be expected, even (or especially) what can be expected to go wrong and what might be done to restore or cope with the situation” (Bruner, 2002:31).*

The conventional wisdom of narratives can be discharged in narrative analysis by use of different genres; a genre can be defined as the persistence of certain conventional elements that engage listeners in different ways (Mitchell, 1990). Hence, genre provides the narrator with specific styles and structures with which to construct the narrative, and as such genre represents both a choice on the part of the narrator and the narrative resources provided by the larger cultural frame of

reference. Examples of genres include: habitual narratives in which things happened over again with no action peak; topic-centered narratives in which snapshots of past events are linked thematically; and hypothetical narratives, which are centered on events that did not happen (Riesmann, 1993:18).

### **Narrating is Part of Identity Construction Processes**

Narratives and stories are perceived to be at the core of identity construction processes: Children learn the ways of the world through stories they are told and through the stories in which they are interactively involved. As philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre proposes:

*“...it is through hearing stories that children learn, or mislearn, both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are” (MacIntyre, 1981:54).*

Narratives and stories are unavoidable for understanding and coping with our life worlds, although not for a self-proclaimed constructivist. Bruner, reflecting in his writing on the dynamic constructive qualities of narratives, says: *“We constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future” (Bruner, 2002:64).*

And finally, narratives and stories are at the core of our very conceptualization of identity as it is ingrained and unfolded in the narrative expression of a personal life story, as the investigations of McAdams indicate:

*“If you want to know me, you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insights into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story” (McAdams, 1993:11).*

This implies that every time an individual tells a story, it is an act of identity construction, an act of defining *who I am* for one's self and for others. Hence, Bruner's (1990) fourth tenet is actually the epistemological point of departure for this dissertation and my exploration of the narrative construction of leader identity,

perceived as ontological narratives. Narrative therapeutic<sup>24</sup> theory and methods are central to this research framework, because it involves people in narrative construction of identity. The aim of the therapeutic practice is not to impose conventional norms or evaluations onto the narrator; in practice, this means that the therapist interacts with unconventional narratives “as if” they are conventional, and seeks to acknowledge each story’s specific meaning to the individual. In the therapeutic practice, the meanings of words and concepts are investigated in great detail and depth in order to unfold the idiosyncratic significance and meaning structures, as well as the historical constructions of meaning. The therapeutic ideal is to explore the meaning of narratives without passing judgment or taking conventional meanings for granted. The intent is to leave the possibility open for the narrator to construct identity by narrating alternative and, for the narrator, more liberating stories. The aim is thus emancipation at an individual level of practice (White, 2007, White and Epston, 1989; 1990).

### **3.3 Narrative Construction of Identity**

This section focuses on narrative construction of identity, and it is structured according to four functional aspects of narrative construction of identity: making sense of self, understanding social reality, negotiating power, and changing identity

*“Self-making through self-narrating is restless and endless, probably more so now than ever before” (Bruner, 2002:84).*

#### **3.3.1 Making Sense of Self**

Narratives can be perceived as a mode of representation and an ontological constitutive practice. Considering narratives to be more than a representation of the world has considerable consequences for our thinking in several ways. It implies that we come to know ourselves through our own stories, that we construct identity by telling stories. The choices we make in telling become central to our sense of identity and to identity change. Also psychologist Sarbin moved his conviction from a representational orientation to an ontological orientation. He says that

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<sup>24</sup> Narrative therapy was designed to assist individuals and families in constructing alternative life stories. It is directed toward facilitating identity processes in the therapeutic setting, and offers a terminology for investigating processes. Because the aim of the narrative therapeutic framework is to make identity construction processes emerge, it provides new (to the narrative research field) conceptual models for understanding and illustrating identity processes. Narrative therapy is founded on an awareness and sensitivity to power structures and dominant discourses, and is concerned with individual agency and how to respectfully approach the meaning making of the individual in a social context (White, 2007; White and Epston, 1989; 1990).

*“...stories have ontological status. We are always enveloped in stories. The narrative of human beings is analogous to the ocean for fishes”* (Sarbin, 1986, in Heaven, 1999:301). This implies that narratives are not limited to ways of perceiving and representing the world. We construct our world through narratives and live through the stories told by us or by others. However, this does not replace or dismiss narratives as representations. Riesmann (1993) argues that interpretation is still unavoidable because narratives are also representations: *“Nature and the world do not tell stories, individuals do”* (Riesmann, 1993:2). She stresses how human agency and imagination determine what is included and excluded and how plots are made sense of. Individuals become the autobiographical narratives through which they tell about their lives, and their individual stories build on the narrative meta stories of particular cultures, interwoven with stories about life itself (Bruner, 1986). Thus, narratives are used to make sense of experience, the self and relationships with others (Riesmann, 1993, Gergen, 1997), and identities are constructed in the stories people tell about themselves (Lieblich et al., 2006). The stories we tell about others are as much about us as their alleged subjects. This indicates that not only are we significant in the stories we tell about ourselves; quite a lot can also be discerned about our own identity in the way we tell stories about others. In the context of this dissertation, this point is highly relevant, since researchers are also storytellers, adhering to academic criteria for narrative production while drawing on individual background and experiences, as discussed in chapter 2.

The linguistic turn introduced a cognitive orientation for explaining social phenomena. Because narratives are constructed in language, this makes the cognitive work of coherence, structure and plot very salient and gives research a cognitive theoretical tilt that makes it convenient to produce a simplified cognitive view of identity construction while neglecting or minimizing the emotional aspects of narration and narratives. The introduction of narrative therapy theories and concepts in this dissertation also constitutes an attempt to shed more light on the tensions and emotional struggles involved in constructing identity in narratives.

### **3.3.2 Understanding Social Reality**

*“How individuals recount their histories – what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience – all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about*



*one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned” (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992:1).*

In the view of narrative identity theory, self-perception is not seen as an individual's personal and private cognitive structure but as a discussion of the self in a language accessible in the public sphere. This shifts the understanding from cognitive conceptual categorization towards the self as narrative, as a story that is rendered meaningful in ongoing social relations. Since the construction process of identity is expressed in language by telling stories to another person, narratives can be understood as the socially shared part of identity. Czarniawska defines narratives somewhat broadly: as a form of social life, a form of knowing, and as a form of communication. Czarniawska (2004) claims that individual as well as organizational identity are constructed in discourse and in narratives, and she suggests that identity emerges through the narrative processes that take place in interaction between people, thus denoting that social interaction is where identity is constantly being constructed and challenged. Therefore, human beings can be understood as social constructors and organizations as social constructs.

The introductory quotation points to narratives as a way of understanding self in the context of a social reality where narratives are products of and are being produced in social interaction and social context. This places the audiences for the narrative of the self as the key to the question of what, how and why narratives are constructed. The first audience is the self; we tell stories to ourselves about ourselves; we rehearse stories in our imagination; we place ourselves in plots; and sometimes we are harsh critics of ourselves in our stories. Not all of these stories are subsequently told to others. Bruner (2001) even thinks that some of our internal storytelling is a process of self-creation that requires no external audience to have its effect. We rehearse stories by trying out stories with different audiences, e.g. by telling a story we perceive as sensitive to a safe audience before telling it to a wider public audience. This may be done to check the reactions of particular audiences and to improve our stories on the basis of their reactions (Linde, 1993). We also tell different stories to different audiences, and we trade stories; when I tell you a personal story, I expect one in return. Moreover, Sims proposes, drawing on Bruner (2001), that the division between self and the social may be a false dichotomy, and that it can be merged or overcome by introducing the concept of a distributed self. The idea of a distributed self places the self neither within the skull of the individual nor even within the body. Rather, the distributed self is inter-subjective and distributed beyond the individual in the organization, in relation of work,

family, friends, and artifacts. The basic argument is that the self cannot be understood without knowing something about where it is distributed, i.e. the areas in which the identity construct is situated. This provides a metaphor that stresses the social embeddedness of the individual, and is in strong contrast to the essentialist metaphors of identity described earlier.

In the work setting, narration has been described as an important means of constructing and altering identities, thus supporting the notion of a socially constructed self (Gergen, 1997; Ibarra, 2005; Linde, 1993; McAdams, 1993). Following the same line of reasoning, Giddens claims that identity persists through the ability to narrate one's life and formulate it into a narrative composed of terms that will be accepted by a relevant audience (Giddens, 1991). Narratives are addressed to an audience, which can be imaginative or actual, and the actual audience has to engage in evaluating whether the narrative is plausible and can be accepted as a legitimate account. Czaniawaska, (1997) says that the meaning of a narrative is negotiated between the teller and the listener, and Gergen (1997) stresses that identities are judged intelligible in particular social contexts and relationships. But how does a narrator construct a narrative that is accepted and considered legitimate and even intelligible by an audience, and what are the pitfalls in the narrative construction of identity.

The construction of self in narratives in a social context runs five salient risks according to Sims (2005): the risk of defeat, disbelief, disinterest, disproof, and the risk of losing the plot. The risk of defeat is based on the idea that a plot is only interesting when it includes an element of risk, e.g. some kind of threat to be overcome, thus introducing the risk of defeat. Disbelief is simply when the audience does not believe the story, which can be ascribed to lack of coherence (Linde, 1993). The story could also be of no interest to the audience, and for an individual to be uninteresting is far more threatening to a sense of identity than being loved or hated, which both imply a much more dynamic relation that forcefully calls the self into existence. Disinterest risks total derailment. The fourth risk is that our story is disproved, whereby the underlying argument of the story is not considered valuable. This implies that every story is based on an underlying argument about what is important and what is not, which makes some causality chains believable and others less plausible and less trustworthy. The last risk of losing the plot in the presence of the audience has to do with the narrator's ability and skill to actually construct a story. Some people are more skilled in constructing stories, and sometimes in life we lose track of our basic storylines, or we start with

something that ends very differently than we planned. Also, many plots are lived out at the same time and can compete, and we can lose the plot because we cannot possibly follow them all. Thus, retelling a narrative to an audience means leaving out some of the plots and drawing others together, so as to construct a coherent identity narrative with a plot that is understandable to the actual audience (Sims, 2005: 98-101).

Narratives establish and restore identity continuity, when an individual is faced with change or discontinuity. An individual's ability to establish coherence within a story and to demonstrate a coherent life story is essential for a sense of identity in the face of others and one's self. Linde (1993) says a coherent life story demonstrates that our lives are a series of unfolding, related and linking events that make sense for the individual. To establish coherence depends on the extent to which the narrative demonstrates continuity and causality: continuity is implied when the fundamental essence of the protagonist remains the same, even when the situation has changed; causality is established when the reasons used to describe the protagonist's trajectory is perceived as sufficient and/or understandable (Ibarra, 2005:3).

Bruner (2002) listed guidelines for how to produce or construct a "good story", emphasizing that a story needs a plot; plots need obstacles to goals; and obstacles make people reconsider. He urges narrators to tell only about the story's relevant past and place the characters in the social world, to give them moods, allies and connections. And he proposes the narrator should let the characters grow but keep their identities intact. Their continuities should remain evident. This is in my view an interesting aspect of narrative construction, which implies that somehow the individual simultaneously has to change and stay the same. Bruner continues that characters in narratives should explain themselves as needed, and as a narrator you should worry when your characters are not making sense – at least you should let your characters worry too, in the narrative. In my opinion, Bruner again points to something very essential for narrative conceptualization: the seemingly contradictory quest by the protagonist and audiences for coherence and meaning in identity construction, even when a process of change is causing identity incoherence or the absence of meaning. In producing a coherent narrative, just as in constructing a coherent self, this contradiction must be contained to make the narrative identities plausible and legitimate. To do this, the narrator's narration must bring together coherence and change in one embrace (Bruner, 2002:72).

Coherence is important in narrative studies for several reasons. First, for a story to be meaningful, it must be coherent; a criterion for the story's meaningfulness is that the different parts of the story fit together in some consistent way. Second, the individual will use this criterion to some extent to evaluate whether the individual life story is meaningful when compared to what is culturally considered a positively valued identity (Mishler, 1999: 14). In narratives and in life, characters and identity should grow but still be kept intact, a contradiction that points out the challenge of preserving some recognizable identity for others and oneself, even in processes of identity reconstruction. Major breaks in the coherence of a story challenge and potentially threaten this perception of coherence, and therefore generate narratives.

### **3.3.3 Negotiating Power**

Narratives are told in social situations and relations that significantly influence what is told; narratives told to a particular group of people might be told in a different way to other audiences. Hence, the meaning of a story is negotiated in a process of interaction; in narratives, I construct myself before the other. I construct how I would like to be known by my audience and the meaning I would like my audience to ascribe to my actions and me. Narrating can be understood as a process of meaning construction in which the negotiation of meaning is an important and somewhat neglected aspect. The term *negotiating* implies a locally situated negotiation of meaning and subject positions, and it accentuates the power aspects of narration in social relationships. The process of negotiating identity also entails the broader societal context and frame of reference, which provide the context and literally frame what we can think and what we can be. Narratives also function to guide, normalize and control.

*“We more often tell stories to forewarn than to instruct. And because of this, stories are a culture’s coin and currency. For culture is, figuratively, the maker and enforcer of what is expected, but it also, paradoxically, compiles, even slyly treasures, transgressions” (Bruner, 2002:15).*

In Bruner’s understanding, self-narrating is done from the outside in, as well as from the inside out. From childhood on, we become expressions of the relations and culture that nurture us, and we make and remake ourselves in the culturally provided frame of imagined possible future selves (Bruner, 2002:87). The plotting of events is central to negotiating power. Czarniawska points to the plotting battle, which is actually a power struggle. Those who “win” earn the right to define history, past events and their meaning (Czarniawska, 2004:31). The plot can also be

said to determine the power of the narrative, and not the degree to which the narrative can be verified or falsified with regard to facts (Bruner, 1990). Research on discourse, identity and organizational identity (Gergen; 1997; Boje, 1995) shows how the use of specific categories demarcates and differentiates identity, reflecting broader cultural context and processes of sense-making (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004a: 157). Bruner argues that culture and individual stories are dialectically (shaping and being shaped) connected to the collective story of culture. Bruner even claims that “*Storytelling becomes entwined with, even sometimes constitutive of, cultural life*” (Bruner, 2002:31).

From a moral perspective, narratives can be seen as stories of right and wrong. For example, narratives can be told as attempts to do the virtuous thing during times of challenge. The social and normative context and cultural valuation of certain stories over others is equivalent to Goffman’s (1959) writing on self-presentation in everyday life. Here, narratives are inevitably self-representations in which the narrator intentionally seeks to persuade herself and others of her virtues by negotiating the relative power of the narrator. A match with prevailing cultural and social conventions provides the narrator, with “imaginative power” in the particular context. Mismatch between identity narratives and dominant discourses on leadership or other aspects of life might provide the individual with less sense of identity power; then, the leader may construct an identity based on a sense of failure, shortcoming and a need for improvement and reconstruction.

The negotiation metaphor highlights that narratives constitute a purposeful form of social action (Gergen, 1997), that narratives can be used as attempts to increase the power and self-esteem of the storyteller. Cobb (1993) describes how this can be done by two means: resonance and closure. Cultural resonance is achieved through the use of metaphors that allow actors to access the power of dominant cultural stories that are already established and have significant cultural meaning. The choices made in constructing a narrative are constrained by and reflect cultural conventions. This implies that the choice of characters, the inclusion of events, the determination of what is relevant, the organization of plots, form and genre are culturally constituted, which also implies limited agency for the narrator. Closure in Cobb’s terminology is achieved through narrative structures: such as using a linear plot and adhering to established conventions for producing narratives; establishing a desirable goal; explaining outcomes; and having characters with a coherent identity over time. The last point only applies when the identity change process is not itself the plot of the narrative.

There is still room for some individual agency and resistance, which Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe in management research as identity struggles, indicating counter-identification and dis-identifying with the way managers have formulated the prevailing identity discourse. Discourse regulates not only what can be sensibly said about a particular object, but also who can speak and from what position. Grand Discourse is a term coined by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) to describe this limitation, and it is defined as “*an assembly of discourses, ordered and presented as an integral frame in which actors are required to take certain positions in order to speak and from which particular practices follow, in this sense it represents a power structure*” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000:1133). Narrative therapy hypothesizes that only experiences that are part of a larger story will have significant impact on people’s lives. Narrative therapy facilitates the building of the plots that connect a person’s life together, which involves finding and amplifying the “unseen storylines” that often comprise a problem-saturated narrative. Re-authoring implies the activity of identifying neglected aspects and events, and evolving them in alternative storylines. Michael White (1995; 2007) suggests that gaps exist in dominant stories, and that no story will dominate every aspect of individual identity. It is from the search and exploration of these gaps that stories can be enriched and thickened in order to make way for the emergence of alternative identity stories (White and Epston, 1990).

### **3.3.4 Changing Identity**

*“...Narrative acts of self-making are usually guided by unspoken, implicit cultural models of what selfhood should be - and, of course, shouldn't be” (Bruner, 2002:65).*

Identity construction processes are virtually processes of change, as every narration is a new version of a story told and potentially creates new insights into the overall life story of the narrator. Construction processes are the focus of leader development programs, but these often focus on fixing problems or developing what the leader or others perceive to be problematic aspects of the leader's identity (negative identity stories). Identity changes are linked to turning points or significant events in the protagonist's identity narratives. Bruner defines a turning point as

*“...those episodes in which, as if to underline the power of the agent’s intentional states, the narrator attributes a crucial change or stance in the protagonist’s story to a belief, a conviction, a thought” (Bruner, 2001:31).*

Identity change has also been understood within the realm of the equilibrium model, which is a common metaphor for change processes in psychology as well as in organizational studies. Thus far, the main exploration of narrative content has evolved around the concept of plots, whereas this model stresses that states of equilibrium are being replaced by states of disequilibrium. Todorov (1971) integrates these notions as he defines a plot in the following way; “[It] consists in the passage from one equilibrium to another” (Todorov 1971/1977:11, in Czarniawska, 2004:19). In the context of this dissertation, these plot and equilibrium model ideas imply that a narrative begins with a stable situation, which is then disturbed by some power or force. The result is a state of disequilibrium introduced by action or some kind of force directed in the opposite direction. Thereafter, a second equilibrium is established that is similar to the first, but the two are never identical. Czarniawska says that what the second equilibrium has obtained may be similar to the first, but often the second equilibrium is the reverse of the first (Czarniawska, 2004:19). This could indicate that identity reconstruction processes occur in a pendulum movement, changing from one (extreme) to the opposite before, maybe with time, finding a more balanced expression.

Drawing on social constructivist theory and a critical management ideology, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) argue that identity is a process of becoming conceptualized through **identity work** and **identity struggles**. Identity work is defined as the process of:

*“...people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening and revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165).*

This definition punctuates the notion that identity work is an activity people engage in to achieve a sense of coherence and establish a sense of “knowing who I am”. It is a continuous process of becoming in which people construct themselves as different and similar to specific others in order to narrate a distinct identity. Highly complex, fragmented contexts, such as crises or transitions, are likely to increase awareness of the constructed quality of self-identity and compel the individual to engage in identity work (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003:1165). As a consequence, eminent contexts in which to investigate identity work are situations where identity

is challenged and where self-doubt and openness are encouraged. The concepts of identity work and identity struggles are central for this dissertation in investigating identity construction processes as a continuous process of construction and reconstruction. In chapter 5 *The Analytical Framework*, I further relate these concepts to the leader occupation and specify how these notions are integrated into the analytical approach.

### **3.4 Summary**

In this dissertation, the following assumptions about identity constitute the basic understanding for investigating the narrative construction of identity. Identity is perceived as a constant process of construction, and people engage in identity work to reconstruct and restore a sense of coherence and continuity of identity in narrative form. Identity work increases in connection with situations in which people are faced with change, challenges or discontinuities. With the changeability of the world and life circumstances, people are in a constant process of becoming and identity is always in the making. People organize and make sense of their lived experiences in narratives. They perform stories to express selected aspects of their lived experience, and this storytelling become constitutive for shaping lives, social relations and the perception of reality. People depend on language in order to ascribe meaning to their lived experiences, using the narrative resources of the culturally and historically based language at hand. Conventional language structures and rhetoric can be considered both facilitative and restrictive for the construction of identity, and stories are told in retrospect from a particular position, using conventional schemes (e.g. genres and structures). The concept of negotiation brings power aspects of narratives to the fore, and stresses that narrative accounts are social performances in which interaction with particular audiences is vital to any identity construction in the process of evaluating and accepting the narrative as legitimate and plausible. Identity construction processes are especially prevalent in situations of conflict or when events are challenging or tension is provoking for the individual. These are described by Bruner (1986; 1990) as “significant events and turning points” and by Svenningson and Alvesson (2003) as “critical episodes” that initiate “identity struggles” and “identity work”.. These processes are unfolded in chapter 5 on building the analytical strategy. Individuals construct different narrative identities, which become salient in different contexts (e.g. identity hierarchies are evoked in specific settings). The process of reconstructing identity is described as a balancing of opposites, e.g. balancing a sense of coherence with reconstructive incoherence. Identity reconstruction processes are also described as identity work and identity struggles, indicating both active constructive engagement



and identity tension. Although much narrative literature has a cognitive orientation, identity construction processes are emotional experiences for the narrator and most often also for the listener. People connect emotionally with, and are moved by, each other in narrating their storied lives, and people struggle with the tensions of constructing identities over and over again in everyday interaction and practice.

The telling of narratives is understood as social performance. In a performance perspective, narratives are believed to be performed with a particular audience in mind and produced for an audience in social situations (Goffman, 1959). When telling narratives of identity, we are performing preferred identities and negotiating different subject positions. A performance perspective does not imply the performed identities are inauthentic or somehow fake; on the contrary, the investigative point of departure is that narratives are unavoidably performed identities and incontrovertibly situated and accomplished in social interaction (Riessman, 2002: 701). In this sense, identity cannot be anything other than performed, since it evokes and takes place in social interaction. Even in solitude, “the other” is present in our minds as an imaginative actor. This is emphasized by the American pragmatists’ early construction of the social self. I have now described the multifaceted emergence of the identity concept in a time perspective, and the multidisciplinary narrative field. I have unfolded significant conceptualizations of how to make sense of narratives, as well as how the construction of narrative identity functions in everyday life, helping the narrator to make sense of self, understand social reality, negotiate subject positions and power, and change identity constructs. In the next chapter, I briefly review and discuss the discursive construction of leaders in leadership theory. Discourses of leadership theory are used by leaders to define and impart language to “leadership”, and as such, discourses serve as narrative resources for them. Hence, a discursive framing of leadership in a selected body of leadership theory facilitates and specifies the exploration of the narrative construction of identity.



# 4 The Discursive Construction of Leaders in Leadership Theory

This chapter begins with a brief review of the management and leadership debate, which forms a backdrop for conceptually clarifying the application of terms in this dissertation. I then review how leaders have been constructed discursively in selected leadership theories. I have found three prevalent ways of discursively constructing leaders in leadership theory and have structured the review accordingly. The three discourses are: the trait-oriented discourse, the behavior-oriented discourse, and the process-oriented discourse.

This dissertation investigates the narrative construction of leader identity. In chapter 3, I position the study in relation to identity and narrative identity theory, and in this chapter, I position the study in relation to leadership theory. The focal point is to review selected influential discourses in leadership theory<sup>25</sup> relevant to the investigative focus of the dissertation. In chapter 2, I unfold the empirical practice of the *Executive Training Program* context, and describe the ideology and theoretical foundation of the program. I argue that understanding the theoretical position regarding leadership is central for understanding the context and intent of leader development programs such as the Executive Training Program. Moreover, since leadership theories discursively construct leaders in particular ways, the purpose is to better understand where the leaders in my sample draw on narrative resources for constructing leader identity.

In investigating the narrative construction of leader identity, discourses are not understood as superficial rules. When we create meaning about who we are, the available discourses delimit and enhance in fundamental ways *what* we talk about, and they also influence *how* we conduct ourselves in conversation and in practice. The term *discourse* is understood to provide a frame within which particular ways of talking, writing and conducting ourselves are ruled in or out. Certain discourses will define some language and conduct as acceptable and delimit and restrict others. In a narrative epistemological understanding, discourses provide *narrative resources* with which to construct identities and understand the world. In this sense,

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<sup>25</sup> This review is by no means exhaustive but contains selected theoretical contributions that have distinctively constructed leaders in leadership theory. See House, 1997; Rost, 1991 and Yukl, 1989 for extensive reviews.

discourses *do* things and are deeply ingrained in the ways people create meaning and take action in their life and work practices (Potter and Wetherell, 1987:6).

## 4.1 Management and Leadership

There is a long and ongoing debate on the distinguishing qualities of management and leadership, which is trying to determine whether they are synonymous, if management is a subset of leadership, or vice versa (Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Kotter, 1988; Rost, 1991). Leadership research in the 1970s studied primarily lower or middle-level management, and the background for the debate was the recognition of the need for more “high-level” research that followed all the efforts made to describe and identify characteristics of leadership and management (Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Kotter, 1990). Zaleznik (1977) argues *for* a distinction between leadership and management, describing the leader with the image of the artist who by force of creativity and intuition navigates chaos, whereas the manager is described as a problem-solver relying on rationality and control. Following this line of thinking, Kotter (1990) describes management as concerned with complexity through order and control, in contrast to leadership, which is concerned with change through dynamic strategic processes. Thus, the notion of leadership involves establishing direction, vision of the future, and strategies for change. Leadership aligns people by communicating, fostering accept and winning commitment to goals. Leadership is about motivating and inspiring people in order to energize them, satisfy needs and overcome change, whereas management is defined as involving organizing activities, structures and systems, deciding procedures and policies, allocating staff and resources, controlling budgets, making plans, and monitoring ongoing activities (Buchanan and Huszyski, 2004: 718, based on Kotter, 1990).

Hence, leadership has been distinguished as being visionary, future-oriented and people-focused, whereas management has been diminished into the day-to-day activities of follow-up, routines and task control (Kotter, 1990; Buchanan and Huszyski, 2004). This dichotomized debate seems to have furthered a value ascription that makes leadership somewhat more desirable and sophisticated than the drudgery of day-to-day management routines and practices. This point is pushed to the edge in Bennis and Nanus’ characterization of managers as “*doing the right things*” and leaders “*doing things right*” (1985:21). Furthermore, Bennis (1989) suggests management involves power by position, whereas leadership involves power by influence. However categorical and argumentative, the debate

still provides polarized positions that are appealingly comprehensible for the individual leader who is trying to make sense of the occupation. In the early debate, managers and leaders were constructed as if they were two different and incompatible kinds of people. In spite of this, the debate conceptually specified different activities and tasks, and thereby offered a detailed vocabulary with which to talk about what leaders and managers do.

More recent research emphasizes the interrelatedness of management and leadership, and argues that they are both integral parts of the same occupation, though different jobs might accentuate different combinations and dosages of management and leadership activities (House, 1997:445). In contemporary theories, leadership and management are understood as two sides of the same coin, involving tasks in various combinations determined by situation, job design and organizational circumstances and traditions. This is in line with Yukl's suggestion that leadership and management involve separate processes but not necessarily separate people (Yukl, 1989). This being said, not all people practice all aspects of leadership and management equally; people have preferences or might have more experience or skills in particular areas. Hence, in this dissertation, the management and leadership debate is a discursive influence that provides narrative resources and vocabulary for the individual in constructing identity, and it is acknowledged that management and leadership involve different activities but are equally important to organizational life (Mintzberg, 1973).

#### **4.1.1 Managers and Leaders**

Watson has specified that the term management can refer to management as function, activities, or a team of people. *Management understood as function* is used in the sense of the overall shaping of relationships, understandings and processes within a work organization, ultimately to pursue the strategic direction, fulfill goals and secure the future continuation of the organization. *Management understood as activities or action* is used when a set of activities are carried out to provide direction and to align activities taking place within an organization. *Management understood as a team of people* is used when referring to the specific group of people responsible for directing the organization. Finally, *managers* can be defined as the people given the formal position and responsibility of practicing management within an organizational context. The manager is in this sense assigned a formal role, which implies carrying out specific management activities and joining the management team (Watson, 2001a:35).

Based on Watson's specification and the reconciliation of the construction of leader activities in the management and leadership debate, I do not distinguish in the context of my dissertation between the concept of leadership and management. Thus, when I refer to the function, I use these two concepts to mean the same; however, it is specified in the text, if different activities are positioned as defining or distinguishing qualities of leader or manager activities as separate entities. In this dissertation, I investigate five individuals who are all positioned at the top level in their organizations' hierarchies. According to the leadership and management debate, this hierarchical organizational position indicates that the leaders are predominately engaged in what is described as leadership activities. For the sake of clarity, I subsequently apply the terminology *leader* and *leadership*<sup>26</sup> throughout the dissertation.

#### **4.1.2 Leader Development and Leadership Development**

Furthermore, a specification has to be made between leader development and leadership development. Leader development is focused on developing individuals in leader roles (Day, 2001), whereas leadership development is potentially a process that involves everybody in the organization and, according to Day (2001), is basically concerned with the development of collective organizational processes. Bolden (2007) refers to Day's distinction of leader development:

*“Leader development is an investment in human capital to enhance intrapersonal competence for selected individuals, whereas leadership development is an investment in social capital to develop interpersonal networks and cooperation within organizations and other social systems” (Day, 2001 in Bolden, 2007:5).*

By linking organization and leadership, Day (2001) emphasizes that leadership is contextually embedded in an organization, thereby, locating leadership development *within* the organization in a collective process of leadership development. He positions leader development, on the other hand, with focus on the individual, linked to intrapersonal development, and not directly connected to the organizational context. This might be meant to facilitate a conceptual clarification, but in practice it is hard to imagine that individual leaders engage in leader development without taking their current organizational context into

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<sup>26</sup> When referring to theory or studies by other researchers, I maintain the author's terminology. If the point is to advocate in relation to the leader-manager debate, I make this explicit in the text.

consideration. Furthermore, development programs are most often designed to integrate and align individual development efforts with the organization's strategy and goals. Day's separation of intrapersonal versus interpersonal development reflects modern functionalistic identity notions, in contrast to the social constructivist identity notion applied in this dissertation.

## **4.2 Three Discourses in Leadership Theory**

Different understandings of what leadership entails construct fundamentally different understandings of what leader development programs aim to achieve, and this substantiates and legitimizes program focus, content, and form. This section reviews and discusses how leaders and leadership have been constructed in leadership research in order to illustrate how influential theories in the field have tried to make sense of these concepts. Hence, leadership theories co-construct leader development programs and provide the narrative resources with which leaders construct identity.

Reviewing leadership literature, Yukl (1989) concludes that studies and research on leadership are flawed by a lack of definitions and unclear concepts. Since then, social constructivist research has increasingly advocated the conception that leaders and leadership should be understood as social constructions, although social constructivism in its most radical forms defies any attempt to define and pin down the characteristics of leadership in categorical terms (Alvesson, 1996). Reviews of theoretical contributions are often structured according to historical chronology, which creates a view of a highly scattered field (House, 1997; Rost, 1991; Yukl, 1989). The theoretical heritage of previous periods does not completely vanish with time, as theories continue to influence the way we conceptualize leaders in theory and in practice. Hence, in the following, I review selected theories regarding leaders within the framework of three discourses: the trait-oriented discourse, the behavior-oriented discourse, and the process-oriented discourse, in order to illustrate how the construction and conceptualization of leaders is also closely connected to underlying assumptions about human beings, society and organizations.

### **4.2.1 The Trait-Oriented Discourse**

In the early twentieth century, leadership research focused on finding personal traits that distinguished leaders from non-leaders. Inspired by *Great Man* theories (this reads as exclusively applying to men), personality traits were investigated

empirically, and it was believed that universal traits could be identified and that the defining characteristics of the successful leader could be isolated (Stogdill, 1974). Trait theories of leadership rest on a paradigm in which innate qualities are given priority, and where individual personality characteristics determine *good* leadership. Within this individualistic perspective, leaders are believed to be born not made. Taken literally, this devaluates leader development programs and renders development efforts superfluous, since the trait-oriented discourse implies that individuals become leaders by virtue of their personality and the unfolding of inner traits, without taking contextual factors into account.

Early trait theory was flawed by lack of theory and trait measurement instruments, and appears to have been rather theoretical (Bass, 1990, Yukl, 1989). The trait-oriented discourse can be considered to have a rather static and deterministic view of people; nevertheless, its nature-nurture dialectic is often discussed in theoretical and commonsense debates regarding leaders. Theoretically, the trait approach had a significant renaissance in 1980s with the theory of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio, 1994) developed by Burns (1978), which stresses the leader's ability to motivate and empower employees, since ordinary people can achieve extraordinary results. Thus, transformational leadership constructs the leader as an agent of change who relies on communication and interpersonal skills. However, transformational leadership is often compared with transactional leadership, where the motivating factor is the more traditional notion of self-interest, conceptualized as pay and job security in exchange for a reliable work force. The concepts of management and leadership in transactional and transformational leadership have much in common, and they have been seen as related by several researchers (Rost, 1991; Bennis, 1989; Yukl, 1989).

In the late 1980s, in a societal context of organizational restructuring and competition, the need for leaders who could bring about transformational change was conspicuous, and theories of charismatic leadership emerged. The charismatic leader construct can be seen to combine early trait and "great man" theories with notions of the transformational leader. The charismatic leader is defined as a person who builds a positive vision for the future and restores declining morale. The leader is constructed as a savior and was later more critically referred to as *the heroic leader* (Northouse, 2004). Later, public scandals involving prominent executives diminished faith in the notion of charismatic leaders, which was criticized for being overly individualistic and unrealistic, and quieter and less individual leader constructions were promoted (Mintzberg, 1999). More recent trait-oriented



discourses are the emotional intelligence theory (Goleman, 1995) and the multiple intelligence theory (Gardner, 1983). However, despite the more interactive emphasis in these theories, the concern and focus is still the development of individual emotional intelligence. The theory on emotionally intelligent leadership argues that central to the theory is a profound level of self-awareness. Interpersonal skills are described as knowledge of others and the ability of the leader to navigate in social situations, thus promoting an individual leader construction as a prerequisite for understanding and interacting successfully with others. This theory also slides into the behavior- oriented discourse (Goleman, 1995).

Finally, non-academic leadership literature often subscribes to the trait-oriented discourse, as reflected in the hundreds of books and biographies based on the ideas of great and successful business leaders that seem to have much popular appeal. In a theoretical narrative perspective, this can be understood to represent a classic genre of the hero (i.e. leader) who can solve all problems, answer all questions, settle insecurities and save us basically from kinds of trouble. The trait- oriented discourse thus constructs a hero leader who is very persistently present over time but is also constructed as larger than life.

#### **4.2.2 The Behavior-Oriented Discourse**

From the 1960s as researchers began to look more closely into what leaders do, alternative approaches to leaders took form. This started what has been called the behavioral paradigm, which accumulated studies of leader behavior and styles (Yukl, 1989). Early approaches identified leader styles, such as the autocratic style or participative style in McGregor's (1960) X and Y theory. The Managerial Grid was another early behavioral approach that distinguishes between manager task/production and employee/people orientation (Blake and Mouton, 1994). However, these early behavior-oriented theories provide little guidance regarding what constitutes effective leader behavior in different situations and leaves open the question of when a particular leader style is appropriate and how people, task, and organizational factors interact. Fiedler (1964; 1972) suggests that management style and organizational structure are influenced by various aspects of the working environment, which he calls contingency factors. Fiedler's contingency model distinguishes between task-oriented and relationship-oriented managers and includes different task structures and power positions as crucial factors that determine management style. Notably, however, contingency studies do *not* assume that the leader is able to adapt his style; rather, leaders should be matched with the situation, or the situation should be molded to fit the leader (Fiedler, 1964).

However, theories in this tradition focus on both behavioral and contingency aspects of leadership (see also Bass, 1990; Yukl, 1989; House, 1991).

The widely used *situational leadership model* is based on similar ideas of style, but in contrast to contingency theory, this theory implies that the leader must adapt leader style to the specifics of the situation (Blanchard and Zigarmi 1994). Situational leadership theory suggests that leaders have to lead according to the situation. Since no specific leader style matches every situation, it proposes four different leader styles: directing, coaching, supporting and delegating. The argument is that the leader should assess the developmental level of employees to determine the most appropriate leader behavior in the situation. The flexible repertoire of leader behaviors presented indicate that leaders are discursively constructed in different behaviors, styles, roles, competencies or activities, which also imply that leaders are made and that leadership is something you can learn.

In behavioral and contingency theories, leaders are constructed as being involved in processes of influence, and interpersonal relations become central. The focus thus shifts from the leader as a person to the leader's interpersonal behavior and competence and social relations skills. Consequently, in the behavior-oriented discursive frame, it is no longer enough to unfold inner traits; the leader has to learn how to be a leader, has to acquire knowledge of the leader role and his preferred leader style, and has to learn to apply specific leader behavior to particular situations.

### **4.2.3 The Process-Oriented Discourse**

Theories under the umbrella of the process-oriented discourse share a positioning of leaders and leadership as a socially embedded process of becoming. Studies focus on the situational and contextual aspects in which leaders emerge, and leaders are basically approached as constructed in social situations. The process-oriented discourse is found in contemporary critical management studies that emphasize critical reflection, power relations, political sensitivity and language. Accordingly, a radical perspective within this discourse rejects a priori definitions of leaders and leadership. The focus of the studies is the investigation of exactly how leaders are constructed. Alvesson (1996), who represents the process-oriented discourse, proclaims that leader definitions do not create clarity:

*“Language is too ambiguous and meaning too context dependent for abstract definitions to work very effectively” (Alvesson, 1996:458).*

He therefore rejects a priori definitions and categorizations and instead insists that leaders be conceptualized as embedded in empirical practice and social contexts. Alvesson suggests approaching leaders with a reflexive-interpretive method that emphasizes social constructive processes, local situations, and linguistic aspects of leadership (Alvesson 1996). Management studies following a social constructionist perspective have focused on leadership as connected to “identity work” (Alvesson and Svenningson, 2003). Identity work and discursive leadership practices are approached by examining language, discourses and narratives, and people are understood as conglomerates of multiple identities. Each identity construct is perceived to be constructed in continuous conversations involving different and multiple identities. Watson (2001b) describes management as a practice filled with moral dilemmas and characterized by ongoing learning; it involves a practice where the leader never can get everything “right”. Watson's concept of “negotiated narrative” entails a processual understanding of the managerial role, which indicates that leaders interactively construct identity when debating, comparing and negotiating narratives of leadership in a critical, reflexive manner among peers. This dissertation investigates from a moderate social constructivist position and as such is positioned within the process-oriented discourse. Chapter 5 unfolds in more depth how the leaders' ideas and the leader occupation have been conceptualized and constructed in critical management theory within a process-oriented discourse.

### **4.3 Summary**

In the three discursive frameworks, leaders are constructed as an extraordinary individual in terms of outstanding traits, personality or personal charisma; in terms of behavior, leader roles, styles, and competencies as assessing and matching their behavior according to the characteristics of the situation; and as ever emerging in a process of becoming, through social interaction and in interaction with particular contexts.

In a leader development program, discourses provide narrative resources from which leaders can construct leader identity. The discourses implemented in the program co-construct leader identity in interaction with the other actors in the program context. A leader development program in which leaders would be discursively constructed with emphasis on inherent traits can be considered a waste

of time, since the trait-oriented discourse perceives innate traits as relatively stable and unchangeable personality characteristics.

The behavior-oriented discourse indicates that leaders can modify behavior, e.g. learn to differentiate leader behavior and choose the most effective behavior in the situation. This discourse constructs leader development as assessment, which legitimizes the use of diagnostic tools (i.e. leader test and an analysis such as the 360 degree analysis of leader behavior). Such tools can be important to identify skills and areas of improvement. This discourse constructs becoming a leader with the connotation of solving a problem or fixing something that is not functioning well. In leader development programs, this understanding accesses knowledge about better leadership practices; thus, following leader development programs should facilitate self-awareness, identify interpersonal skills, and provide training to strengthen leaders' identified areas of liability. The process-oriented discourse constructs leader as continuously emerging and emphasizes that leadership is a constant and never-ending process involving identity tensions and struggles. This discourse thus transcends the notion of learning and constructs leader work practice as a way of being in the world; as a way to live one's life. Multiple conflicting identity constructs are constantly emerging and situating the individual in highly complex and paradoxical organizational and societal contexts where the leader is constructed in fragmented, issue-specific terms, and where becoming a leader involves constant identity work through interacting with different people and practices.

On the basis of the selected review, the following display provides a schematic view of how leaders are conceptually constructed in the three discourse frameworks. This is not intended to be a complete or exhaustive review. The intent is, in the context of this dissertation, to illustrate key differences of construction in the three prevalent discourses of leaders in leadership theory in order to provide a backdrop for the following analysis of narrative construction of leader identity, and to better understand the discursive and narrative recourses available to leaders in the process of constructing themselves.

**Display 4-1 Three Discourses in Leadership Theory**

	<b>Trait-oriented Discourse</b>	<b>Behavior-oriented Discourse</b>	<b>Process-oriented Discourse</b>
<b>The Leader Construct</b>	The hero leader  Normative: The right personality	The leader role  Differentiated: Matching behavior and situation	The emergent leader  Fragmented: Conflicting and multiple identity constructs
<b>Narrative Resources</b>	Trait Personality Charismatic leadership	Leader style Multiple roles Situating leadership	Identity work Multiple identities Issue-specific leadership
<b>Leader Construction</b>	Born Unfold who you are Express personal talent and inner qualities Find leader within	Learn Feedback on behavior Identify competency gaps Develop self-reflection Learn competencies	Live Engage in identity work Practice self-reflection Reconcile opposites Balance paradoxes
<b>Identity Labels</b>	The independent leader	The socially dependent leader	The oxymoronic leader <sup>27</sup> independent and socially dependent

These three discourses are part of the shared knowledge pool that is available for leaders in constructing leader identity. As I have described, the ETP leader development program provides a context within which a mélange of especially the trait- and behavior-oriented discourses is available for the leader. This further emphasizes that the ETP program draws prevalently on the trait- and behavior-oriented discourses, whereas this research study is positioned in the realm of the process-oriented discourse. In the next chapter, I describe the narrative analytical framework and strategy, including a more in-depth discussion of theoretical concepts used to analytically approach the leader occupation, in preparation for the subsequent narrative analyses.

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<sup>27</sup> The word oxymoron means: "*the conjoining of contradictory terms*" (Synonym.com /03-11-09). It thereby underscores the balancing of opposites and contradictions accentuated in the process-oriented discourse, and it adds to the argument that the leader occupation entails paradoxes, which is unfolded further in this dissertation.



## 5 The Narrative Analytical Framework

This chapter describes the analytical framework used to investigate how leaders use narratives to construct identity in interaction with a leader development program. First, I unfold narratives as an epistemological approach that serves as backdrop for the analytical strategy and analytical guidelines. Second, I revisit the theoretical framework for approaching the leader occupation in order to identify characteristics of the leader occupation and key concepts to be used in the analysis, before entering into the concrete construction of the analytical strategy. The narrative analytical strategies consist of three analytical steps and three supportive models. The analytical steps are: a thematic analysis of narrative resources, a temporal analysis of the narrative construction process, and a relational analysis of how subject positions are negotiated.

Applying a narrative-oriented epistemology indicates that the research interest is to understand, explore and analyze the meaning systems and the contexts within which people understand themselves and others. Hence, the aim is to better understand the creation of meaning that takes place in everyday life, in the day-to-day situations of lived experience (Søndergård, 1996). Narratives are useful in understanding and shaping the self, others and the world we inhabit; however, no narrative completely communicates human experience, nor can all of what we are be transmitted in a single story. Although the social constructivist assumption underpinning this research does not reject the existence of a material reality, independent of human consciousness, it nevertheless asserts that reality is accessible only through social processes of meaning creation (Crotty, 1998). The implications are that regardless of how central narratives are to the construction of identity, narratives are not all there is. And no matter how dominant one story may be in the individual identity construction, it is not the only possible or accessible story. Bruner frames this point of departure eloquently:

*“...experience is richer than discourse. Narrative structures organize and give meaning to experience, but there are always feelings and lived experience not fully encompassed by the dominant story” (Bruner, 1986b:143).*

Narratives can be understood both as a means and resource for constructing identity, but also as a significant genre for analyzing identity with emphasis on multiplicity and meaning (Riessman in Gubrium and Holstein, 2002: 705-706). In this research project, I develop and apply a narrative analytical strategy, because it

enables the study of leaders' experiences and construction of meaning, thereby supporting my goal of illuminating the dynamics of the "*...active, self-shaping quality of human thought, the power of stories to create and refashion personal identity*" (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997: xiv).

Narrative analysis has to do with "*how protagonists interpret things*", says Bruner (1990; 51), and I would add that it has to do with how we can go about systematically interpreting the protagonists' interpretations. However, there is no "one ready-to-go" narrative method or narrative analysis, and the design of the analytical strategy is to a large extent produced by the individual researcher (Czarniawska, 2004; Riessman, 1993). Søndergård (1996: 63) even claims that the building of the analytical instruments is the most important contribution of narrative research.

The investigative focus of this dissertation is ontological narratives. Ontological narratives are stories people tell in an effort to make sense of how they experience themselves and how they would like to be understood; hence, ontological narratives can be understood as an attempt to bring structure to personal lives (Somers, 1994; Søreide, 2006). When the narrator (in this case, the leader) tells and interprets ontological narratives, the leader is simultaneously constructing one or several narrative identities. Ontological narratives are located in historical time, and they are situated in social relations in concrete situations and experiences (Bruner; 1986a; 1990, Polkinghorne, 1988). Besides communicating the idiosyncratic story of the individual, ontological narratives are a resource for examining present cultural and societal conditions, which makes ontological narratives a resource for communicating about social conventions. Thus, in this perspective, the analysis reflects broader societal contexts and discourses, and the narrator is actively constructing and being constructed by prevalent contemporary discourses about identity, leaders, organizations and society (Riessman, 2002).

This dissertation attempts to build a multifaceted, narrative analytical strategy for studying the leaders' narrative construction of identity. In my analysis, I attempt to preserve and unfold the complexity of the construction process and allow diversity and conflicting identity constructs to emerge. I seek to unfold the narrator's own process of creating meaning, sequencing and structuring, and at the same time avoid too excessive categorization and simplification of the empirical material. Identity is perceived as a relational construct, and the analysis emphasizes the way social interaction plays a part in negotiating subject positions in narratives, in the interview, and the ETP context. The analysis investigates how identities are



constructed by use of narrative resources, and how identities are negotiated in social contexts (Lieblich et al., 1998). The overarching idea is to build a process-sensitive analytical frame for investigating the leaders' narrative constructions of identity based on the following guiding principles:

- Examine the use of narrative resources to create meaning regarding leader identity
- Unfold narrative construction that is sensitive to process and multiple identities
- Explore negotiation of subject positions

The epistemological point of departure guides the investigative interest and significantly influences my choice of analytical methods as well as the final research product.

An outline follows regarding how the leader occupation can be approached and understood relative to the building of the analytical strategy. Finally the concrete analytical strategy and three analytical steps are described and unfolded in the last section of this chapter.

## **5.1 Theoretical Frame for Approaching the Leader Occupation**

This section is a brief theoretical excursion into selected key elements of how the leader occupation can be understood in relation to narrative construction of identity. The aim is to clarify relevant theoretical concepts and the language used to approach the construction of leader identity. This research project investigates five men who have been practicing as leaders in various leader occupations for from fifteen to twenty-five years. In constructing the analytical strategy, I have been inspired by critical management theories and discourse analysis (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004a). More specifically, I apply the concepts of *identity work* and *identity struggles* by Svenningson and Alvesson (2003), conceptualizing narratives of tensions and struggles as indicators of identity work, e.g. identity construction processes. Furthermore, I build on critical management studies by Tony Watson, arguing that the leader occupation entails certain paradoxes that leaders must manage (Watson, 2001a; 2001b; 2001c, Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini, 1998).

### 5.1.1 The Leader Occupation and Tension

The idea that identity construction is incontrovertibly connected to experiences of tension and struggle is to be found in much narrative-oriented research and literature. In such studies, the notion of tension has been understood as a dialectic relationship between the established and the possible (Bruner, 2002). Tension is understood as a narrative characteristic in the breach with the expected (Bruner, 1986a), or stylistically as a narrative poetic device (Gee, 1991), or as an imbalance that drives the story forward (Burke, 1969). In autobiographical research of life stories, the notion of tension is also prevalent (See Mishler, 1999, McAdams, 1993, McAdams et al. 2001, Josselson et al, 1995).

We also know from research that experiences evoking strong emotions and tensions<sup>28</sup> are better remembered over time (Bruner, 2002). Stories are told in retrospect, and this implies that identity is constructed in the stories we remember and in the stories we repeatedly tell others and ourselves. People tell stories about significant events and emotionally important experiences, and certain central stories are often reconstructed in narratives years after the actual event or experience took place (White, 1995; White & Epston, 1989; 1990). In this sense, tension signifies importance and can direct our attention to the hot spots of individual constructions of meaning. Thus, when we as researchers focus on tensions, it provides a way in to how people construct experiences into narratives about who they are now, why they do what they do, and what they aspire to become in the future.

According to Watson (2001a), the leader occupation is in itself a source of tension. Watson argues that because managers<sup>29</sup> are employed in bureaucratic work organizations operating under the conditions of advanced industrial capitalism and the mechanisms of markets and profit, certain pressures and goals are accentuated, affecting the people and leaders within them (2001a: xiii). In the context of this dissertation, this politically oriented assumption of the societal and organizational context is central to understanding the experienced tensions of leaders, and in Watson's critical writing it is the core in understanding what we call "management". In relation to this, Watson emphasizes that managers must deal with:

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<sup>28</sup> Tension is used in the psychological sense of the word, referring to a state of mental suspense or emotional strain (Oxford Dictionary, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> In Watson's research (2001a; 2001b), he uses the terminology "managers". In the following, when quoting and referring to Watson, I apply his terms. The focus of this dissertation is not to enter into the debate about the distinguishing qualities of managers versus leaders, as clarified in chapter 3. Therefore, I use the terms manager / leader as synonymous in the above passage and throughout.

*“...the general human process of coping with and managing life as well as the pressures of the occupational role of “manager” – a role which requires managers to contribute to the shaping of the organization which employs them and which, in effect, uses them to serve the controlling interest behind the enterprise” (Watson, 2001a: xvi.)*

Watson describes two types of tensions in his book, *In Search of Management*, a general human existential angst and a more specific managerial occupational angst. Thus, managers have the same normal problems and angst as other people, and in addition the manager is expected to “*manage the activities and meanings of others*” (Watson, 2001b:393). Watson proposes that people's engagement with stories in popular culture and fiction helps them handle deeper essential anxieties (Watson, 2001a:22). And the research of Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini (1998) distinguishes some differences between the managerial creation of meaning and basic human creation of meaning, but at the same time finds them inseparable. The notion of a dual managerial position – managing others and managing oneself – fuels a particular type of occupational tension and introduces the leader's sense of isolation (Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini, 1998:289).

In order to understand these occupational tensions, Watson (2001a) emphasizes the need to investigate the story behind the stories. In this narrative analysis, tensions are understood to be activating identity work to encompass how to become a leader and how to construct stories that form, explain and keep the identity narrative together as a meaningful whole. Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini's (1998) research has a critical management orientation, pointing out how the capitalist system embeds major contradictions. These contradictions create a situation where the manager becomes a mediator, and where the task of the manager becomes to manage the tensions of others as well as the tensions within him/her. Karen Legge (1995) specifies this point of contradiction in Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini (1998) as follows:

*“Personnel managers are simultaneously under pressure to treat employees as 'means' to the 'end' of employing interest (a push towards efficiency) and as 'ends in themselves' (a push towards justice or fairness)” (Legge, 1995; 28).*

Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini suggest that identity struggles taking place in the micro-arena are connected to the macro-arena, (i.e. the local, situated practice between actors in the micro- arena reflects and enacts conditions of the macro-

arena). This social context provides narrative resources – e.g. cultural stories and conventional discourses that give people guidance, comfort and inspiration for handling challenges. This point of the double nature of culture – a creator of tension and a provider of devices for dealing with tensions – is also found in Bruner’s (1990) writing. A central premise in Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini is that culture contains a spectrum of stories ranging from stories of existential issues facing human beings to stories related to managing work and tasks (1998:287). Riessman (1993) argues that we come close to subjective experience – what life means for an individual at the moment of the telling – when we analyze the experienced tension in the structure of the narratives. And in contrast to the prevailing negative connotation of tension, Riessman stresses that tension is not necessarily a negatively perceived emotional state but can be understood as the tension between reality and an imagined future dream.

*“Juxtaposition of the real and the wished for, the story and the dream”*  
(Riessman, 1993:52).

This perception of tension can be found in narrative therapy, where tension is understood to emerge in the imaginative space between a problem story and preferred story. These are central ideas integrated into the analytical framework. In addition, tensions can be unfolded through the choice of stories, in thematic content and in the use of narrative resources in telling the story. Tension can be identified by emotional cues made by the narrator when telling the story; for instance, longer pauses, body language, emotional intensity, and voice pitch can signify the importance of the story and the degree of tension involved. Unavoidably, the analysis includes my observations and perceptions of the nonverbal behavior; however, the analytical strategy focuses primarily on the narratives told and how the leader, in his narratives, makes sense of being a leader. In summary, tensions direct me as a researcher towards the melting pot of meaning creation that is the result when leaders construct identity. Later in this chapter, I unfold this by building the thematic analytical framework of problem stories and preferred stories.

### **5.1.2 The Leader Occupation and Struggle**

Critical management research on identity construction has been conducted in the relatively new field of identity work studies by Alvesson (2003), Svenningson and Alvesson (2003) and Watson (2007). I have already defined identity work and struggle with outset in Svenningson and Alvesson (2003) in chapter 3, *The*

*Narrative Construction of Identity.* To further elaborate and approach the leader occupation, I present here significant aspects of identity struggles that are related to context and multiple identities. In Watson's (2007) definition of identity work, he stresses the mutually constituting process of the individual and the social context, as well as the importance of various contexts for identity work.

The leader development program, "*The Executive Training Program*", is the point of departure for the production of the empirical material of the analysis. This context has the intention to facilitate leader development activities. I assume that leaders who have chosen to participate are interested in developing or at least are in a situation where change or some kind of development are needed or considered relevant. The following analyses unfold how different organizational contexts and circumstances play an important role in the leader's construction of identity development, its "needs and problems", as well as influence their narrative construction process.

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) operate with multiple identities and distinguish between work identity and narrative self-identity. Drawing on McAdams' (1993) concept, *narrative self-identity* is defined as relatively stable and less influenced e.g. by organizational interactions, whereas *work identity* emerges in a work context and is highly changeable. Work identity is understood as the construction of several leader identities, and the different identity constructs can be perceived to contradict and conflict. The work identity construct can also conflict with the person's narrative self-identity construct (McAdams, 1993). Multiple identities influence and mutually define each other; non-managerial identities can impact aspects of the managerial identity and vice versa (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003:1166). This dissertation does not operate a priori with a distinct separation between a work identity and other identity constructs, first because it is difficult to dissect identities into such very general categories, since identity constructs tend to intermingle and merge in different situations. Secondly, the purpose of this dissertation is explorative; thus, it is contra-productive to operate with very rigid pre-established narrative categories. My point of departure, however, is anchored in the concept of leader identity, but I attempt to refrain from delimiting narrative identity construction towards this end. Therefore, in the interviews, I introduce a broad framework for investigating "how to become a leader" and do not delimit questions to work or the leader occupation. Nevertheless, within this framework, the leaders have decided where to start their story and what stories to tell, and this has resulted in a multifaceted specter of identity stories. Some focus narrowly on

the leader occupation but most draw on many identities and are in accordance with the analytical guidelines for investigating identity constructs by including multiple and potentially conflicting constructs.

Multiple identities are seen as a source of tension by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), and they suggest that a constant struggle among different identities creates a temporary view of self in which certain identity constructs tend to dominate others, depending on the context. The individual's attempt to reconcile contrasting identity constructs is metaphorically conceptualized as "identity struggle" by the authors. Organizational contexts are another initiator of identity struggles, because organizations interact with, influence and make demands of leaders. This gives rise to identity work. Identity work is salient if the organizational demands and the individual identity construct differ. Identity work is a reciprocal process in which leaders also actively influence the organization in order to negotiate different subject positions. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) define the relationship between identity and role, and suggest that even though a role is taken seriously identity work must not be reduced to nothing but roles. They construct the individual in interaction as a location for contradictory discourses, implying that a variety of leader identities is possible and that tensions and contradictions are likely to exist among them. Hence, identity construction is seen as identity struggle, and the individual is assumed to strive for meaning and seek some correspondence and integration between identity constructs and the organizational position, and between the identity constructs and the situation (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1188). With the changing nature of organizations, identity work becomes a constant struggle. The result is only temporary, and the identity constructs are context-dependant.

*"...A variety of managerial identities are possible, between which there are tensions and contradictions; hence, the constant struggle bringing about temporary views of the self, where certain identity versions dominate over others, depending on the context" (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1183).*

Identity work can emerge as anti-identities, which are identity constructs based on a negative definition – identity constructs defined on the basis of "what is not me" in the face of certain role expectations, work situations or organizational demands, rather than identity construction based on a preferred identity. Despite the negative definition, anti-identity constructs do indeed provide temporary stability for identity work, and anti-identity metaphors are as important a part of identity work as preferred identity narratives (Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2003:1189).

### 5.1.3 The Leader Occupation and Paradox

This dissertation is inspired by the central premise that becoming a manager is a process, as indicated by the conceptualization of *The Emergent Manager*, which emphasizes the relational and discursive aspects of becoming a manager (Watson, 2001b; Watson2001c). Furthermore, the dissertation builds on the premise that managerial work is an unavoidable social, political and economic practice, and as a consequence of the macro-socio-political context of organizations, the leader occupation is characterized by inherent paradox (Watson, 2001b:395). Hence, the leader occupation entails identity work tensions and identity struggles in everyday leader practice (Watson: 2001a; 2001b).

This approach to the leader occupation accentuates the question of what kind of tensions the leaders are struggling with, and how paradoxes inherent in the leader occupation interact with the narrative construction of leader identity. In an extensive overview of organizational research investigating paradox, Marianne W. Lewis (2000) finds that regardless of whether researchers' were trying to understand other findings and stumbled on paradox accidentally, or paradox was their prime subject of study, then "...*identifying paradox means recognizing and interpreting tensions, and representation signifies methods of conceptualizing, mapping and theorizing paradox*" (Lewis, 2000: 771). Ralph D. Stacey (1999.13) defines paradox as: "...*the presence together at the same time of self-contradictory, essentially conflicting forces, none of which can be removed*", a definition he bases on Quinn and Cameron's (1988) definition of paradox:

*"...states in which two diametrically opposing forces are simultaneously present, neither of which can be removed. The choice is not therefore between one or the other; both must be accommodated at the same time and this can be done only by continually rearranging them"* (Quinn and Cameron, 1988 in Stacey, 1999; 12).

Hence, leaders are constantly in a process of "rearranging", perceived here to signify constant engagement in identity work. Stacey also proposes that the way we perceive paradox reflects how we perceive organizational dynamics. One view is to perceive paradoxes as something that must be solved and tension as something that has to be released. In Stacy's view, this indicates an understanding of organizational dynamics that values stability, regularity and predictability. Alternatively, paradoxes can be viewed as something that can never be resolved but

only endlessly rearranged and managed. This view indicates that organizational dynamics are understood to continuously generate tension and behavioral patterns characterized by irregularity, instability and unpredictability (Stacy, 1999:13). This last perspective implies that the leader is continuously “at work” and has to manage tensions connected to the inherent paradoxes of the leader occupation. This view is aligned with the argument of this dissertation that each leader has to work continuously to balance the tensions in the social environment and within himself. Leaders have to work with their temporal identity constructs in the current organizational context and work practice – a process in which the leader is always in the making, Watson calls this the “*unavoidable realities of managerial work as a social, political and economic practice*” (2001b:395).

This last view is the basis for my approach to the leader occupation and for understanding the construction of leader identity. Interestingly, however, in the ETP program, I observed empirically that many leaders approach leader development with the first view; the participating leaders approached leader development as something to be fixed or a problem to be solved. The leaders expressed that it would be nice to get rid of the tension and solve the leader challenges once and for all, so they could carry on and do their job uninterrupted and undisturbed by inconvenient identity struggles. Needless to say, these leaders became both disappointed and disillusioned when they discovered that the ETP program offered no quick fixes, or short-cut tools for “becoming a leader”. In the following empirical analyses, I return to this observation and unfold it further. A paradox must be distinguished from a dilemma.<sup>30</sup> a dilemma can be defined as “*a situation where a choice must be made between two equally undesirable possibilities*”. This implies that dilemmas can be solved by making choices. Selecting one option over another frames an either/or choice situation. In contrast, paradox is defined as the continuous managing of two contradictory options, without giving in to either one; thus, the propellant in a paradox is the balancing of *both/and* at the same time (Stacy, 1999:13). Paradoxes of the leader occupation are accumulated by the organizational division of labor to make work more efficient, and the need for control and task integration. In bridging this paradox, the leader becomes a central mediator (Stacy, 1999). The notion of the leader occupation accentuating paradox is used to thematically analyze the five leaders’ narrative construction of identity. Paradox is also central in the final analysis in chapter 11, where I analyze across the empirical material to analytically illustrate how five

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<sup>30</sup> In Oxford English Dictionary (March, 2008) defined as a choice between two (or several) alternatives, which are or appear equally unfavorable; a position of doubt or perplexity.



empirically identified paradoxes interact with the five leaders' construction of identity.

In the previous sections, the leader occupation is approached as entailing tensions, identity work and struggles and as a position that accentuates paradox, because the leader occupation is situated in organizations anchored in a western capitalist societal context. Having this contextual understanding in mind, I describe in the next section the concrete analytical approach.

## **5.2 A Three-Step Narrative Analytical Strategy**

This section describes the analytical strategy and the concrete steps undertaken. I argue for the relevance of key theoretical concepts and substantiate their relevance in relation to the investigative focus. In general, the building of the concrete analytical framework is inspired by three sources: the substantial work with narratives, identity and culture by cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986a; 1990; 2001; 2002); the theories and conceptualizations of narrative therapy by psychotherapist Michael White (1989; 1995; 2007), who is a key contributor in developing narrative therapy and practice; and finally, from positioning theory (Davis and Harré, 1990; 1991; Harré and Moghaddam, 2003) I draw the intention to apply the concept of “positioning” to emphasize the social and relational aspects of the identity construction process, and to make interpretative explorations into how people negotiate subject positions of power and agency when constructing identities in narratives in social contexts.

### **5.2.1 Thematic Analysis: Re-authoring Conversations in Problem- and Preferred Stories**

Narrative therapy has been influential for the analytical framework of this dissertation, because it offers dynamic conceptualizations for understanding the narrative construction processes. Narrative therapy has not hitherto been integrated much in narrative academic research. In narrative therapy, the therapeutic aim is processes of reconstruction, but most importantly, narrative therapeutic theory contributes with strong process sensitivity with which to understand narrative processes as inter-subjective practice. Philosophically grounded in post-structuralism, and greatly inspired by Michel Foucault's thinking about power and knowledge (Monk et al., 1997), the key issue within narrative therapy is to question taken-for-granted assumptions and challenge previous knowledge in a non-judgmental context. Narrative therapy examines how personal stories are authored

and can be re-authored, and it focuses on the shaping moments of people's lives, the turning points and significant relationships as they are remembered in conversation. In the therapeutic process, aspects of identity can be organized in working categories of identities, beliefs, values, and principles, including commitments, intentions, and hopes (White & Epston, 1990). Specific narrative terminology has been developed to describe the process and sequence of the therapeutic processes and the processes of meaning creation within them (Monk et al, 1997; Payne, 2000; White, 1995; White and Epston, 1990; Winslade & Monk, 1999).

The story is the basic unit of experience. Stories are believed to guide how people think, act and feel. People make sense of their experiences in stories, and stories organize the experiences of life. This notion is similar to what I have previously described as ontological narratives. However, only experiences that are part of a larger story will have significant impact on people's lives. This is why narrative therapy aims to develop the plot, which connects a person's life together into stories that are meaningful for the individual. The concept "dominant story" signifies that individual identity can be dominated by particular stories about who we are. A dominant story is often a problem-saturated narrative. For some people, it seems as if their identity is overshadowed by one or a few very dominant storylines. The dominant story will be reflected in the choice of content (i.e. narrative themes) but also in the rhetorical form and in the story structure, e.g. the form of telling (Riessman, 1993). It is a basic assumption of narrative therapy that the dominant stories in which individuals narrate their experience do not sufficiently represent their lived experience. Therefore, narrative therapy involves finding and amplifying "unseen storylines", also called alternative stories, which unfold significant and vital aspects of the individual's identity construct that contradict dominant stories (White and Epston, 1990). Most often, dominant stories are taken for granted by the individual, who rarely questions or even thinks that he could be something other than the person the dominant story describes. The therapeutic work thus involves questioning the "taken- for-granted assumptions" in the dominant story and helping to unfold hidden (e.g. untold) aspects of the identity construct and make them emerge by giving voice to a new identity story (White, 2007:61).

A re-authoring conversation is defined as a conversation in which individuals are invited to link events of their lives in sequence through time according to a theme or a plot. According to White and Epston (1990), personal experiences are often

strikingly storied by others, and in re-authoring conversations, neglected aspects and events are identified and evolved into alternative storylines,<sup>31</sup> Alternative storylines are stories about neglected but potentially significant events that are “out of phase” with the dominant identity story. In the therapeutic situation, these experiences or events provide a starting point for re-authoring conversations (White, 2007:61). Gaps always exist in dominant stories, and no story will dominate every aspect of an individual’s identity; it is from the search for and exploration of these gaps that stories can be enriched and thickened in order to make way for alternative identity stories, and new identity stories can be re-authored (White, 2006; 2007). In a re-authoring conversation, the therapist uses questions as scaffolds to encourage people to explore and metaphorically to fill the gaps with alternative stories. I have developed my first thematic analysis from the idea of dominant problem stories and alternative – also called preferred – stories in narrative therapy in order to identify how leaders use narrative resources to construct leader identity between the desired (the preferred story) and the problem story (the undesired). This illuminates the process by which leaders create meaning in narratives. The framework enables identifying and analyzing contributions to the dominant problem story, and the extent to which the leader is constructing alternative identity stories – e.g. whether leader narratives have been reflected upon, questioned, supplemented, thickened or re-authored identity stories.

Hence, the first step of the analysis explores how the leader is constructing problem stories and preferred stories. Empirically, leaders connect stories to certain areas of life. Some stories, for example, are narrated as focused on predominately personal, relational or organizational themes. I have chosen analytically to use and sustain the leaders’ thematic categorization of the stories, because it reflects their narrative construction of meaning. This thematic structuring and categorization possibly makes it easier for the leader/narrator to perform and communicate a well-structured and coherent story, and it may provide the narrator with more confidence and direction in the telling. While being aware that these categories are constructs that are intertwined and often hard to distinguish from one another, the thematic categories do provide order and make it possible to distinguish between different identity constructs. They thereby facilitate my analytical tracking of stories and identification of how specific stories are reconstructed over the time period from 2005 to 2007.

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<sup>31</sup> In narrative therapy there is an implicit assumption that dominating stories are oppression the individual, indicating an emancipatory therapeutic intention and indicating that dominating stories are negative problem stories that delimiting and inhibiting the individual.

The analytical model illustrated below is divided into stories analyzed as problem stories and preferred stories and their narrated consequences. In the model, *consequences of* refers to the leaders' own interpretation of the consequences of a particular story, i.e. the leader's story and creation of meaning about consequences of a particular problem story.

**Display 5-1 Problem Stories, Preferred Stories and Consequences**

Stories focusing on	Problem stories	Consequences of problem stories	Preferred stories	Consequences of preferred stories
Personal Themes				
Relational Themes				
Organizational Themes				

In summary, the model is used to identify significant themes of problems and preferences in each leader's narrative construction of identity, and the model helps identify reconstruction in the retrospective narratives. The model further illustrates the multiplicity of stories in each leader's construction of a narrative identity, and gives insight into the themes of tensions involved in identity work.

### **5.2.2 Temporal Analysis: Constructing Storylines in Landscapes of Identity**

Narrative analysis enables the researcher to ask questions about how stories are told and to not simply focus on what is told, the narrative *content* (Riessman, 1993, 2002). Thus far, I have focused the analytical strategy on how leaders construct identity by making use of narrative resources in thematic plots of problem stories and preferred stories. In presenting this first analysis step, I have already indicated and described different ways in which leaders negotiate and position themselves as leaders; the second step in the analysis aims to further investigate the *process* of

narrative construction, i.e. how leaders link various fragmented narratives into coherent stories of identity.

To explicate the process of narrative construction, I draw on Jerome Bruner (1986a, 1990), who introduced the metaphor that identity can be understood as a “*Landscape of Mind*”, which is stretched between two dimensions: a landscape of action and a landscape of identity. The two are related in a dynamic and interdependent relation, and together they make up what he calls the individual landscape of mind. The landscape of action is composed of events and experiences linked in a sequence through time and forming a plot. The landscape of identity is composed by the interpretive conclusions the individual makes in order to make sense of experiences, actions and events. Identity conclusions take the form of stories in which an individual creates meaning about who the leader thinks he is. Identity conclusions are stories about what he has learned in life, what he aspires to be, and what actions should be avoided. Identity conclusions are anchored and formulated in the language of a specific cultural or organizational context, which simultaneously provides the leader with a conception of socially acceptable identity constructs for leaders. In this way, the landscape of identity is composed of or is stretched out between the events/experiences and the identity conclusions made by the individual, but they are also shaped by contemporary identity categories of society and culture (Bruner; 1986a). In order to analyze and illustrate processes of construction, I have developed the analytical model: *A Storyline Map*, inspired by the theoretical ideas of landscapes of action and identity (Bruner, 1986a; 1987; 1990) and making evident the dynamic interrelation between experience and interpretation, between action and narrative. The model is also reworked from Michael White’s (1995, 2007) re-authoring conversations map, which is a therapeutic model used in narrative therapy for mapping experiences.

In the following, I describe and explain the constitutive parts of the Storyline Map model. The model has two horizontal axes: a landscape of action and a landscape of identity. They signify how narrative construction can be related to specific events or be related to identity conclusions made by the leader on the basis of specific events, experiences or actions. The leader’s narrative of actions and narrative of identity conclusion are placed on a continuum from past to present to introduce the temporal aspect of when the event or identity conclusion took place. For example, if the leader tells a narrative about an event that took place in childhood, this is placed in the remote past section, while a narrative about the present is placed to the right, signifying present time. Sometimes people link narratives from the past

and the present into the same storylines; or they cluster narratives positioned in the same time. Each narrative is identified by a short title or heading to give the reader a brief clue about the creation of meaning in the narrative. Narratives are connected with lines to illustrate how specific narratives of events are linked to particular narratives of identity conclusions made during the interview. Thus, the arrows and numbers indicate the sequencing and ordering of the ways in which the narrator connects narratives in the landscape of action with narratives of identity conclusions. The arrows illustrate the dynamic sequencing in the construction processes, and as the following analysis will demonstrate, the map shows how specific narrated events can be the outset for multiple identity constructs, and how leaders position themselves in narratives by linking experiences and identity conclusions. The narrative ordering and clustering makes it possible to recognize the way individuals make events/actions comprehensible by identifying the whole to which they connect and contribute. Polkinghorne, (1988) suggests that the plot or storyline is the means by which a specific event is made to cohere into a narrative.

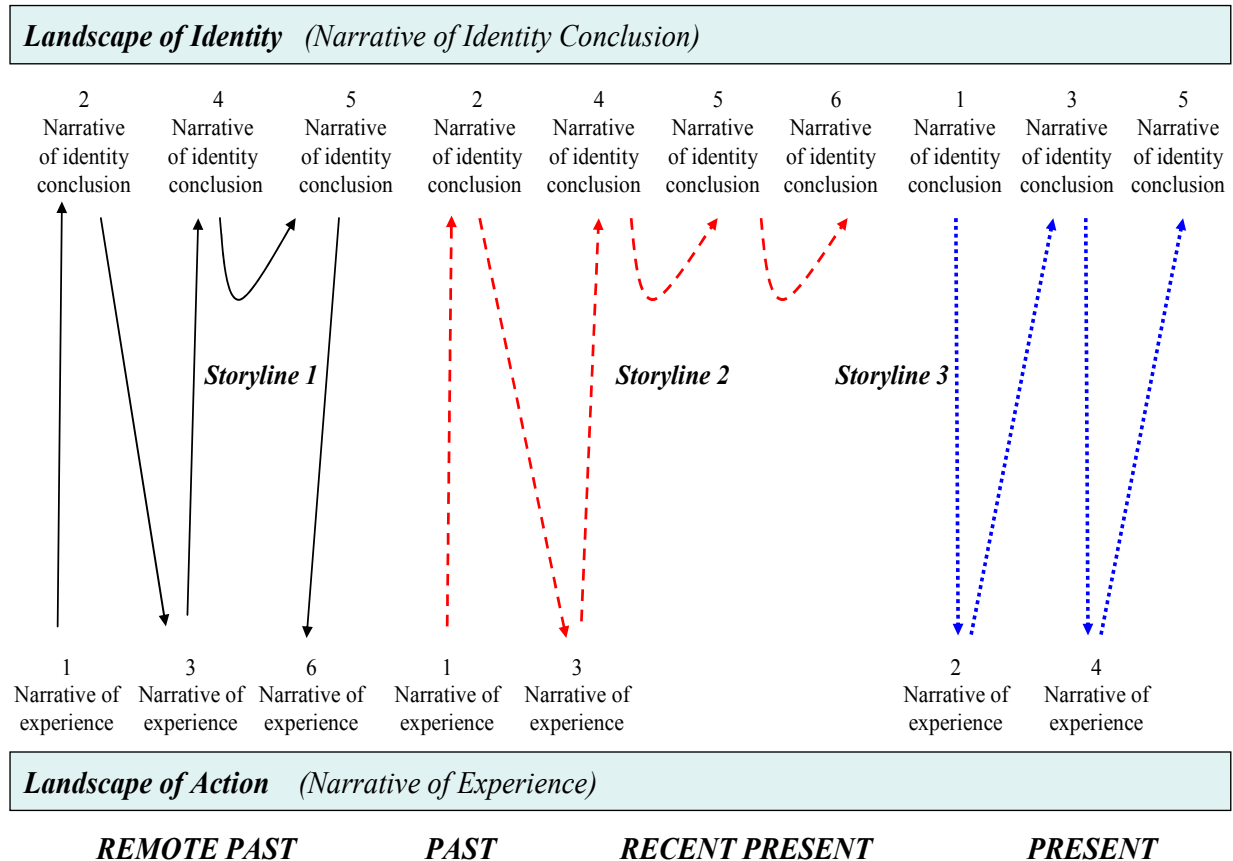
The plot (or the storyline) shows how the part contributes to the whole, e.g. to the construction of the overall ontological narrative. In this sense, the organizing storyline theme identifies the significance and role of single events in the construction of identity (Polkinghorne, 1988:18). Svenningson and Alvesson (2003) supplement these ideas by specifying and defining storylines to be versions of identity that are situationally defined. I proceed using the terminology storylines to describe the interrelatedness of narrated events and narrated identity conclusions, because the term “plot” has two interpretative connotations that somehow contradict my research intentions. First, the term “plot” gives access to a more limited stock of identity constructs. Plot categories are relatively few and restrictive – such as plots of tragedy, romance or comedy – and this is contra-productive to my intent of producing richer, varied and detailed knowledge of leader identity that approximates the leader's idiosyncratic and empirically defined categories. Second, the plot metaphor signals a deliberate and conspiratorial construction process, as if the leader is intentionally constructing identity in a certain image in a controlled and deliberate construction process.

This in my view minimizes the social interdependence and co-productive aspects of the construction process, which I attempt to bring to the surface in my analytical design and approach. In many cases, the plot is an attractive construct for pulling together fragmented stories or story pieces into a coherent plot structure, but in this dissertation it does not support the explorative nature of the investigation and the

analytical intention of giving priority to the empirical material's complexity. Therefore, I use the storyline concept to bring the social construction process to the surface and provide more empirical latitude for the unintended and coincidental.

Furthermore, the analytical mapping in the storyline map model gives an indication of how the leader positions himself in the identity construction process. In combination with the thematic analysis, this illuminates dominant narratives and specific positioning, which can be advanced to increase our understanding about how leaders are constructing identity in narratives. The analytical framework builds on the concept of stanza, which implies that the analytical unit of a narrative is a series of "*lines on a single topic*" or a "*particular perspective*", while the concept of scene implies clusters of stanzas that "*sound as if they go together*", which is parallel to my application of storylines in this analytical model (see also chapter 2, Gee, 1991:23-24; Riessman, 1993:45). The accumulated storylines make up the ontological narrative of the individual, and if these storylines are re-authored or reconstructed, it indicates, within this analytical framework, identity work and identity change. Each storyline consists of narratives of experience and narratives of identity conclusions told in sequences, as indicated by their numbers, and together construct a thematic specific identity storyline. The storylines together signify important identity constructs through which the leader makes sense of himself as a leader. When reading the model, you follow the numbers and arrows and thereby the leader's process of narrative linking and clustering in order to make sense of himself as a leader. For example, the leader might in a narrative of experience (narrative number 1) describe the experience of firing 30 employees as a young leader. On the basis of this, the leader makes an identity conclusion (narrative number 2) that tells how he decided that he would be a better leader if he kept people at a distance. Then, more narratives are added to give more nuances to the storyline construct of "distant leadership" (narratives number 3-6). Below is an example: an illustrative storyline map and a list of the constituting narratives of a storyline.

## Display 5-2 Storyline Map: an Illustrative Example



### Storyline 1: Example

1. Narrative of experience: leader fires employees for the first time.
2. Narrative of identity conclusion: leader concludes that keeping a distance is better.
3. Narrative of experience: leader fires employees a second time.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: leader concludes and legitimizes distance.
5. Narrative of identity conclusion: leader concludes that people are functions and numbers to him.
6. Narrative of experience: leader avoids small talk with employees.

The storyline map illuminates the process of constructing identity, in narratives (i.e. stanzas) and in storylines (i.e. clusters of stanzas constructing distinct meaning). It gives a graphic view of the invisible processes by which leaders piece together in narration who they are as leaders. The storyline map helps illustrate how leader narrate what they have experienced, what events have been significant in their lives, and how they make sense of those experiences and events. The storyline attempts to bring to the surface construction process sequence and ordering, as well as the sense-making process of how leaders narrate leader aspirations temporally: then, now and in the future.



### 5.2.3 Relational Analysis: Negotiating Subject Positions

In chapter 2, *Constructing the Field*, I describe my researcher position as a moderate social constructivist position. In accordance with this position, I approach identity in my analytical framework both as a relatively stable construction and as a continuous process of positioning and negotiation of subject positions.

In positioning theory, positions are understood as “*clusters of rights and duties*”, and the distribution of positional power depends on subtly varying presuppositions (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003). One way of negotiating a powerful subject position is to have access to the locally situated repertoire of acceptable conduct or to the distribution of duties to perform certain actions (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003:3). Discursive practice is a constitutional force in the provision of available subject positions; thus, a position incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location within the structure of people using the repertoire (Davis and Harré, 1990:3). In this way, different positions give access to different images, expectations, practices, opinions and values, and they therefore form the core of the construction of the world and the subject's place in it. Moreover, subject positions are constantly negotiated and evaluated between the narrator and the listener, between the narrator and his momentary audience. Czarniawska-Joerges has described this as:

*“...a continuous process of narration where both the narrator and the audience formulate, edit, applaud and refuse various elements of the ever-produced narratives” (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994:198).*

Positioning accentuates the power aspect of narrative construction and brings to the fore the constitutive power of discursive practice. In this sense, the narrative negotiation of subject positions is closely linked to clusters of rights and duties to think, act and speak in particular ways (Harré and Van Langenhove, 1999). The extent to which the act of positioning is a deliberate act guided by reflected calculation or is a more spontaneous and unreflected act is hard to determine and outside the scope of this investigation. Theoretically, however, a distinction can be made about two extreme forms of positioning: one form is planned and executed deliberately, and another form is not reflected action but based on everyday routines and taken-for-granted beliefs. In the latter form, positions almost seem to be part of the natural order of things and are enacted unquestioned (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003). Research has been conducted to investigate taken-for-granted positions of gender, age and illness, which have unfolded the constructed yet

unreflectiveness of social phenomena. I integrate the theoretical concepts of negotiation of subject positions into my analytical strategy to emphasize the relational and negotiated power aspects of narrative construction processes, and to analytically examine the way subject positioning interacts with identity construction processes. The subject positioning metaphor gives me language with which to accentuate the relational and socially negotiated power aspects of identity construction processes. Identity constructions are negotiated by positive identification and recognition or by negative distancing and opposition (Garcia and Hardy, 2007).

Positioning theory argues that positions tend to be situation specific, temporary, short-termed and less fixed. Positions are based on consequential assumptions of what are relevant rights and what are accepted as relevant duties (Harré and Slocum, 2003:127-128). The catalogue of positions is multiple, and narrators can position themselves as active agents, passive victims of circumstance, against-all-odds surviving heroes, solo fighters in a world of injustice etc. Most importantly, narrators can easily shift between positions; they may be the active, controlling agent in one story and the passive victim in the next. Hence, positioning theory opens up analytical possibilities that are missed by prevailing static role conceptualization and identity categories, as well as by essentialist assumptions of identity (Riessman, 2002:701). In conclusion, positioning theory is useful for my analysis because the metaphor “positioning” introduces more flexibility, power aspects and social negotiation into the exploration of identity construction processes. Positioning has a spatial dimension and refers to both where and how you position yourself, although positioning is also a more fluid concept that stresses relational and temporal qualities, but the concepts of role and position cannot be unbounded in an absolute sense. Every narrative is told within a social context in which the narrator draws on a shared pool of knowledge regarding social structures and socially defined roles. It is important to note, however, that any individual narrative will finally have to be acknowledged and recognized by others in order to function as a position and be relevant for narrative construction of identity (Davis and Harré, 1990). In the following five chapters 6-10, I apply the third step of the narrative analytical strategy to analyze the negotiation of subject positions of the five leaders.

### **5.3 Summary**

The analytical strategy is to investigate the narrative construction of leader identity, more specifically to analyze how narrative resources of problem stories, preferred stories, storylines and subject positioning are used by leaders to construct certain situated leader identities. In the following analysis, I examine how five leaders from different backgrounds and industries, construct leader identity in interaction with the Executive Training Program, and then in two interviews in 2006 and 2007. The analytical strategy has three analytical steps: a thematic analysis in which I examine how the leaders construct identity in problem stories and preferred stories and their narrated consequences. This analysis illuminates the themes, the content level of what leaders are struggling with in their identity work. I analyze how stories of problems can be re-authored into alternative and preferred stories or vice versa. In the second step, I examine how each leader episodically sequences stories temporally. I analyze the processes by which the leaders connect or cluster stories together into storylines, and thereby construct significant meaning structures of leader identity. This analysis focuses on the temporal processes of narrative identity construction and is based on the empirical material from the 2006 interview.

The analysis seeks to illuminate how selected significant identity storylines are constructed and it is illustrated by a Storyline Map. Finally, in step three, I analyze how leaders negotiate particular leader identities by negotiating subject positions. The analytical focus is the negotiation processes in social interaction and the tensions accentuated by specific subject positions. Perhaps in my efforts to communicate and clarify the analytical framework, the three analytical steps appear to be sharply separate. However, in analytical practice, the steps are intertwined and overlapping; in fact, it is difficult if not impossible to dissect a social phenomenon into analytical bites and still make sense of what it means as a whole. Thus, when we analyze a social phenomenon to gain better understanding, we are simultaneously both approaching it and removing ourselves from it. In general, the analytical framework and analysis aim to be sensitive to process and ambiguities, while at the same time providing enough order and structure to allow us to gain a better understanding of the narrative construction of identity.

The analytical framework and interrelated analytical steps are:

**Display 5-3 Three Analytical Steps**

**Three Analytical Steps**

**Thematic Analysis:**

Focus on tensions, struggles and paradox in the construction of leader identities  
Emphasis on problem stories, preferred stories and their narrated consequences  
Interpretive frame: re-authoring conversations

**Temporal Analysis:**

Focus on processes in the narrative construction of identity  
Emphasis on storyline constructions in a time perspective.  
Interpretive frame: landscapes of identity

**Relational Analysis:**

Focus on negotiation of positions in narratives  
Emphasis on positioning by positive identification and opposition distancing  
Interpretive frame: subject positions

Now follows the application of the analytical framework to the empirical material from the 2006 interviews with the five leaders. Each analysis begins with a quote from the focus group interview, where the leader is asked about his motivation for participating in the program. In hindsight, this prelude already points out important themes of identity for each leader, as the following analyses demonstrate.

# 6 Milton -The Story of the Butcher and the Sunshine

*“It was a combination of things; basically, I think that the problem was that it was the “blood” that had made me a leader. It was not because I always dreamt about becoming a leader, but it was a family business and then at one time or the other you end up there. I think that was the challenge my brother and I shared, in reality none of us had any leader experience. We had just taken over the organization and we had learned to be leaders with our father as the role model. We learned by doing, but after a while we began to realize that it was not running the way it should. In addition, my brother and I had an ongoing conflict, and at the time we started at the leader development program, conflicts were escalating. I think we both saw it as an opportunity, a chance to solve it. Even though we thought we participated to solve problems in our surroundings more than between us - at the start” (Milton, 2006).*

## 6.1 A Beginning...Themes of Tension

Milton is in his early forties and with his brother Eric he heads a Danish-based production company. Founded by their father, the organization manufactures and delivers textile to the health care and service sector in the Nordic countries. The family business has been an integral part of the lives of Milton and his younger brother since early childhood. Their father is described by the brothers as an entrepreneurial old-school authoritarian leader figure, and in the 1980s the brothers rejoin the company after years of completing education and working in other organizations. First, they work for a number of years in various positions with functional responsibilities and limited employee contact and responsibility. Then, their father decides to hand over the full leadership of the organization to his sons, remaining only as head of the board. The sons formally take over the leadership of the entire organization, dividing management functions between them. At the time, the market situation is under pressure with strong competition, and as a result the brothers have to rationalize and undertake major cost-cutting activities from the very start. Five years have passed when the brothers decide to participate in *The Executive Training Program (ETP)*, both feeling that some kind of change is needed for them to continue leading the family business together.

This first section is based on empirical material accumulated during the *Executive Training Program* in 2005. The aim is to examine how significant themes of tension are constructed into problem stories or preferred stories in Milton’s narrative construction of identity in the interactive context of the leader development program. The brothers are part of the same cohort starting in the Executive Training Program in 2005. They participate in the plenary sessions and

all other shared activities for this cohort, which consists in all of 18 leaders from a broad variety of different Danish industry sectors. Milton becomes part of my basic group, while his brother Eric participates in another group.

The first module starts with an introductory exercise in plenary: All leaders are given 3-4 minutes to present themselves, not by presenting the usual list of accomplishments or curriculum vitae, but by answering for the other leaders the question, “*Why you are a good leader?*” Milton emphasizes in his presentation that because of his exhaustive experience with most organizational functions, he is able to understand and discuss work assignments in detail with employees. Second, he explains that he never makes spontaneous decisions, but always tries to think the situation through by himself before reaching a conclusion. Third, Milton says he has the ability to talk and listen to others one-on-one, and is always seeking concrete knowledge as the basis for implementing and designing systems that work. Later, at the end of the first module in March 2005, Milton gives two main reasons for attending the program; he calls one reason personal in orientation and explains: “*I have built a box around me, and I am upholding it, and I jump out of the box to shock and scare people*”. The other reason is his relationship with his brother. Milton says, “*I have to stop defending myself, and we need more accept in our relationship.*” Milton’s declared leader development goal at this point in time is formulated broadly as a wish: “*to find myself*”. This wording resonates the humanistic and existentialist oriented discourses with their emphasis on finding the self; e.g. Milton is applying the narrative resources offered in these discourses to find inner personal talent and qualities and to unfold who he is, as described in chapter 3.

At the second module in April 2005, Milton has had time to read and reflect on his LEA360 report. Milton is not surprised by the feedback from his employees, colleagues and boss, but rather sees it as a confirmation of problems already known to him:

*Milton: “I was confirmed about my introverted side by my direct reports, and also on my negative view of others if they don’t follow my lead. I will try to take small steps. I feel I am very much petrified in a role in which I have convinced myself that I have permission to be cross and sulky, which is the opposite of choosing. It is not dangerous to be happy an, I could start being more interested in other people, which I have never really been”*

Milton critically reflects about his leader role in the past. I read this as a beginning re-authoring of his hitherto leader identity towards a more reflected and actively chosen leader identity. As the quote indicates, Milton is now actively and reflectively engaged in identity work; he is in the process of constructing the leader he would like to be in the future. This illustrates how narratives can become a means by which we legitimize our actions, as when Milton describes having convinced himself (i.e. talked himself into) having the right to be “*cross and sulky*”. Moreover, the LEA360 feedback report reflects two of Milton problem stories: being introverted and impatient when delegating. Milton expresses that his problem stories are confirmed by others in the feedback indicated in the LEA360 framework. In May 2005 at the third module, Milton gives the following update to his ETP basis group about his developmental progress:

*Milton: “I catch myself smiling at people, and it’s actually a funny experience for me. I feel more serene and happy, and I am tired of being close to people who have a black outlook on things. I use my energy to be curious about other people. I went to a conference, which is something I normally hate to do. Before going, I had a long discussion with myself about whether to attend or not. I did go, and it turned out to be very important for our company. My brother and I have also found out more about each other, and I feel we solve problems more rationally”*

In September 2005, Milton had a two and one-half hour coaching session in the basis group at the last module of the leader development program. Milton wanted to use his coaching session to work with the problem of “*how to feel more happiness by getting along with other people, instead of reacting with irritation and anger*”. In the coaching session, Milton describes realizing for the first time that he tends to use a dichotomist terminology when relating to others and has “*either-or*” polarized thinking. He recognizes that he uses the same dichotomist creation of meaning to understand and create meaning regarding being a leader. In his thinking, a leader could be either a “*flying clown*” or an “*angry dictator*”. The latter role, he said, his father had often taken. The polarized construction also applies when making sense of his relationship with his brother. Milton says that it has been easy for him to hide behind his more extroverted brother at social events, explaining how he always has found social interaction challenging and felt shy or insecure in social situations.

In the coaching situation, however, Milton describes how he feels he has to “*know something of interest to others*” as a prerequisite for participating in social events and interaction. Several of the group members share their experiences of interaction

with Milton during the program. Milton is told that they perceive him to be socially at ease in the group, and to have very good listening skills. By giving feedback from experience in this way, the group is really offering Milton new stories in which to understand himself and from which to re-construct an alternative identity narrative. Milton links this feedback to a story about him as the older brother in what seems to be an attempt to explain or maybe excuse himself. He describes having always taken responsibility for his younger brother by “*picking up the pieces*”, when his brother made mistakes. In the coaching session, Milton says he suddenly realizes that instead he should have talked more with his brother and made him correct his own mistakes. Although Milton is still unclear about what might be holding him back from changing this, at the end of the session, he draws a conclusion. Milton summarizes that perhaps he does not allow himself to be happy and to express joy, because he feels so very responsible for everything, and being this responsible has become a heavy burden for him. In other words, he connects his feelings of “*lack of happiness*” back to a strong sense of responsibility. In this perspective, Milton’s introductory problem story of anger and irritability are thus re-authored in the coaching session into an alternative understanding of engagement and responsibility, a story about Milton trying hard to take good care of things. In the ETP program design, the reflective team method used in the coaching session is followed by an exercise. In the exercise, the group gives Milton five pieces of advice in relation to the particular focus of the coaching session; the fifth is supposed to be crazy out-of-the-box and can be less work-related. The group feedback and advice to Milton is:

*“We believe you need:*

- *To enjoy the present and the satisfaction you feel; accept that you have the right to be happy*
- *To realize that you have a lot of drive and a strong sense of responsibility; therefore, to help you enjoy the moment, you might need a coach or a mentor to keep you on track*
- *To reserve time for reflection, time for yourself to get a high level view of things and to avoid slipping back into operational mode*
- *To be goal-directed on your own development, take a course in coaching skills*
- *To start acting in an amateur theater, to learn how to play a role and to seduce”*

Milton makes a status on his personal project in module 4: He has to learn to soften up the serious Milton, has to listen before reacting, and become more curious about people. Evaluating his relation with his brother, Eric, Milton thinks that “*they need*



*to learn to talk together, to get to know each other better and perhaps they might even become friends*". In his LEA360<sup>32</sup> feedback report, the dimension Control (low score 20%) indicates a specific concern of his direct reports. Within the LEA360 framework, a low score on this dimension indicates that Milton could improve as a leader by paying more attention to employees and showing an interest in their work. Delegation is another dimension emphasized by Milton; he thinks he delegates significantly but often without giving adequate instructions or clarification about the task. Moreover, he almost never follows up on progress and task completion. Milton's reflection on the basis of the LEA360 results is that he talks to employees only when he perceives there is a problem, e.g. that the task is not being solved in accordance with his intentions or standards. The control dimension in LEA360 is at the low end, indicating that he could follow up more closely in order to secure the quality of the solution, and use more time communicating his expectations up front. Milton concludes that the following up would be intrusive to the employees and challenging to him. He dislikes looking over people's shoulders and checking up on them, nor does he like others to follow up on him. The group reflects back to Milton that he could try reframing the meaning of "follow up" and perhaps perceive it as paying attention and helping employees meet expectations and succeed with the task. In the LEA feedback report, Milton's preference for less control is further enhanced, because also in his direct reports Milton is seen as not participating in daily activities. Perhaps Milton is trying to avoid any face- to-face social interaction, which again creates more distance to employees. Based on the coaching session, the detours into the LEA360 feedback report, and the reflections from group members, Milton develops an action plan for his future development along the following themes:

*Milton: "To learn to soften up the serious Milton, to be more curious about other people and who they are, to listen to others before I react, and to talk with my brother."*

These developmental goals are broken down into the following actions for implementing the above goals into organizational reality:

*Milton: "To smile and show that I am open, to ask questions and listen. I'm not required to be the speaker; it is okay just to walk around the organization and*

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<sup>32</sup> The use of 360 degree analyses is common at leader development programs, however analytical tools are based on leader ideology and thinking, and entails a reduction of the complexity of leadership and identity. With these limitation I in the context of this dissertation LEA360 understands LEA360 as a significant tool interacting with the participating leaders at ETP.

*talk to people on a daily basis. I should give my comments based on reasoning, not emotions, and say what I mean without using unnecessary words, and I should start coaching one or two direct-reports.”*

Furthermore, Milton seeks to improve the control and participation dimensions based on the LEA360 feedback by setting up the following goal:

*Milton: “To increase result orientation for all employees, to focus more on the process, to define the task: establish goals, milestones and time schedules. To ask questions about everyday life in the organization and ask questions without having the answer, and to test ideas and thoughts with others, not just with myself.”*

Besides articulating these two detailed and partly overlapping action plans, Milton also sketches out a business plan for the organization and works out an action plan for a vision and strategy process. Moreover, he decides to hold employee appraisals with all employees on a more formal and continuous basis. This narrated solution is in alignment with the behavior-oriented discourse in leadership theory, which emphasizes identifying competency gaps and formulating action plans for the application of new behavioral repertoires. The LEA analytical framework is constructed in accordance with this discursive approach to leader development, and as such supports this narrative construction of leader identity.

Empirically, the leaders construct stories by thematically linking the story to certain thematic categories. In my sample, the leaders constructed stories to be prevalently focused on personal, relational or organizational themes. As an example, delegation as a problem story can be told with a focus on organizational themes, emphasizing the problem of organizational bottlenecks and inefficiency. The story of delegation can also be told with a focus on personal themes, emphasizing not trusting others' abilities or being a perfectionist. And the story of delegation can be told with a focus on relational themes, emphasizing de-motivating interaction with employees and not communicating expectations. In alignment with social constructivist theory, these categories are understood to be mutually dependent and intertwined; however, in the everyday language of leaders, as well as in the leader development program context, these categorizations are applied as narrative resources with which leaders and consultants communicate and create meaning related to leader identity and leader development in practice.

Narrative psychological theory and vocabulary is not part of the ETP program design and context (described in chapter 1); hence, the analytical categorization of the leaders’ narratives into problem stories and preferred stories is the result of my empirical analysis. In the display, empty slots signify that no empirical material is found, as when the leader has not narrated any consequences of a particular problem or preferred story. I have prioritized keeping close to the leaders own words when making sense of leader identity; thus, the display presents to a high degree the leaders’ use of terms and words when constructing thematic narratives in order to better illustrate the narrative construction of identity by the five leaders in the sample. As a result, the narrated consequence of a particular story is not necessarily logical from a strictly rational point of view, but represents the meaning creation by the leader. Moreover integrating the complexity of identity narration into schematic form has to be a reduction of complexity and richness, justified primarily by the intent to specify narrative resources and means.

**Display 6-1 Milton: Problem Stories, Preferred Stories and Consequences**

<b>Stories focusing on</b>	<b>Problem Stories</b>	<b>Consequences of problem stories</b>	<b>Preferred Stories</b>	<b>Consequences of preferred stories</b>
<b>Personal Themes</b>	Avoiding social contact and feeling shy	Feels isolated	Participating in social events, take on social positions	Feeling more relaxed in social situations
	Knowing best how to do things and likes control	Works too much and at operational level	Trusting others to be competent	Getting the results he needs
	Being impatient, short-tempered and irritated	Stress and physical burn-out symptoms	Working to be more patient and relaxed	Eliminating angry outbursts and finding balance
	Acting cold and insensitive	Lacks balance in life and feels dissatisfied	Interacting more positively and listening more	Understanding people's feelings
<b>Relational Themes</b>	Being distant; limited social contact	Little trust in others, no dialogue	Initiating small talk, more dialogue	Getting positive feedback from employees
	Being stereotyped as the angry boss	Avoids others and creates conflicts	Establishing friendly dialogue at work	Having less conflicts

	Delegating but quickly takes back assignments	De-motivates the new generation and scares the old	Communicating expectations up front, follow up	Completing tasks and job satisfaction
<b>Organizational Themes</b>	Having unclear, one-dimensional, rigid roles	Disagrees in public, tense social climate	Communicating and aligning w/ brother	Creating a relaxed and congenial social climate

## 6.2 A Middle Ground...Narrative Construction of Identity in Storylines

Many analytical dissections can be made of the empirical material. Above, I have identified and thematically analyzed the most significant problem stories and preferred stories in Milton's narrative, as illustrated in the display. In the following, the analytical focus is a temporal analysis of the process through which Milton connects stories into storylines. To focus the analysis, I illustrate only three storyline construction processes, which allows me to go into more depth with each one and analyze these highly complex processes in order to provide insight into narrative construction processes of leader identity. The following analytical section is based on the empirical material from the individual interview made six months after the program end; the middle ground interview in 2006. I analyze the emergence of three storyline constructions in the 2006 interview, and finally illustrate the temporal construction process in a storyline map.

### *Storyline 1: Keeping a Distance*

Shortly after Milton and his brother took over leadership from their father, the company lost two important customers and the brothers were forced to rationalize production and fire 30 people. This experience was a turning point for Milton. In the interview, he describes the event at length, and the toll it took emotionally. He explains how he concluded afterwards that he would be better off as a leader, if he was less involved with people and kept more distance to others.

*Milton: "We were forced to rationalize radically in the company, and it was the worst I have ever tried. I think half a year after we took over, we were to lay off 30 people and that was a mean experience. It was one of the worst you can ever experience, but when I look back, it is also one of the most educational I have been through, and as a result, we relatively quickly found out how to handle situations; that is, being smart instead of taking all the fights all the time."*

*Gitte: "Mm, so what do you think, if we stick to this situation of firing people, what did you become aware of, or what specifically did you learn from that?"*

*Milton: "(pause) That other people have feelings, I think. I did it consciously, and I don't actually know why I did it, because I felt terrible doing it. But I took everybody to my office for a conversation and explained what was happening and why it happened. Hmm - and there I got an experience. Someone would start crying and that was not much fun at the age of 30, to sit and tell adults, so to speak, who were twenty years older than me. That was a tough experience, but I also learned a lot. Now when I sit and think about it, I think what surprised me the most was that I have grown up with the company, and I have seen how my father is, so because of that, work was to me something that was just there. Then, I get this experience of how important it really is for a lot of people. That took me by surprise, how emotionally people react when something unexpected happens. ... No doubt I got wiser from it. I decided not to get involved in other people's lives, and of course that is good if you can create that distance and relate to things from a distance, from above. But on the other hand, this has been one of my biggest problems, that I have consciously kept a distance to everything."*

*Gitte: "You began to create more distance, or...?"*

*Milton: "It is as if I began to legalize it –that it was ok."*

Milton concludes that distance would help him make better decisions and act more shrewdly as a leader, that by keeping at a distance from others he would be able to avoid conflicts and emotional turmoil. The conflicts Milton refers to can be understood as dilemmas between identity constructs. He is struggling with how to be a leader and how to handle an emotionally stressful situation. In his story of the firing event, the employees are described as more tearful and sad than argumentative or aggressive. Based on this experience, Milton concludes that it is better to keep a distance from others when you are a leader. By constructing a distant leader identity, he will minimize his own emotional unease and make better, more rational decisions; and most important, decisions will not be influenced by his emotions. The experience of firing employees is a turning point for Milton, and the start of an identity construction process in which Milton constructs legitimacy about keeping a distance to other people. In constructing this storyline, the employees are gradually and increasingly objectified by Milton over time. In addition, the interview quotation shows how new stories emerge in the interview setting, and how data is co-produced between researcher and interviewee. This is illustrated by Milton's remark, "...now when I sit and think about it", followed by a

reconstruction of his relation to work as a relation that is significantly influenced by the fact that the business is a family business.

Milton thus re-constructs leader identity to include and emphasize the significance of the family business more explicitly. Furthermore, the family-owned business context punctuates another aspect in Milton's storyline – the fact that he never imagined work could be taken away, which resonates with the conventional notion of always having your family. Thus, in small and middle-sized family businesses, the family feeling often expands to include long-term employees, and one grows up in the company halls. The company is just there for Milton, like the air he breathes. The emotionally strong expressions of people losing their jobs, many of whom had been in the company before he was born, surprises Milton and becomes an important story in constructing his leader identity into what he later comes to think of as his dominating problem story: *“The distant leader”*. Milton says that he is reinforcing distance beyond his leader identity, indicated by Milton's remark that he consciously kept a distance *“to everything”*. This implies that the distance storyline has become a more overriding identity storyline that is not limited to leader identity. Also, Milton describes that creating distance to others has evolved to an extent where other people are treated without much emotion. Employees are objectified and have been transformed into functional artifacts of the organization. This makes him feel emotionally more confident when he acts as a leader, and makes it easier for him to carry out the second firing, which follows shortly after. In the retrospective account, the story is not told as a problem story at the beginning. It is only later that Milton becomes concerned with the distant leader identity construct, which is causing him specific problems, Milton explains:

*Milton: “I had become in relation to work extremely...hmm, I had become extremely systematic in my way of seeing things. Everything suddenly had turned into functions and numbers.”*

However, later in the interview Milton links this narrative to another identity storyline: a life-long storyline of feeling shy in social situations and feeling uncomfortable when the focus of attention. He anchors the story of shyness in events from the remote past as well as in the present, and describes *“shyness”* as something significant to him as a person. This is an example of narrative construction of identity through linking identity conclusions to personal themes, e.g. that Milton emphasizes that the narratives are specifically about *“who he is as a person”*, more than narratives focused on relational or organizational themes.

*Milton: “After the first round of rationalizing the production, I began to feel that I had become, I wouldn’t call it shy of people, but I have always been very shy both as a child and still I am actually shy. So I feel comfortable to be the one who stands in the back. I don’t have to be the one in front, and then it was of course a brutal experience to sit in front of all these people, knowing you have to give them bad news; and that is why I became a little, no not a little, I became very cold in my relation to other people.”*

The story of being shy thus enhances and supports a construction of a leader identity where people are kept at a distance, and where he might also keep people away by expressing strong negative emotions, e.g. anger, impatience and hardness. The narratives of being hard and expressing anger in social relations construct another significant storyline in the overall understanding of Milton's identity construction, but this will not be unfolded in this analysis.

The brothers Milton and Eric agreed to attend the leadership program in 2005. They are close to each other in age, but come across as two very different individuals. Milton describes himself as a shy, more introverted person. At the Executive Training Program, his brother Eric is experienced as talkative, extrovert and socially confident. Milton’s narratives of being a leader are constructed in many narratives about his relation to his brother and their problems running the family business together. The stories tell of strong polarization between Milton and his brother Eric, each positioned at extreme and opposite ends. These stories cluster together to form the storyline of “*the Butcher and the Sunshine*”, a storyline in which the differences between the brothers are highlighted and they are positioned as opposites. Milton positions himself and his brother in the following storyline construction:

*Milton: "...the worst is that we told each other openly that I was the Butcher and he was the one to spread a little sunshine afterwards (laughs), and I don’t know, but we kind of lived with it. The problem was that we were running a business, so we began to get more irritated with each other. He thought I was way too serious, and I thought that he was too funny. I think that has been the core in all the conflicts that we have had – those roles we gave each other in the beginning began to irritate us. He thought I was over-particular and lengthy, and I couldn’t stand he didn’t think about things before rushing into action.”*

This is an example of a “thin” dominate identity story of the brothers stereotyping and casting each other in one-dimensional and opposite roles. The brothers share a family background where they have had the opportunity to role-cast each other in the type of family setting where children typically find particular “identity niches”,

filling out the available roles in the family system. When the brothers enter the family business and share leader responsibility, their stereotyping and limited expectations to each other have more extensive consequences, influence more people, and prove to be detrimental to leading a successful business together. Throughout, the relationship is described by Milton in polarized and dichotomist terms: fun/serious, fast/slow, reflection/action, which I read to indicate stereotyped, limited and opposite thin identity constructions. Milton does not describe anything they have in common or any nuances, either in his own or his brother's identity. In narrative therapy, thin stories are the hallmark of dominating stories (e.g. problem stories) and are perceived as limiting and removing people from their actual experience (White, 2008).

Eventually, Milton begins to feel an unspecific need for something else, for the construction of a richer story for him and for his brother. Prior to attending the development program, the brothers' conflicts were escalating, and they experienced a progressive stereotyping. According to Milton, the conflicts and disagreements were affecting the future of the business and beginning to de-motivate key employees. At the time of the decision to participate in the leadership course, Milton describes their situation thus: "*...either we go separate ways – or we find some ways to solve it*". In the interview, I asked Milton if they had talked about their relationship and about their common leadership of the company. Milton replied, "*Never, well not in the last five years*". They had been running the business single-handed without ever talking about how to lead, their roles and relationship in leading the organization. The two brothers are running the company without dialogue. In the family business context, this can be interpreted as accentuating the family context, where relations are most often not explicitly discussed, except for crises or conflict situations or if vital threats to the relationship arise. The family business context and the stereotyping identity stories may have restrained them from starting the dialogue, since the polarized stories in themselves make it seem almost insurmountable to find a common ground. Furthermore, if they were to engage in a discussion about leadership, then the leadership of the former CEO, "their father as a leader", would be an unavoidable topic and would activate his role as a father and their roles as his sons. Thus, communicating about leadership, relations and power can be especially difficult and emotionally sensitive in a family business context.

On this background, Milton begins to question his distant leader identity storyline and construct it as a problem story, a problem story with consequences for both his



private life and for his leader job. Milton describes thinking that his behavior as a leader is repeating patterns of his father's behavior. In particular, Milton finds that the narratives of being impatient and losing his temper are not in accordance with his preferred identity story about who he would like to be as a leader. In retrospect, Milton detects aspects of his problem story and relates them to different social relationships: to his brother, his father, the employees and significant others in his private life. Milton does not convey one coherent narrative about what his aspirations are as a leader or what the alternative leader identity story looks like. Rather, his mapping of problem stories and their perceived consequences dominate his identity construction at the beginning of the ETP program, and he describes experiencing a pressure to change his relationships but also as a tension within himself.

### ***Storyline 2: We were the Problem***

This storyline is temporally located by Milton to the time when he and his brother participated in the leader development program. Milton anchors his story in the organizational context, explaining how he had used up the goodwill of his organization's younger generation and managed to de-motivate the older generation. He continues by describing a significant turning point for him and his brother.

*Milton: "...because our biggest problem was in regard to our personnel. We thought we were going to this course to learn to understand people. By that we meant, understand other people better. I don't think at that time we had reached the point where we could see that we were the problem."*

In this story, the surprising plot is that their initial expectations and narratives about the problem are relocated from outside us/others to inside me/between us. This refocusing of problems sets a more sensitive and emotional agenda, which requires scrutinizing the relationship between the brothers and involves personal change. This implies willingness to reflect upon and investigate the stories we live by in order to pave the way for narrative re-construction (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). In the interview, Milton narrates that new thinking about leadership in terms of relations and communication has emerged, and he concludes that self-knowledge can be seen as a first step toward understanding others and is thus related to leadership. This passage is interesting because Milton is simultaneously narrating one of the key ideological messages about leadership communicated in the ETP program context: The existentialist and humanistic ideology of self-knowledge is a prerequisite for knowing (and leading) others. This can be interpreted as showing

that Milton is applying the ETP narrative resources to make sense of and construct a leader identity, and that he has accepted and integrated the ETP ideological discourse about how to develop as a leader.

### ***Storyline 3: Before and After***

Milton constructs another identity storyline based on the above reflections about identity and problem stories. The following section illustrates the deconstruction of the previous identity storyline and a reconstruction of identity. I ask Milton what has changed for him and his response is:

*Milton: "Well, it has been wonderful. I think I have used a lot of resources on having to be grumpy or cold to be Boss, and I am not anymore. I am much more relaxed in relation to how things are going, not that I am passive, but I react more. What can I say; I take the day more as an experience, a good experience. When new things come along, I can learn. Before, all the time I had to find something to learn because there was something I hadn't thought about. So, in a way, I think that I have turned it around, and then I have gotten much more energy and interest in people; how they work, and not like it was before. And the result is that I am completely different: I am much more relaxed."*

Milton is not describing a specific developmental goal here. His activities seem to be driven by an indefinable feeling of being more relaxed, feeling more capable, and surprising himself by doing what he never thought he could. He has reconstructed the thin and dominating storyline of *The Butcher and the Sunshine*; and in narratives, he describes a process of continuously challenging himself and acting differently. Milton's narrating implies that he is actively engaged in identity work and that this process includes an important reflection for Milton as he concludes: "*I have underestimated myself.*" I read this as an example of Milton finding the cracks in his dominant storyline, whereby the dominating thin identity construct can be reconstructed into thicker and richer identity stories.

*Milton: "I mean it is a 100% that for a long time I have underrated my own abilities, and kind of used it as an excuse to not get myself into something that I had not 100% control over from the start and that is a bit aggravating because that is the way you learn."*

In Milton's narratives, he consciously and continuously challenges himself to do what "*is not like me*" (i.e. the dominate identity story) in pursuing something else (i.e. the alternative, preferred identity story). Milton describes forcing himself into new activities and experiences, such as joining a local hotel board, serving as

parent representative in the kindergarten, and accepting invitations and participating in social events, such as receptions. Besides, at a very practical level, Milton has integrated new daily routines and behaviors such as smiling, laughing, walking around in the morning, and practicing being more patient. These are examples of identity construction. Although Milton's alternative activities are enmeshed with feelings of insecurity and discomfort, he continues to do "*what feels unnatural to him*". Milton has established a "reflexive dialogue" to encourage himself in his efforts to make identity reconstructions; the following is Milton's description of his inner reflexive dialogue:

*Milton: "... and I still don't feel good about it, but I can just feel that it is becoming less and less a problem for me, and it becomes easier to make the decision. Now, I can think about it and then do it. Before it was completely unthinkable, and I would have done everything I could to not get myself into such a thing."*

And Milton elaborates further:

*Milton: "And I have done it very consciously. You see, before I was world champion, I mean before we started this course, if I was going to something then I could find the first ten excuses for why I shouldn't do it, especially if I was to do something with others. If I was supposed to do something with others, then I had a sea of excuses for not doing it. I have tried to turn myself upside down – I am still trying to do it – now I just do it."*

This story bears references to both reflective and non-reflective processes. In addition, Milton is mixing past tense and present tenses, suggesting that identity construction processing are going on in the situation. Milton is engaging in activities he feels are unusual activities that he would formerly have rejected and declined. Reconstruction is seen in the fact that what was formerly unthinkable has become thinkable, indicating that new identity constructions are possible and available. Milton receives feedback that his identity reconstruction can be seen from the outside. According to Milton, his employees refer to the change, the identity reconstruction, e.g. as "*before and after.*" The employees openly express that they feel they are dealing with a different person now. To Milton, this acknowledgement and feedback from his employees means a lot, and it confirms for him that he is doing something better than before. The feedback helps him sustain the reconstructed identity storyline despite the emotional ambiguity he still feels.

*Milton: "...it means that it is incredibly difficult for me to fall back into the completely old role, because now I see that when I get so much positive feedback, then it is because it is right what is happening now. I also have employees who function so much better than before, and I have more constructive dialogues with people when things do not happen as I would like them to. I would not have wanted to work with me as a boss as I used to be..."*

In my analysis, Milton is reconstructing leader identity in these problems stories and preferred stories of leader identity. In the following, I illustrate how problem stories are constructed and later reconstructed into preferred stories, retrospectively in the interview setting. In the interview, Milton's stories and three significant storylines are thematically structured around personal, relational or organizational themes of tension, perhaps for the narrator to communicate a coherent story and to distinguish between different storyline constructions. In this case, the family business context blurred the borders of the private and organizational, making it is easy for the leader to act more as a family member than as a professional leader. Family roles and relational dynamics are easily reproduced and continued in the organizational setting. Thus, when the founder is the father, it is likely that the organizational culture reflects important values that resemble those of the family. On this basis, constructing leader identity within a family business context can be understood to generate significant emotional tension, since more is at stake if the professional relation is unsuccessful or causing conflicts. The importance of joining the ETP program with his brother Eric and the positive feedback from the employees have been vital to Milton in narrating and re-constructing leader identity.

The following Storyline Map illustrates three significant storylines in Milton's case of narrative construction of identity in the 2006 interview. A storyline is a cluster of narratives that "*sound as if they go together*" (Riessman, 1993, Gee, 1986, 1991); thus, narratives are meaning-creating units, which when thematically clustered construct significant identity storylines, as described in the previous section. The analytical framework and theoretical basis of the storyline map are unfolded in chapter 5. To briefly recap, the storyline map illustrates how in the interview the narrator positions the narratives temporally. Hence, the storyline map illustrates at a micro-level the process of narrative construction of identity, by locating narratives either in the landscape of experience, indicating that the narrative is about an event or experience or in the landscape of identity, indicating that the narrative is an identity conclusion made by the narrator. The storyline map demonstrates the process of linking and clustering narratives to form identity storylines. The model

can be read by following the number sequences in each storyline, which illustrates the progressive temporal clustering of narratives into a particular thematic identity storyline. In the following, the narratives in each of the three storylines are summarized:

### **Storyline 1: Keeping a Distance**

1. Narrative of experience: Milton experiences firing employees for the first time.
2. Narrative of identity conclusion: Milton concludes that keeping a distance to employees is better.
3. Narrative of experience: Milton experiences firing employees the second time.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: Milton concludes that he is right and legitimizes distance.
5. Narrative of identity conclusion: Milton concludes people have become functions and numbers.
6. Narrative of identity conclusion: Milton concludes avoiding social contact is more comfortable.

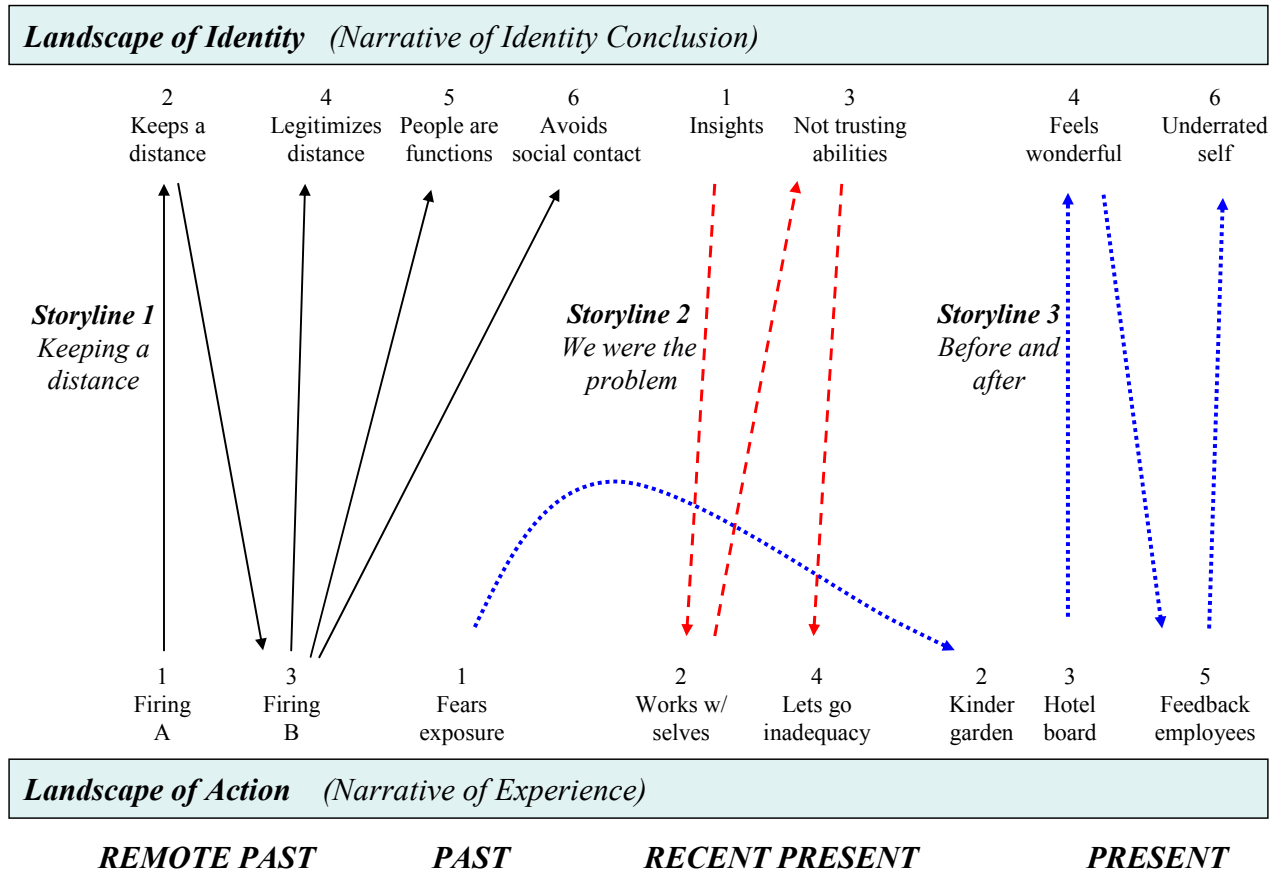
### **Storyline 2: We were the Problem**

1. Narrative of identity conclusion: Milton concludes that he is gaining new relational insights
2. Narrative of experience: Milton realizes at ETP that he and his brother are part of the problem.
3. Narrative of identity conclusion: Milton concludes not having trusted his own abilities.
4. Narrative of experience: Milton is letting go of feelings of inadequacy as a leader

### **Storyline 3: Before and After**

1. Narrative of experience: Milton fears social exposure as a child.
2. Narrative of experience: Milton becomes parent representative in children's kindergarten.
3. Narrative of experience: Milton joins the board of directors at a local hotel.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: Milton concludes new activities make him feel wonderful.
5. Narrative of experience: Milton gets positive feedback from employees; "*before and after*".
6. Narrative of identity conclusion: Milton concludes that he has underrated his own abilities.

**Display 6-2 Storyline Map – Milton 2006**



Milton's storyline map illustrates in storyline 1 how several identity conclusions can be drawn from the same narrative of experience, as when Milton makes three different identity conclusions with outset in the narrative of the second firing. Moreover, the storyline map brings to the fore how identity construction processes take place in the temporal positioning of narratives, and in the linking of narratives of experiences with narratives of identity conclusions. It also illustrates how the narrator links narratives of the past (i.e. the story of fearing exposure and being shy as a child) with narratives of experiences in the present, and from there, authors identity conclusions of the present.

**6.3 An Open Ending...Storyline Reconstruction and Continued Struggles**

This section is based on the empirical material from the 2007 interview. The interview took place in August 2007, one year after the last interview and almost two years after the leaders started at the ETP program. The purpose is to examine leaders' storyline reconstructions and investigate the continued struggles and identity work processes.

## Storyline Reconstruction and Tensions

In Milton's organization, major reorganization and change of responsibilities and roles had taken place since the last interview in June 2006. Milton describes how he and his brother had been fighting each other for years and that this made sense to him as something to be expected in brotherly relationships. Milton understood it as natural that this interaction be carried into their working relationship, and he was not emotionally troubled by it. However, in August 2006, Eric schedules a meeting, and confronting Milton, he states that he can no longer live with shared leadership and parallel responsibility in the organization. After many long discussions, the brothers are still unable to solve these issues. Milton describes the situation as having reached a point where the two of them cannot find a solution to the problem. They therefore involve the head of the board, their father, in the conflict. His initial reaction is disappointment that they are not "wise enough" to solve the problem together. An intense period follows when the brothers have intense discussions but still see no solution in sight. Milton explains: "*The problem was that the discussions were 90% feeling and 10% intellect*". At one of these meetings, Milton describes that he suddenly realizes that neither brother really wants to leave the organization; he describes how this points to a new solution for both of them:

*Milton: "We were going in circles, and we couldn't solve the problem because both of us were engaged in and enthusiastic about the company; so no one wanted to leave. Then, during that discussion we had, I suddenly realized what was important to Eric. He really wanted to be in charge, and he needed to be the one who made the decisions. And the bottom line was that I have never been driven by that. It has more been a natural consequence of our father starting the company and me following in his shoes. And the more I thought about it, the more it made sense to me that as long as I could do what I wanted to do, then...(pause)"*

*Gitte: "What specifically did you want to do?"*

*Milton: "I have always wanted to use more energy on product development and innovation, but I never had the opportunity, because I always have been so operational. I have used 110% of my time doing all sorts of things that I really suddenly became involved in. And that was actually one of the problems between us, that Eric felt I didn't give people a chance to do what they had to do."*

The meeting ends with them beginning to draw up a new organizational structure in which Eric becomes CEO of the Danish organization as well as head of their

Swedish and Norwegian organizations. Milton steps down from daily leadership, takes a limited number of employees with whom he concentrates on product development and IT. Milton initially feels relieved to get rid of the “*personnel responsibilities, which he had always hated.*” Still, he feels he has power and influence in the organization as a member of the board owning 50% of the company.

### **Crossing Boundaries and Increasing Corporation**

This organizational change causes Milton to construct another problem story. Within the old organizational structure, the brothers did not communicate across their divided areas, but basically kept within the borders of their own areas of responsibility.

*Milton: "That was the other problem; that we had locked ourselves into our areas of responsibility, and we did not communicate between the two boxes. He had administration and sales, and I had production and development. And you could say that it is a little catastrophic when these do not communicate, and we just didn't. On a daily basis, it generated a lot of conflicts."*

With hindsight, Milton could explain that after the meeting he was able to see that they had been having serious conflicts for years, but prior to their meeting he would probably just have explained the conflict as one between two people who were just different or brothers. Milton explains how his relationship with Eric has changed; he feels the experiences they have had since the reorganization have established a more positive relationship between them, and they make use of each other in ways they have never done before.

*Milton: "In time and with the everyday practice of things, we have established an incredible respect for each other because I have changed my attitude towards Eric. And he has been able to show me that he knows how to do things. It is as if Eric has had peace to show me he is capable. And correspondingly I have been able to show Eric the things I can manage that he cannot, specifically here during a recent period with heavy production problems, which is one of my biggest strengths."*

Milton explains that before he would only manage problems within his own area of responsibility, because as soon as he tried to cross the boundaries of their divided responsibility it meant trouble. In Milton's experience, this has changed, and he thinks that they both have gained a better awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses. This narration reflects the narrative resources of the behavior-oriented



discourse in leadership theory, which emphasizes building leadership by identifying strengths and liabilities.

*Milton: "It has become fun again because both of us feel that we have gotten what we like and because we both are much more aware of our own strengths and weaknesses. Before our weakness was that we were able to see our own strengths, but we could not see our weaknesses and we could not see each others strengths either, and that has really changed"*

In everyday practice, this becomes visible to Milton because Eric *uses* his knowledge and competencies more than before. To Milton, this signifies that Eric respects and acknowledges that Milton has skills and competencies that Eric has not. Milton describes one of his own weaknesses as having difficulties "*saying no*" to other people, which accumulates operational work for Milton. Milton says he also interacts more with Eric and as an example says that Eric is "*very good at asking questions*" about Milton's operational workload. These dialogues are new and helpful to Milton and help him reflect on the relevance of the workload instead of just executing tasks. Milton explains they have more respect in their relationship and generally are more open to mutual criticism and questions. Recently, they had a problematic takeover of a Swedish production company, which resulted in weekly trips to Sweden. These trips gave them an opportunity them to talk one-on-one and align their expectations on a regular basis, something they had also never practiced. In the interview, Milton narrates the relational changes as if something in him has "*ceased*" or disappeared. Earlier when they had discussions, Milton felt a stubbornness; that he just could not give in, even when acknowledging that Eric was probably right. Milton just could not let it go and would keep on debating; now, he describes this stubbornness as having disappeared:

*Milton: "I surprise myself, because I think I have become extremely good at... or I have learned to take only the battles that are necessary, and in many cases I just let it go."*

*Gitte: "In the situation how do you do that? For example, if you discuss the Swedish organization, how do you experience it; does the stubbornness emerge, is it gone, do you hold yourself back or how?"*

*Milton: "I think that by far, it is actually gone."*

*Gitte: "Yes, do you then focus on the task or how?"*

*Milton: "I don't really know, and it might sound almost philosophical, but I feel I have gotten an inner peace, which means that I do not have a need to take the discussions anymore. And maybe sometimes I also think that he has got the overall responsibility and that he should be allowed to..."*

This part of the interview develops into Milton telling a story of how he is now letting Eric make his own mistakes. Even in situations where Milton thinks the outcome will turn out negative, he now lets his little brother proceed to make his own mistakes. Milton illustrates this with a concrete example of Eric handling production problems in Poland. The organizational restructuring has also shifted the involvement of the father; Milton describes how the father and Eric initially had major conflicts. Milton thinks his father was nervous about Eric's ability to handle the responsibility. When Milton stopped taking responsibility for Eric, the father seems to have entered the scene in the very same role. Milton describes how he himself is opposing his father's leader style while at the same time recognizing several identity constructs that resemble his father's. Milton constructs these as problem stories and as an anti-identity in the 2006 interview. In the 2007 interview, Milton describes how things has become more routine and everyday life in the organization and in his relation to Eric, and Milton feels that in general the management team is currently at peace, and the organization running smoothly.

### **Negotiated Subject Positions**

Milton is positioning the past and present differently when constructing leader identity in the organizational context. Milton describes that his present organizational role demands that he is more strategic and project-oriented in contrast to his former focus on operations and production. This is a significant challenge and change of focus for him, and he describes how it accentuates some of his major weaknesses. Now, project management is critical because he is running international projects involving people in different countries and with different cultures. These work conditions make communication vital, and this has brought to the fore Milton's problem story of being a poor communicator. Milton uses the poor communicator storyline to explain why the long-distance employees are acting frustrated, and he feels that he gives them the impression that he is not interested or does not care. In narratives, Milton distances himself from the tasks of project management and communication (i.e. activities that are not him) even though he acknowledges the business need for these activities.

In Milton's storyline construction, this has a negative impact on the employees' motivation and daily implementation of the project. Time management is also

constructed as a problem story. The planning and timing of large inter-cultural projects comprise a completely different leader task than Milton's preferred working approach, which is to solve the problem operationally and hands-on. This is described in Milton's 2005 problem stories about delegation and operational leadership. This storyline can be interpreted as Milton negotiating identity constructs and using his operationally strong skills as an excuse not to immerse himself in the communication and delegation task in the international project, because operational management is still just so much easier for him. Milton says:

*Milton: "It is not the actual project that is the problem for me, that I am perfectly capable of, but it is the managing of the people and the communication part, where I constantly have to motivate people to do what I need them to do."*

Milton emphasizes how Eric has been extremely good at motivating and communicating with the employees in the Swedish organization after the takeover. Milton is still constructing identity by contrasting dichotomist stories, but now the stories about him and his brother are more complex and less one-dimensional, and include positive stories and stories of similarities.

In the 2007 interview, Milton tells that he has changed most in relation to being extroverted and participating in social events; he has become more curious about other people and feels more relaxed in social contexts. Milton reconstructs his dominant story of being introvert and socially uneasy into a storyline of feeling much more at peace with himself and able to behave more socially extroverted and at ease. Milton concludes that this has made him more satisfied in his social relationships and has contributed to an inner feeling of peace.

*Milton: "I think that I have become a more peaceful person after the experiences. I am not stressed in the same way. Of course, I can be stressed by too much work, but I am not stressed by a need to fight anymore. At the same time, I feel I am a completely other person on the inside, which I think overall is a good thing. Even though there was a time when I dreaded that people would think I was being too relaxed and maybe didn't care."*

Taking this storyline as a point of departure, Milton negotiates a different identity construct in relation to communicating. Milton explains that now he does not need to know "everything" in order to have a conversation. If the other person speaks 70% of the time, and he fills in the last 30%, then they can still have a good conversation. This is an example of a reconstruction of the former storyline of "knowing as a prerequisite for dialogue" described in the previous section.

*Milton: "If we go back to ETP in 2005 and until now, that is when it became clear to me that I was extremely bad at communicating with people. I really felt most comfortable if I can just sit by myself and find out what to do. Following, I have used an extreme amount of energy to turn it around; to become more extroverted and to show some interest in other people. I don't know if it is good enough, I mean it is a question about how much you can change yourself, but I clearly feel that today I have much better relations with people in our organization and in life in general. And the reason is that I started to expose myself and to be curious, which has become something which is much more natural to me today."*

Furthermore, Milton estimates that there has been an 80% replacement of the employees in the Danish organization over the last two years. He links this to his inner peacefulness; he now is less worried, because employees are better qualified to do their job. Milton has given up a large part of his daily leadership of the organization but feels more comfortable as a leader. In the LEA360 analysis re-test, the dimension called Management Focus indicates the willingness to lead and how comfortable and important being a leader is to the respondent (Management Research Group, 2007). In Milton's self assessment, this dimension has changed from a score of 10% at the low end in 2005 to a high-end score of 90% in 2007. I interpret this to indicate a drastic reconstruction of Milton's self-assessed attitude towards being a leader. Milton has significantly reconstructed anti-identity stories into stories of leader identity, which better contain and integrate his preferred leader identities. Milton formulates the following reflections about this change in the 2007 interview.

*Milton: "...I think that in my eyes it has become more interesting; the way I lead the organization. Before, I had this inner feeling of being leader because of duty and the blood, and I felt that I had to lead in a way that didn't suit me. Now, I lead in a completely different manner."*

*Gitte: "In what way?"*

*Milton: "Exactly because today I lead in areas which I like, and I do things that I like, and in reality I do not have any direct reports anymore. You could say that I got rid of the everyday role modeling, which I never really liked. That might also be another thing that has contributed to my inner peace. I have gotten rid of things that I was not good at and that I didn't like...."*

*Gitte: "What precisely are you glad to have gotten rid of, in relation to being a role model?"*

*Milton: "It was as if I had to be the lighthouse out there; the one everybody looked up to, the one you would like to follow. That has been really difficult for me to come to terms with, because I am a little people shy. So that role just didn't come together with who I was on the inside. And because I have let it go, it has become much easier for me to be happy and to feel happiness in my life."*

### **Concluding Reflections – Looking Back**

In the interview in 2007, I ask Milton to look back at the almost three-year-long process and summarize significant reflections or conclusions. Milton replies:

*Milton: "It is terrifying that you can change so much as a person, from one thing to the other, in such a short while. I would never have believed it possible. I think that the reason that I have repressed myself for so many years and taken on a leader role of distance was that Eric and I were completely inexperienced and thrown into the firing, which also made me convince myself that it was okay for me to be cold and hard."*

And Milton goes on reflecting about leadership and roles:

*Milton: "It is a crazy that when you take on a role, there is an element of acting the role. It is really hard then when the role is not you and you really have to fight for others not to see that it is not all together. I have also become much more relaxed at home, and I am not at all hot-tempered anymore. It has been fantastic, and to be honest I think it is a little embarrassing that so much has happened with me in such a short while."*

*Gitte: "If you should give a picture of the leader you where back in 2005 and the leader you are today, what kind of picture do you see – if you should give a short statement of the essence of it all?"*

*Milton: "...(thinking) I'm sitting here and feel like saying that I have grown up."*

*Gitte: "(laughs) Yes?"*

*Milton: "Yes, I think that in 2005 I felt that I had to be a leader, like I was born and raised into it. It was like my assignment in life. And I did some things that I didn't feel like doing, but it wasn't something I was conscious about; it was just something I had to do. You can say that in the last two years I have gone from that, to knowing what I am really good at. Before, I did things that I knew how to do, things I could do but which I didn't really want to do, or I did things I felt I had to do but which I wasn't very good at. Now, I do not do things that I am not good at, because I know that there are others that can do it better."*



# 7 Jim - The Story of the Perfect Match

*“Yes, I just have to find what I have written, because when we started the course we talked about this, ...my ticket to the course or reason for participating and getting the opportunity to meet you all, was by my own force and motivation. I wanted to develop myself further, and as I already told Gitte, it was sheer coincidence that this program happened to be on my desk that day. What caught my attention was the description and thinking about leadership, about developing people that was extremely appealing to me. I was searching for confirmation of the thoughts I had on leadership, those thoughts I wanted to develop further, and the program was a perfect match. That was the reason and my reflections. If the program had not been in accordance with my understanding and values, I would probably not have participated and that is perhaps not very wise, but that’s how I am, and that’s why it was perfect for me” (Jim, 2006)*

## 7.1 A Beginning...Themes of Tension

Jim is in his early fifties and has worked in the financial sector all his life. Since the late 1980s, he has been the CEO in a Danish financial organization. During his career, he left the organization for positions in other financial organizations, but has returned each time to his current organization. Most recently he was contacted and offered to rejoin his old organization in an attractive leader position. Jim returned and over time increased his responsibilities and was continuously promoted. The financial sector is a context in which security; accuracy and rule obedience are vital for the business, which encourages central cultural norms of cautiousness and risk avoidance. At the time of the ETP program, Jim had been the CEO in the organization for several years, and he had held leader positions in the financial sector for over 22 years. The financial organization Jim heads plays a significant role in the local community, and Jim and his family are very involved in local sports and participate actively in the social life of the local community.

In the leader development program’s first module, the participants introduce themselves, facilitated by an exercise in which the leader has 5-7 minutes to present “*why he is a good leader*”. In Jim’s presentation, he describes and emphasizes some of his basic convictions. Jim says that he firmly believes “*that everybody is doing the best they can, and that everybody wants to develop themselves*”. He describes seeing the development of employees as related to and crucial for development of the organization. This is also the exact phrasing in the Right Management course catalogue 2005. Jim characterizes his leader style as proactive, team-oriented and focused on insuring common goals. During the first module, Jim explains that his motivation for participating is that he is interested in developing himself; he wants to make the most of his freedom to develop himself. Jim uses the

metaphor of a “*magic candy ball*”,<sup>33</sup> a sugar candy that changes as you eat it and reveals different colors. Jim is curious to see what it will reveal to him. This indicates that Jim is not in a situation where he is forced to change due to critical organizational circumstances. Jim’s participation seems to be motivated mostly by an unfocused curiosity that involves discovering himself, as a leader but also more generally as a human being. Besides being “*time for innovation*”, Jim does point out two areas for development; two of his current struggles (i.e. problem stories) are that he is “*working too much*” and “*taking too much care of others*”. At the end of module 1, Jim defines his personal project as: to become more innovative, and to find space to develop himself. Jim realizes that using too much time to help others is draining his own resources and limiting the time spent with his family. In passing, Jim mentions being worried that too much work could be damaging for his physical health in the long run. Jim wishes he were more extroverted in his personal relations.<sup>34</sup> At the end of the first module, Jim summarizes his developmental goal: “*to develop myself, and to prioritize creating a new identity.*”<sup>35</sup>

When returning for module 2 in April, Jim tells the group, how deeply shocked he was by the openness within the group after only three days together during the first module. This shock has made him reflect about his own level of openness with other people, and Jim concludes that he really has a lack of openness with others. In these self-reflections, Jim is questioning himself:

*Jim: "Those things that I would like to promote in others, for example freedom to develop, am I really doing it myself?"*

Furthermore, Jim continuously uses the plural “we” when talking about himself and the bank. His own identity and values seem to be merging with the value work and branding of the organization. When I ask him a personal question, he responds by reflecting about the organization as a whole, or by explaining to me how he works with the openness of the employees. At module 3 in May 2005, Jim had recently conducted the yearly employee appraisals. He conducted part of the appraisal process as a “walk and talk”, a method introduced at the first ETP module, and Jim is enthusiastic about his progress with his staff. Reflecting about the power balance, Jim thinks he still needs to work on improving his own ability to show his own

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<sup>33</sup> In Danish, this candy is called: “en forvandlingskugle”

<sup>34</sup> In Danish, Jim’s wording is “større personlig udadvendthed”

<sup>35</sup> In Danish and in Jim’s wording, ”at skabe sig på ny”



faults and be open in dialogue. Jim has not succeeded in reducing his working hours and still works too much. Jim appears very optimistic and receives positive feedback from the ETP group members. In the ETP program, he is active and engaged in the developmental processes and the exercises, offering insights and strong analytical feedback to the group members. Milton, especially, points to Jim several times as a role model of a person in balance with himself in the leader role. In interacting with the group, and most likely in interacting with the ideological setup of the ETP program, Jim is receiving positive feedback and confirmation of his leader identity, in agreement with what he was looking for at the outset. During the final module 4, Jim states:

*Jim: "I have never felt as strong as I do now – almost like a sinking feeling in my stomach."*

In the coaching session of module 4, Jim wants to work with two themes: One is to reduce working hours by delegating more and to figure out how to use the time gained; and the other theme is how to have a stronger profile in relation to positioning and branding the organization externally.

Jim chooses Ben<sup>36</sup> to be his coach in the coaching session. In the process, the reflective team<sup>37</sup> reflects back to Jim that he "...seems to be very keen on developing others but who is developing Jim". Throughout the session, Jim talks much more about other people's needs and feelings and very little about his own. Jim quotes his wife, who tells him to put himself first and do something for himself. This seems very difficult for Jim, and when he is challenged by the coach, his reply is: "... with six siblings you don't have to do anything for yourself". This flashback in time in which Jim relates his behavior to his family history and changes the context can be interpreted as Jim perhaps never having experienced putting himself first; and now he might not know how this is done. It is an identity story of taking care of others before the "I" – and has roots in the remote past. Jim might have learned that being self-centered is a negative identity construct in the context of a large group of siblings, and that only care for others is acceptable social behavior. This theme of tension is currently accentuated in Jim's interaction

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<sup>36</sup> Ben was chosen by three out of 6 leaders to be the coach for these sessions. He proved to have significant strengths and was at ease in the coaching role, asking questions and being empathic in following the focus person's story.

<sup>37</sup> The coaching session is based on Reflective Team Method (Andersen, 1996). One leader is coach, while the rest of the leaders comprise the reflective team and I facilitate the reflective team method and the group process.

with others in his organization and in the ETP program. The second theme of tension mentioned by Jim, *“that he spends too much time taking care of others”*, is in a similar vein, and this might also reflect the identity construct of care and putting others first.

At the end of the coaching session, the group reflects back to Jim, that he has also spent the majority of his coaching time talking about other people and not about himself. Jim’s reply and explanation is: *“I am just not open by nature”*. This is Jim returning to and drawing from the traditional trait oriented leader discourse (described in chapter 3). In this context, “nature” is used by Jim almost as an excuse for the way his identity construction has been accentuated in the coaching session. It exemplifies how one identity construct, e.g. caring for others, is used to explain and excuse another identity construct, e.g. lack of openness with others, thereby making a circular conclusion that sustains the status quo. This can thus be interpreted as Jim avoiding identity re-construction. Following the ETP design and method, the coaching session ends with an exercise in which the group formulates five pieces of advice for Jim on the basis of what they have heard and what they think could further Jim’s development. The fifth is supposed to be creative, “out of the box” and can be less work-related. The feedback and advice from the group is:

*“We believe you need:*

- *A media training course, to train your voice and receive provoking questions*
- *To build a broader network, for example have lunch meetings with journalists*
- *To look at the way you build credibility, maybe show more vulnerability to avoid being “Mister Perfect”*
- *To do something that has absolutely no purpose; today, everything is done for a reason - be spontaneous*
- *To get a motorcycle driver's license, with a side car for your wife – feel the freedom”*

In the program context, the group advice acts as a reflection of how Jim is perceived by others. It serves as a mirror to help Jim understand how others perceive him. The group advice points to several of Jim’s problem stories and challenges him to step out onto thin ice by being more *“spontaneous, being provoked, showing vulnerability and feeling the freedom”* – which contrasts the negative identity problem story Jim struggles with under his heading of *“letting go of control”* and *“feeling safe”*, themes at the core of Jim’s narrative identity construction and two of the storyline constructions to be unfolded in the next section.

The display below is an overview of the significant stories of struggles, themes of tension and preferred stories constructed by Jim in interaction with his group in the ETP program context in 2005. Empty squares marked not applicable (N/A) illustrate that no empirical material exists (e.g. that Jim did not narrate any consequences of a particular story). The purpose of the display is to illustrate the complexity of leader identity constructs, to highlight the significant stories of problems and tensions narrated by Jim at this point in time, and to follow and identify how significant stories are re-constructed over time in the subsequent 2006 and 2007 interviews. Interestingly, Jim does not narrate any problem stories focused on organizational themes during the ETP program in 2005. Indirectly, this supports the identity construct of lacking the openness to share issues with the group. This can be interpreted as a consequence of Jim positioning himself as one who is in charge and in control of things; thus, he is also in control of the organization and narrates no issues to contradict that story. Consequently, the organizational theme is left empty (N/A) in the display.

**Display 7-1 Jim: Problem Stories, Preferred Stories and Consequences**

<b>Stories Focusing on</b>	<b>Problem Stories</b>	<b>Consequences of problem stories</b>	<b>Preferred Stories</b>	<b>Consequences of preferred stories</b>
<b>Personal Themes</b>	Taking too much care of others	Works too much and does not empower people	Working less	Having more time with the family
	Being in control of the situation	Limits others' input and discourages participation	Letting go more	Increasing balance and personal satisfaction
	Being a bottleneck, Micro-management and tight follow-up	Does not delegate	Keeping a balance between control and letting go	Living up to core values
<b>Relational</b>	Being closed, not open with others	Keeps others at arms length, minimal self-development through others	Being more extrovert as a person	Feeling a sense of harmony, balance in life

<b>Themes</b>	Being in charge and in control of social situations	Controls and maybe even dominates others	Wanting to develop others, likes to see others grow	Having employees wanting to develop themselves
	Feeling that others expect him to stay the same	Changes make others insecure	N/A	N/A
<b>Organizational Themes</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Jim did not participate in the reflecting exercise on the developmental progress and focus areas in module 3, because he had to attend an employee jubilee celebration in his organization. Therefore, this piece of empirical material does not exist for Jim.

## 7.2 A Middle Ground...Narrative Construction of Identity in Storylines

In this section, the analytical focus is how Jim constructs identity in the interview by linking, connecting and clustering stories into storylines, emphasizing the storyline construction process. I examine how Jim constructs meaningful storylines in order to make sense of himself as a leader. I analyze three significant storyline constructions and illustrate the processes in a storyline map. The analysis is based on the empirical material from the 2006 interview and the analytical framework described in chapter 5.

### *Storyline 1: Letting Go*

In the ETP program, Jim narrates control as a crucial theme of tension. In the previous section, I presented how Jim narrates his struggles with control in relation to being open with other people, wanting to become more extroverted as a person, wishing to delegate and empower employees more, and wanting to develop others and himself. In 2005, Jim re-authors these problem stories somewhat. As he describes his developmental goals in his logbook and starts implementing some of his plans, Jim begins working with how to *let go more* in different concrete social relationships in his home organization. In Jim's narrative construction of leader identity, balancing control is a central theme. Balancing control with letting go are the core constructs for understanding Jim's narrated identity and positioning as a

leader in the past, and his process of re-constructing a preferred leader identity in the present. Thematically, Jim is struggling to re-author a storyline in which he exercises various aspects of controlling behavior in relation to the employees in his organization. In this first storyline, Jim is struggling with re-authoring a problem story of “*a controlling bottleneck*” into a different identity that he has named “*letting go*”.

In the 2006 interview, the storyline of “*letting go*” is constructed of several stories positioned both in the landscape of identity and in the landscape of action in the landscape of identity framework. Beginning with an identity conclusion, Jim tells me laughingly that the biggest change happening to him during the past 1½ years is: “*I am letting go more.*” Jim emphasizes not knowing what caused the change – whether it is due to the ETP program or to other factors – but he is convinced that “*letting go*” represents the biggest change in him. He continues his story, saying that the day before the interview he asked his wife and one of his longtime co-workers, middle-manager Paul, “*if they had noticed change in him and what kind of changes they had noticed, if any*”. After careful consideration, Jim’s wife responded that she sees he is “*letting go more*”. Jim relates this story of experience to another story about how in the past he used to be a significant bottleneck in the organization, because he needed to be in control of everything. Jim describes his past leadership (i.e. identity construct) as much more controlling, directing, and not listening at all to other people. In the interview, this past identity is positioned by Jim as an anti-identity construct, and he continues to link and contrast this story to the story of his present leader identity. Jim opposes the old identity construct saying: “*This is not what I represent today*”, thus signaling a de-construction of the past identity and indicating a re-construction of a different future identity construct. Jim explains that in the conversation with the longtime employee Paul, he confirmed that he also noticed a change in Jim’s ability to let go. This way the stories of feedback from Paul and from Jim’s wife are used by Jim, thus confirming his leader identity change. Jim underlines that Paul mentioned that Jim “*... should be careful not to take it too far*”. This story is positioned as a warning (almost a threat) to Jim about changing too radically. In the story, Jim legitimizes his change to Paul by referring to the ETP group and the facilitator as supporting him to change in this direction. Jim explains to Paul that Paul and the organization may perceive his change to be more radical, because they are familiar with and expect a certain established leader behavior from Jim. In this story, the challenge emerges of balancing or managing the tensions, expectations and insecurities that arise in social interaction when hitherto established patterns of interaction are changed. The

storyline construction ends with Jim concluding on the basis of his reference to the conversation with Paul that “*it is an act of balance, but he [Jim] is definitely letting go more than he used to*”.

This storyline construction shows that Jim has made some re-constructions in his former leader identity of strong control. Under the identity work theme of “*letting go*”, he has re-constructed a leader identity that perceives of control as a balance and not as a goal in itself. Jim expresses a wish to empower others more than he has done in the past, which also indicates giving up some control by involving and giving more responsibility to others. In this re-construction of identity, it is characteristic that Jim introduces stories of feedback or dialogue with others (his wife, Paul, the ETP group/me) as support for the conclusions that he is making about his leader identity. Jim is narrating stories in the landscape of action that support and legitimize the identity conclusions he makes in the landscape of identity. He refers to the ETP group and facilitator in order to legitimize and support the direction he is taking. And he refers to Paul and his wife in the interview in order to legitimize balancing control and to explain to me (and himself) that all control should not be given up but a balance should be found. This is illustrated in the storyline map as a crisscross between landscapes: An identity conclusion story is followed by a supporting story of experience, in which others confirm or support the identity conclusion. This is an example of narrative re-construction of a central past identity storyline, and an analytical observation about how stories of experience, here social interaction, are used to support and legitimize the narrative construction of leader identity.

This first attempt by Jim to make sense of control is rather abstract and non-specific, however, with regard to what he thinks control is about in a more concrete leader context. Later in the interview, Jim returns to the control theme in stories that make more precise and concrete how Jim makes sense of what it means to be in control and to let go more. Jim positions his present identity construct as a preferred identity story, and the identity construct of the past is prevalently narrated as an anti-identity story. Jim describes how he earlier was leading with a narrower business focus and was controlling others by use of rules and “*number-fun*”.<sup>38</sup> He still thinks that he is focusing on the business but in a different way than before.

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<sup>38</sup> Jim invents the word “*tal sjov*”, combining the words numbers and fun in what appears to be an ironic and slightly demeaning characterization of leaders who concern themselves primarily with facts and numbers in leading a business and leave out “*the human aspects*”, which Jim in 2006 narrates as being equally essential.

Jim tells about two experiences that have significantly impacted his development as leader: one was a leader course by Mercury International where he learned how to structure the organization and identify the organizational vision, and the other experience was the ETP program. Jim says that the ETP program motivated him with a strong wish to change certain aspects of the way he worked as a leader. In the beginning, he felt nervous and excited about participating in the program, wondering how he might measure up in comparison with the other leaders. Jim explains this tension with reference to the control theme of tension. Jim says: " *My constitution is still that I like to have control of the situation, so it was exciting for me.* "

In this perspective, participating in the leader developmental program can be interpreted as a first step out of the familiar, secure, and controlled context of his home organization. Even though Jim chose the program because it seemed to him " *a perfect match* " to his perception of leadership, it still takes him into the unknown and into a context of comparison and influence. Moreover, the word " *constitution* " applies the vocabulary of the trait-oriented leader discourse, and Jim's choice of this word echoes the discursive position of people having unchangeable constitutions, e.g. given natures or traits. I interpret this as an example of how leaders make use of narrative resources provided by leader discourses to explain leader identity to themselves and to others. Here, the trait-oriented discourse is introduced by Jim to explain, support, and maybe even excuse a specific tension. The storyline is used to explain and understand himself as leader, and " *constitution* " signals that control is a significant and maybe the dominant storyline in Jim's construction of identity. At the very end of the interview, Jim returns to the theme of control but relates it to development processes. Jim describes driving home from one of the ETP modules and suddenly realizing something new and surprising about control, i.e. about his storyline construct of letting go. Jim explains:

*Jim: "When you stop controlling everything and let go, then things that you want to happen, happen around you anyway. That is probably the most considerable change."*

In the above Jim is de-constructing his storyline of maximum control and tentatively re-constructing a story in which less control is desirable and safe. The story can be interpreted as Jim reassuring himself that good things come out of less control, or that his wishes and goals – e.g. " *the things you want to happen* " – will still be achieved. During the program, he has come to understand that he as a

person is central in changing the organization. Jim says that he realizes that not only what he does in everyday leader practice, but also who he is as a person, will be reflected in the organizational culture and norms. This leads him to connect his own personal development with the development of the organization: *“The process made evident that I have to develop for the organization to develop. That has become much clearer to me.”*

In the 2006 interview, Jim is looking back and reflecting about his own change processes. Some stories and storylines have been re-constructed, but at the same time, meaningful and important aspects of his leader identity have been preserved.

*Jim: “Well, I changed from the day I came to the day I went home. I changed but I did not change the picture in my head of who I wanted to be.”*

Jim’s narrative construction of whom he wants to be, i.e. his preferred identity story, becomes more concrete during the leader development program, but to Jim the essence of who he is stays the same, or as the quote indicates, the vision of his preferred leader identity is intact and may have become more concrete. In a control perspective, this can be interpreted as an attempt to control the developmental process. On one hand, he is excited and curiously interested in entering the developmental context of the ETP; on the other hand, he has already made up his mind and is mostly looking for affirmation. The story of the perfect match can be interpreted as positioning Jim in control of his own development process. The story of the perfect match is in this light a story of controlling the outcome, getting affirmation, and maybe preserving the status quo.

### ***Storyline 2: Values as a Filter***

In this next storyline construction, I analyze how Jim is unfolding and defining his personal values. I examine how this value identity work helps him envision his preferred leader identity and strengthen his sense of having a coherent and meaningful leader identity. In 2006, I went to interview Jim in his home organization. While waiting in the main lobby, I browsed through their quarterly customers’ magazine<sup>39</sup> and read the leading article, *“It is about people”*. In the article, Jim writes about organizational values and how values play out in relation to customers: how organizational values are the foundation for customer service, communication and product portfolio management. The following quotations are from the magazine and communicate values almost identical to the values Jim

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<sup>39</sup> Magazine, number 1, 2006. In Danish the chronicle title is: *“Det handler om mennesker”*.



defined for himself during the leader development program in 2005. Below are two illustrative quotes from the magazine:

*"In the bank, we have our own values; we call them "local values". In this case when we talk about values it is not the material values we are concerned with but the values that have to do with people."*

*"In the organization, we are very aware that happy, engaged, content and competent employees are what are most important in order to live up to and realize our ambitions. Also here, we have a strong position, and we constantly invest in our own professional and personal development."*

Jim distinguishes between material values and relational values; and the organization's core business involves material values. Thus, by emphasizing people and interaction, Jim is making a value statement that communicates, both externally and internally, what these values are. Jim specifies the developmental focus of the organization in relation to the employees: The key message is that people are the foundation for good business and that values are at the heart of the business. What the article does not tell us is that Jim is constructing organizational identity and values in his own image; the described organizational values are in alignment and close to identical with Jim's personal values. Being the CEO, Jim is central as a role model and in defining organizational values. In this case, Jim describes in the article organizational values that are nearly a perfect match with Jim's values as a person. In the light of Jim's control theme, introducing values in the organization can be seen as a top-down process with Jim in maximum control.

The value work Jim has implemented in his organization can be understood as a leveling device, by which Jim balances the control mechanisms of the financial organization with the humanistic values of respect and care he holds as a person. In constructing this storyline of "values as filter", Jim describes in detail how the organization has been working with values during the past year. He specifies each value and what it means to the way they conduct business and interact with customers and each other in the organization. Jim tells another story significant to his storyline of values as filter: Jim had a management consulting firm make a proposal on how to work with the organizational value of "active customer service". In the proposal presented by the consulting firm, training was only planned for the customer service functions. Jim strongly opposed this and insisted that every employee in the bank should be included in the value work and training sessions. In this story, Jim demonstrates that his fundamental values are at work

and are influencing decisions in practice. In this analysis, the story is positioned in the landscape of action as Jim experiencing a value violation. The story demonstrates the importance of values for Jim, and it demonstrates how he actively lives and acts on his values in his daily work. Thus, in telling the story, Jim is also positioning himself as a leader who acts on his beliefs, as well as an inclusive leader who takes care of everybody. The last position reflects another significant storyline of Jim's: the caring and including leader. This is not unfolded in detail in this analysis, but it is significant for Jim's overall narrative construction of identity.

Jim started working with identifying his personal values during the ETP program. While on vacation he read Stephen Covey's (2001) *Seven Habits of Effective People*, and this book inspired him to identify and write down his own personal values. These values are later described and integrated in his personal action plan, which Jim revised several times during the period from 2005-2007. Jim's values are first "*decency, being decent in relation to other people and in every business the organization is involved in*". The second is "*balance in all the things I do, privately and in business*". Jim explains that for him this means not being extreme, not allowing any black and white thinking but always acting in a balanced way with other people. Jim describes this as an attitude; that nothing is right or wrong and no one should be labeled incompetent or incapable. The third value is "*health*" and is about living a healthy life with exercise. Fourth is "*honest and loving*", which Jim relates to developing other people. Jim explains that for him this means giving feedback and telling others what you think so that people are not kept in the dark or in ignorance about themselves. For Jim, loving means being honest with people, i.e. communicating in a positive way without comparing and without making some people better than others. Jim stresses that what counts is a willingness to look at your own performance. Finally, Jim's last value is respect, "*...the last value stems from my home; it is called respect for other people*". He links this value to a story of his working-class background and his upbringing with five siblings. In retrospect, he has realized that no matter how different the lives of the siblings have turned out, they all share some fundamental values, and respect is one. Finally, he concludes or summarizes that all these values function as a filter for him:

*Jim: "These values are my own, and everything I do, I try to pour down that filter."*

These values function as a navigating device for Jim, by which he seeks support or guidance in relation to everyday action and decisions. This I interpret as a central

identity conclusion describing how values are essential to Jim's leader identity construction. This storyline of "values as filter" can be interpreted as representing a stabilizing factor in the face of identity struggles or identity work. Hence, Jim's values can be seen to provide a sense of stability and control in relation to situations where there is a threat of losing control and experiencing tensions from letting go. This further implies that the two storyline constructs dynamically interact; the value storyline has a function in leveling out or smoothing the experienced identity tension of letting go. Thus, it facilitates the re-construction of the control storyline by providing Jim with a sense of (value) stability and a sense of being in control of the developmental process, even when identity work is going on and identity storylines are in the making.

In 2006, a new director joined the organization's management team. Many discussions followed, in which the fundamental values of the business (as well as Jim) were at the center. Jim thinks the new director comes from what he calls a "harder organization", and he explains how the new director is a tremendous challenge to him personally, especially in regard to the value of respecting other people. In Jim's narrative, these discussions are an intense experience for him, and he describes that in hindsight the discussions moved both the organization and him forward. Jim tells the following story as an example of the conflicting dialogue and self-reflections emerging from discussions in the management team:

*Jim: "Typically, the new director would say: We have 185 employees; these employees are not all good; those who are not good, we have to fire, and then we have to hire someone else! That's just not who I am, so we had a forceful clash. And this thing about suddenly making individual goals visible – that does not work in our organization, or at least it does not work in my mind, anyway. But we have come a long way. We have had important discussions which have developed all of us to be more result-oriented, and that is to his merit. But the focus is the team and not the individual, and we are balancing on a knife's edge, because we have extremely competent and skilled employees who are willing to do almost anything, and they should not be measured from the time they get up in the morning until they go home at night. I fear things become worse this way. The exercise really is to create results and have respect for the individual human being at the same time. So that has been the biggest battle."*

The example shows how leader identity construction influences business decisions, that business decisions here are guided to a large extent by the individual leader's sense-making of identity, i.e. "who I am, and what is not me", that business

decision are also evaluated by whether they are in alignment with preferred identity construct more than being solely based on economic business considerations.

Jim describes his qualities as a leader as subdued and not obvious at first sight; his qualities as a leader become more visible over time, when he is engaged in a task in practice. He understands inclusion as an important part of his leader identity, and he describes inclusion as taking care of and making room for everybody. Jim refers back to the ETP group and their outdoor team-building exercise during the first module in order to explain:

*Jim: "My qualities as a leader appear when we have to solve concrete assignments together, and when people have to work together. Then you realize that I want to include everybody, and so did my group. When we returned from the forest, I had great influence on the goals we wanted to realize in our team-building. The goals were to be together as a team; that we should all come home in one piece; and then we should also win. Those were our goals, and I think I had quite an influence on forming those goals."*

In this way, Jim is positioning himself as the keeper of the weak, as the guard of inclusion and the preserver of the human sides of business, striving to protect and take care of everybody. Relating to his organization context, Jim unfolds stories of being a caring leader, one who feels for and is protective towards all employees. Jim constructs a storyline in which he again contrasts his past identity construct with the present and preferred identity construct. In the following dialogue, Jim unfolds a "softer" leader identity, and Jim explains how he earlier used to "be harder". He would react more emotionally towards employees, sometimes losing his temper, which Jim calls being in "the red zone".

*Jim. "I used to be harder, but I am not any more – well, in situations where the values are at stake, I can be hard but not within the values."*

*Gitte: "What was it earlier that would make you harder?"*

*Jim: "I don't know why it happened, but I guess it was my own need to control things."*

*Gitte: "And you think that has changed?"*

*Jim: "Yes, because I have gotten some other tools to handle it, and I can see that if you do things differently, then other people feel better, and then you get much better results."*

In the previously described disagreement with the new director, Jim argues from a position of inclusion. He wants to include instead of exclude people in his organization. This theme is linked to and co-constructs the storyline in Jim's leader identity of the caring and protective leader.

*Jim:” I have always had a tendency to carry other people’s burdens on my shoulders, to protect them instead of... (pause) I thought it was a good thing to do, and in fact it is not.”*

Jim's elaborates what it means to carry other people's burdens, describing how being protective (i.e. the caring storyline) influences his leader behavior when delegating. Jim explains that he has realized that employees have to make their own mistakes, and that he is in fact not helping them by either being overly controlling or by being overly protective and doing their jobs for them. Jim concludes that he now listens more than he used to in the past, when he was more forceful and directive when leading meetings. Jim explains that the directors give him feedback that they feel he has changed regarding this. Once more, Jim contrasts the past and the present identity constructs and includes feedback from others to support the identity conclusions he is making.

### ***Storyline 3: Feeling Safe***

So far Jim's case has been centered on the construction of the storyline of “*letting go*”. The following storyline is selected because it illustrates how Jim attempts to preserve a sense of control, even in the process of identity change. However, the storyline of feeling safe also provides insight into the challenges of developmental processes (e.g. identity work) by making the emotional aspects of identity work come to the surface.

The financial organization in which Jim is CEO is traditionally characterized by virtues of stability, reliability and security. It is in this context that Jim has carried out his practice as a leader for 22 years and constructed his leader identity. This context has to be considered as a denominator for the narrative construction of control and for understanding the storyline of “*feeling safe*”. In the organizational context, control is expected and positively rewarded, and Jim's focus on control and “*number-fun*” is very likely to have contributed to his success as a leader and brought him to his current position. However, Jim narrates that maybe he has taken this virtue to its limits, and Jim starts defining control as a problem story more than

a preferred story. The identity storyline of “*feeling safe*” reveals more aspects of the complexity of Jim's narrative identity construction process. The storyline construction begins when Jim asks himself rhetorically whether he really has control of things. In narratives, Jim is reflecting about how he continually pays attention to development goals and avoids slipping into old control modes. He says:

*Jim: "It is something that has to be worked on all the time, and then there is the situation... do I really have it under control"*

Jim describes how identity work makes demands on his attention and introduces a feeling of insecurity in him; his reflective questioning is linked to his problem storyline of control and his struggle to let go. Jim connects this story of reflective questioning to another story. Jim has been reading the Blue Ocean strategy book, and his initial thought is to introduce this book to the board to use as the foundation for strategy work. Continuing his self-reflective narrative, he understands that this as an indirect attempt to control the strategy process. He explains how he tries to redirect his own thinking to try instead to approach the strategy seminar with the vision of involving and empowering the directors by using his positional power and control to make certain things happen that are on his own agenda:

*Jim: "...now I think about how I can best prepare the board to take the strategic discussions and not just let Jim get his way – that's the difference."*

This to Jim is “*letting go*”, and the hardest job is to close his eyes and keep believing that everything will be all right. In leader meetings, he still feels most comfortable directing things and controlling the output, but he feels he is working in the right direction. Jim legitimizes his identity re-construction by stating that he is not letting go for his own sake; instead, the identity re-construction is to benefit his employees. This way Jim aligns the identity re-construction with his storyline of care and protecting others. This alignment may facilitate identity work and ease the emotional tension of doing something that he feels uncomfortable doing. He explains that he “*is tired of*” being the dominant decision maker and that he has to “*open up*” and give directors more influence. He explains how feeling secure in his position is vital to his ability to change, that he can only let go if he feels safe and secure in his position. He emphasizes having been in the job for some years, and receiving positive feedback and evaluations from the board of directors makes him feel safer in his position and makes it easier for him to engage in and focus on changing (i.e. identity work). Thus, feeling safe is a prerequisite for re-constructing the problem storyline of control and leader identity.

*Jim: "In my universe, if you do not have a secure foundation, then you cannot change, then you use you resources on other things."*

Jim is engaged in identity work, struggling with balancing control and letting go. The re-construction process causes emotional tensions as indicated in this last storyline on the importance of feeling safe and having a sense of security. In this perspective, Jim's storyline construction can be interpreted as handling the tensions of identity work. The narrative construction of leader identity in the three storylines illustrates how Jim attempts to manage the emotional tension of re-constructing storylines. In narratives and stories, Jim is working to tolerate the tension of not being in control of change processes. In Jim's case, emotional unease and insecurity are at odds with the process of identity re-construction. In summary, the storylines are:

### **Storyline 1: Letting Go**

1. Narrative of identity conclusion: Jim concludes that his biggest change has been to let go.
2. Narrative of identity experience: Jim receives feedback from wife and middle-manager Paul.
3. Narrative of identity experience: Jim exercises too much control and is a bottleneck.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: Jim concludes that he represents something else today.
5. Narrative of identity conclusion: Jim concludes that letting go is an act of balancing control.

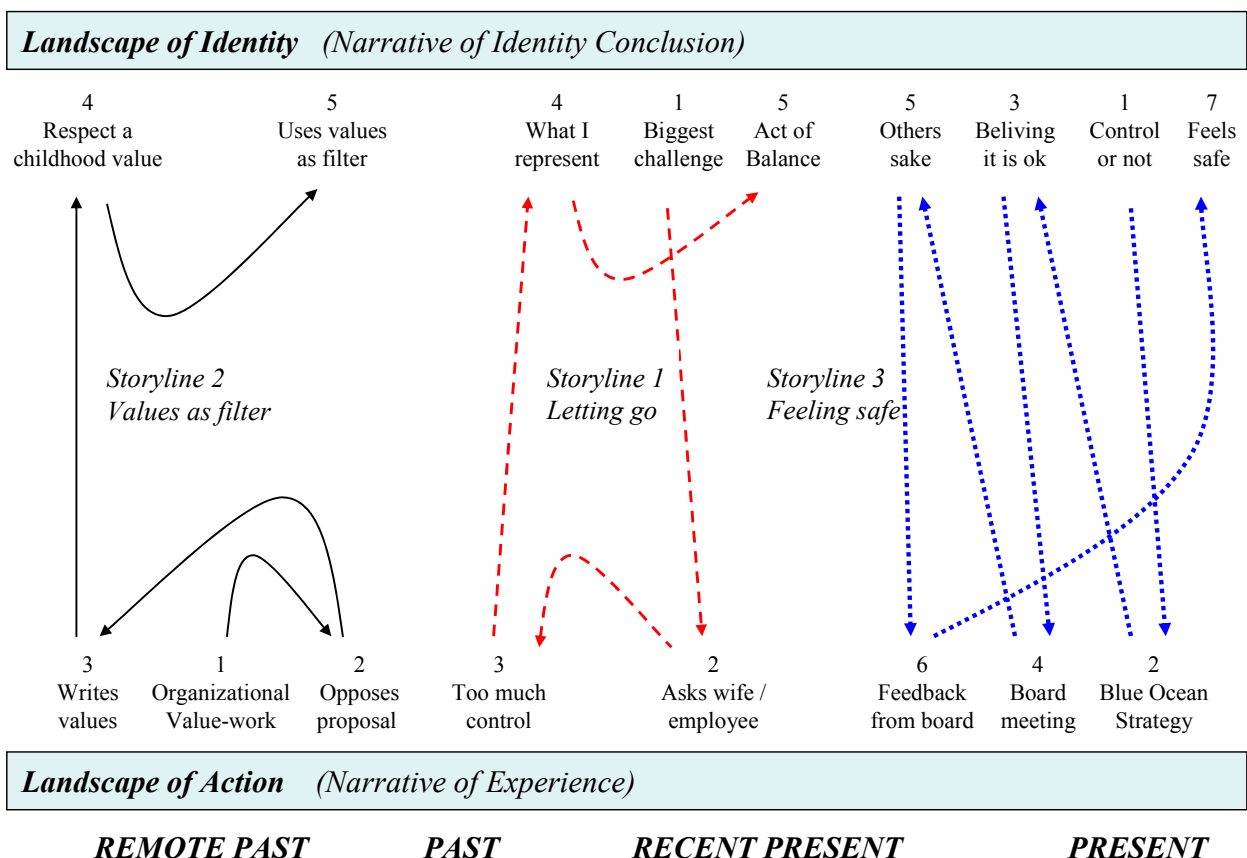
### **Storyline 2: Values as a Filter**

1. Narrative of experience: Jim works with values in the organization.
2. Narrative of experience: Jim makes a value correction to consultant proposal.
3. Narrative of experience: Jim describes and concretizes his personal values.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: Jim concludes that respect is an important childhood value.
5. Narrative of identity conclusion: Jim concludes that values function as a filter for his leadership.

### Storyline 3: Feeling Safe

1. Narrative of identity conclusion: Jim concludes that control has to be constantly monitored.
2. Narrative of experience: Jim uses Blue Ocean Strategy book to control management team.
3. Narrative of identity conclusion: Jim concludes that the hardest is to believe everything will be ok.
4. Narrative of experience: Jim takes too much control at board meeting.
5. Narrative of identity conclusion: Jim concludes that it is necessary to let go for the sake of the others.
6. Narrative of experience: Jim receives positive feedback from management team.
7. Narrative of identity conclusion: Jim concludes that a secure foundation is necessary to change.

#### Display 7-2 Storyline Map – Jim 2006



The storyline map illustrates how Jim is using narratives of experiences to support and confirm the conclusions he is making in the landscape of identity. This is especially evident in the construction of storyline 1, where Jim narrates eliciting feedback from others (landscape of action) to confirm his identity conclusions in



the landscape of identity. Furthermore, the narrative construction of storyline 3 illustrates how Jim crisscrosses between narratives of identity conclusions to narratives of experiences in constructing the identity storyline of feeling safe. Hence, narrative construction of identity emerges in the linking of narratives of experiences and narratives of identity conclusions within particular thematic storylines. And again, Jim's storyline map shows how the narrator flexibly links narratives from the past with narratives of the present to construct and make sense of who he is, exemplified here in storyline 2: Values as Filter.

This section has illustrated how identity work introduces tension and insecurity; thus, the introductory quote precludes the story that Jim is primarily seeking affirmation of his own ideas of leadership. He has chosen the ETP program, because to a great extent it matches what he perceives to be his preferred leader identity. He thereby defines his developmental goal as receiving confirmation of the leader identity and the values he already holds. At that point in time, the "*perfect match*" approach seems ideal to Jim, but in retrospect it may have limited his perceived gain from the leader development program, as the next section, which is based on the interview in 2007, shows. Furthermore, there is something double-edged about Jim's conceptualization of the care and control leader. On one hand, Jim constructs his identity as a caring and protective leader that in the past was harder, i.e. more focused on the business and number-fun. On the other hand, the former control has been transformed or re-constructed into a leader identity construct in which development is in focus, and where Jim challenges his directors to change and is engaged in conversations with them with a developmental focus. This can be interpreted as the former control of business and numbers has been re-constructed into control of value alignment and demands for personal development in the job, which can be understood as just another form of control.

### **7.3 An Open Ending... Storyline Reconstruction and Continued Struggles**

This section is based on the empirical material from the 2007 interview, and the aim is to examine significant events, experiences and identity conclusions made by Jim in 2007, relative to the previously narrated problem stories and preferred stories of leader identity.

## **Storyline Reconstruction and Tensions**

In the 2007 interview, Jim describes his current organizational situation as one of considerable strength. The financial markets have recently been under pressure, and Jim's economic dispositions have proved beneficial and have helped the organization sustain a stable position in the overall financial unrest. Jim emphasizes how this situation adds to the credibility of his leadership and has strengthened his internal position as leader. Jim explains that the organization's internal environment is in good shape, and he perceives the employees to have developed tremendously over the past two years. In the top management team, two leaders have just been promoted along with the HR consultant who is now appointed HR manager. The HR manager was hired in 2005, and according to Jim, he has contributed and been a driving force in internal organizational development. Jim summarizes:

*Jim: "I must say that professionally, when I look back, I have never before felt as certain and so good in the organization. I mean personally, to have as good an organization as I have now, I have never felt that before."*

## **Value Based Leadership and Control**

In 2005 and 2006, Jim described how he used values as guidelines for leadership. Jim now says that he does not just implement one value at a time; instead, all values are activated, "*because the values fit me*". Jim only needs to refocus and remind himself of the values every now and then. He first formulated his values during the ETP program in 2005, and since then, he has been using values as a filter, as a guide in his day-to-day leadership and in living his life, as already described. In 2007, Jim concludes: "*The overarching focus for me is to live up to my own values, that is the motivating power for me,*"

He explains that currently the toughest thing is to find time for dialogue with the employees; he wishes that everyone entering the organization should have a personal talk with him as part of the introduction to the organization, regardless of the type of work they do or the job they hold. This is an example of Jim's value of respect: "*treating everybody equally and showing respect*", and it also reflects Jim's storyline of inclusion and being a caring leader, as described in the previous analysis. This has resulted in a value clash between Jim, the new board member, and the HR manager. They both think Jim is overdoing it and that this level of inclusion is just unnecessary, but Jim insists and is still involved at eight locations. Jim legitimizes his decision by saying that employees further down the hierarchical

chain support and appreciate it. Even though Jim finds the face-to-face dialogue extremely important, he simultaneously finds it difficult to physically get around to everybody. In addition, his value of being inclusive and showing respect by being in dialogue with all employees is in conflict with his wish to reduce his working hours, which he has not yet been able to do. Jim explains feeling that he is now doing other things that he is better at as a leader, but he is still using many hours at work. Jim tells the story of how strong organizational values are reflected in their recruiting process. Recently, there have been examples of people who were recruited, but who did not match the organizational values and have since left the organization. Jim's explanation is that they did not fit in because they wanted to get ahead "*at the expense of other people*", which to him is not acceptable and contradictory to the value of respect and equality that according to Jim prevails in the organization.

In 2006, Jim told the story of a new director who challenged him and his values. In the 2007 interview, he says that the director is still in the organization, and that "*he has developed a lot and has also developed us*". Again, Jim uses the plural "us" and avoids talking about himself and how the director has influenced him. Jim describes the current management team as very diverse, and he is currently experiencing a challenge with "*my man*", referring to the new director in a slightly ironic way. Jim describes the new director to be different from the rest of the management team, but he emphasizes this as positive, but as the following story shows, the interaction and differences are not insignificant. Jim tells that the employee appraisal with the new director lasted a full day. I asked Jim to elaborate, and he responded that the director did not accept anything and kept on arguing. The full day talk ended with a take-it-or-leave-it proposal, which the director eventually accepted after what Jim considers was "*a long tough fight but also a development in the right direction*". This story leaves the impression that Jim, by virtue of his positional power, is controlling the output and is pressuring the director to comply. One of the issues Jim is concerned with is that the new director, in Jim's perception, is not taking care of the whole organization but is concerned only about his own area of responsibility. Jim feels that when you are part of the management team, you are responsible for the whole and not just part of the organization. I ask Jim what his biggest challenge is in leading this director, and Jim says: "*That I really cannot understand the way he thinks*".

Jim is again constructing his leader identity based on and legitimized by values. He sees his personal values as central to leading the organization, but the story reflects

more a combination of control and exercising positional power. Jim is actively narrating control as an anti-identity construct and is volunteering stories of values to describe his leadership.

*Jim: "I love goal-oriented leadership and a form of value-based leadership, which is not real value-based leadership because I cannot figure out how a pure value-based leadership would work for our organization. In the financial sector, there are many examples of financial organizations that are having trouble with government inspection, and there are lots of restrictive rules that must be followed by all financial organizations, and these do not match very well with value-based leadership."*

*Gitte: "Mmm?"*

*Jim: "In our organization, we try to do something in between, and it works - that I can assure you, but where it will end, we just don't know."*

In Jim's narratives value-based, leadership is positioned in opposition to the restrictive rules. He sees the security demands and rules to be at the heart of the financial sector. Thereby, Jim is legitimizing strong control by referring to "*financial sector regulation*" as an explanatory factor, and he is making his organization a special case, e.g. by the phrase "*if it works for our organization*". Indirectly, Jim places great emphasis on values as guides for leadership, but he simultaneously does not trust values to stand alone. Jim has a strong conviction that values should be supported by strong control. This introduces a tension in Jim's narratives, as he has to balance his strong value of respect, protection and care for the employees with his strong need to control others and to be in charge of the organization. I return and unfold this observation in chapter 11, Paradox of the Leader Occupation.

### **Delegating and Staying in Control**

In 2006, Jim described how the control storyline resulted in micro-managing and involvement. Now, Jim describes how he sometimes just "*closes his ears and eyes to seeing what happens*". He purposefully refrains from intervening to allow employees to make their own mistakes. To Jim, this is an example of him "*letting go*" and behaving less controlling than before.

*Jim: "Yes, let them take responsibility and then coach them instead, and then when you can see the problem, we discuss what needs to be aligned."*

The LEA360 re-test report indicates a discrepancy between Jim's perception that he is increasingly delegating and the low scores from the direct reports and colleagues. Low scores on this dimension from those respondents indicates that Jim is not delegating as much, or that the way he delegates still leaves the impression that he is in charge or somewhat involved in the delegated task. In the interview, Jim is both surprised by this and reacts with disappointment. Jim says that he is disappointed because his effort to let go and empower people around him by delegating is not reflected in the 360LEA report scores from 2007. Jim concludes: *"Well, the score has to be in accordance with the truth, but it is not in accordance with the picture I would like to have on delegating"*.

### **Identity Story in Plural**

The new HR manager is mentioned often in the 2007 interview, and Jim describes them as sharing a mission and having the same view on developing others.

*Jim: "But otherwise we are developing; our HR manager is extremely good at that: the personal development of the individual, to analyze or do profile analysis of the employees. That has been very good and a lot of people have developed themselves. It really fits our values to say that everybody can develop themselves, no out-phasing without having tried development – and it works!"*

Again Jim is answering my questions about his own personal and professional development very reluctantly, and he is still using the noun "we" when answering questions posed to him in the singular. The following is an example from the 2007 interview:

*Gitte: "If we look back, focusing on yourself, what have you been occupied with this last year?"*

*Jim: "(sighing) Puhhh"*

*Gitte: "Regarding yourself, your family, or your own development?"*

*Jim: "(long pause) Hmm, I don't know. I don't know; now I just have to think (pause/thinking) No... (thinking again). You could say... yes, what is important to me is the long and hard struggle to develop the organization and the employees. That is extremely important to me. That is the professional part, and the private... (thinking). Well, I think that of course my wife and children develop in the directions they wish. My wife has gone back to having a full time job again, which is fine. I mean the youngest is 19 years old and at his last year*

*at school. But otherwise I don't think there is anything revolutionary about it...."*

*Jim: "I remember especially from the start I felt that the more I could let go of control and develop others, the more happens around me, and that is what has happened. So about me you could say that I am more at peace with myself than I use to be. And I have done some of the things that the group recommended; I have not taken a motorcycle license yet, but I have become a hunter and that is one of the things I have always dreamt about."*

In becoming a hunter, Jim has entered a new context. He describes how hunting takes him into new social circles, meeting different people and expanding his network. He mentions that the employees were surprised by this initiative, thought "*he did not have it in him*" and that it was very unlikely that he could kill an animal. This story reflects the soft and hard dichotomy themes from 2006. It also positions the hunter identity as different from the caring and protecting identity construct the employees may be referring to.

### **Negotiated Subject Positions**

Jim's choice of a leader development program, which he considers a "perfect match", can be interpreted as a negotiation of change. When choosing to match the program with the values and ideas he already holds, Jim limits the possibility for others to influence him (i.e. his leader identity construct) in any direction outside his control. In this way, the case of Jim can be interpreted as an act of negotiating or perhaps of avoiding development, and as an act of seeking to control the developmental process. Jim stated that he wanted confirmation of "*the picture*" in his head and that is what he is getting; however, at the end of the last interview two and one-half years later, he expresses that he feels disappointed for not having been more courageous in developing himself.

The control storyline is accentuated in different social situations during the ETP program and in Jim's narratives of his interactions in the home organization. In ETP, Jim positions himself in control of the situation, often as the leader of group activities. As an example, Jim states that he "*...cannot wait to get the group working in the next ELTEC assignment*", which suggests that Jim is the leader and in control of the exercise and not part of the group. In the group, Jim quickly negotiates a position as a leader role model, especially for some of the group members, whereby he is admired and receiving confirmation of his leader identity construct. Still, in the ETP program, Jim seems less focused on his own

development and more concerned and preoccupied with the development of the others. This positioning resembles the identity storyline of Jim as the developer of others in his organization. Although in the interviews and the leader development program, Jim positions the control storyline as a problem story, Jim negotiates “development” and control by positioning himself as the developer of others in the program as well as in his home organization, where he also recruited an HR consultant to help Jim reinforce the personnel's personal development.

In Jim’s identity narrative, two leader identity balances are accentuated. The first is the balancing of control and care. Jim legitimizes control as care or protection, as described in the previous analysis in relation to delegation, empowering others and his involvement with newcomers. The second is the balancing of control and development illustrated by Jim’s stories of perfect matching and staying in control of the development process and illustrated in the storyline of feeling safe, which I interpret as implying identity work struggles. Jim concludes that “*feeling safe*” is a prerequisite for developing and re-constructing leader identity, but re-construction involves struggling and a sense of being out of control, in unknown territory. Jim is still struggling with this negotiation and balancing of control and development, and maybe he realizes this for the first time in the last part of the 2007 interview quoted below. Thus, Jim’s dominating storyline of control, which is narrated as “*letting go*”, is detrimental to the re-construction of leader identity. At the very beginning, Jim legitimized his choice of a perfect match program by saying, “*...this might not be wise ...but that’s the way I am*”. Jim is still not in a “burning platform” situation of change; thus, the motivation to change is “*my own force and motivation*”. This position may also have contributed to the following storyline of finding courage, which is the open ending for Jim’s identity narrative. Thus, Jim’s narratives can be read as a story of being comfortable in the leader identity he already holds, with no immediate organizational pressure or incentive to change in the current situation.

### **Concluding Reflections – Looking Back**

In the last interview in June 2007, I ask Jim to try to summarize his thoughts and reflections on the developmental journey he has been on for the last almost three years. The following dialogue is what followed:

*Gitte: “If you as the very last thing should give a picture of yourself as a leader from 2005 until now, what would be the headlines? What have you been most preoccupied with, or do you think you have changed since then?”*

*Jim: “(laughing) I knew that before we started, but now I don’t know.”*

*Gitte: "What do you mean?"*

*Jim. "Well, all this time I thought it was about letting go, and I really thought that it had changed a lot more than it did – to me that is disappointing."*

*Gitte: "Hmm, why do you think it hasn't changed more - do you have a theory? Or maybe just shoot from the hip."*

*Jim: "I think I haven't had the courage, and this in fact is what I try to make all the others do. I try to get the others to let go and make sure that they believe that other people can do their job. This proves that I myself am not able to do it."*

*Gitte: "Maybe that is a good moral to end this?"*

*Jim: "Yes, I think so, too - then the whole course has not been a waste of time after all"  
(both laugh).*

The open ending for Jim is realizing that he has been refocusing his developmental effort towards making other people change and has thereby neglected (i.e. avoided) his own development. In the above quote, this insight emerges in the interview, as Jim reflects on his feelings of disappointment with himself and concludes that he has not had the courage to do what he demands of others. In my reading, this is an important reflective insight for Jim, because it links to his core storyline of letting go, showing how the control identity construct has been detrimental to Jim's wish for change and to his first formulation of "*a time for innovation and change*". Therefore, Jim has controlled the uncontrollable by his perfect match strategy. I understand Jim's introduction of the word "courage" as a key to potential future deconstruction of the control storyline, as "*courage*" in a narrative therapeutic perspective can be understood as the prelude to an alternative storyline construction. In this way, this last story points toward possible future identity constructs for Jim.



# 8

## Ben - The Story of Coincidence

*“... for me it was a question about becoming a leader by coincidence, if I can put it that way. I have not strived to become a leader, but have become a leader qua my qualifications. I felt I needed to work with or find out about my leadership, and I had to think more about leadership in my daily work. Especially, the relations I had with people in my team, where I could see that I could do things better and different. Perhaps I felt a little frustrated in my leader role sometimes, because I didn't feel I had the right leadership tools to solve some of the leader challenges I had – those were my reasons to get more access to leadership that was not tied into my professional qualifications” (Ben, 2006).*

### 8.1 A Beginning...Themes of Tension

Ben is the chief editor of a professional monthly magazine; the organization is a trade and interest organization with more than 200,000 paying members. Ben is in his late forties and has held his current position for about 15 years, and has approximately ten direct reports, primarily academic. Ben has a high school certificate but has no formal education in journalism. He was head-hunted for the position by the former CEO due to his journalistic qualifications. In March 2005 at the start of the leader development program, a new CEO entered the organization that was very focused on leadership. The new CEO requested that Ben support him in making an external communication strategy and branding initiative. This resulted in Ben moving into an office next to the CEO, away from the editorial offices and his staff. Prior to the chief editorial position, Ben had a leader position for four years in a private organization, and before that he was self-employed, leading a small company with a couple of employees. All together, Ben had held leading positions for approximately 25 years at the time of the program start in March 2005.

In the first introductory exercise, Ben has to describe why he is a good leader. Ben emphasizes that he is visionary and enthusiastic about his field and is perceived by others to be reliable. Ben says, he leads by giving people a lot of autonomy and is generally empathetic and understands that people have a life outside work. Ben describes his aim for participating in the program, and the tensions he experiences. The overarching theme is whether *“to be or not to be a leader”*.

Ben describes his goals for participating in the program as follows:

- “To become more me in the leader role”
- “To become more distinct and clear in my leadership”<sup>40</sup>
- “To increase my impact and be better at conflict management”<sup>41</sup>

Then, Ben narrates what is to unfold as one of the most dominating storylines in his narrative identity, as he tells the group about how he became a leader:

*Ben: “What I usually say is that I became a leader by coincidence.”*

The LEA360 feedback report, which is given to the leaders during module 1, is an integrated part of the remaining modules in the ETP program. A general observation in Ben’s LEA360 report from 2005 indicates that Ben has a tendency to assess himself more critically than his respondents. This is especially evident in the LEA360 Team Playing scores. Team Playing indicates how the leader is perceived to cooperate and to seek consensus with the team on decisions, and the high scores imply that Ben is perceived to be team-oriented by the respondents. Ben scores himself in the low or low middle section, which implies that he does not think Team-Playing is characteristic of his leadership, nor does he consider it one of his strengths. However, his direct reports perceive this to be typical of his leader behavior, and particularly the score on Consensus differs from Ben’s self-assessment. Interpreting the LEA360 scores, the direct reports perceive Ben to behave very consensus-oriented, with the highest possible score (99%) and with high agreement between the respondents. This indicates that this is a significant perception regarding Ben’s leadership.

The LEA360 report also indicates three other areas of interest for Ben. According to the scores, Ben perceives that he is not delegating enough or is somehow struggling with Delegation, but his direct reports indicate that he does delegate assignments and assess Ben with a high-middle score (80%). In the LEA360 interpretative framework, a leader’s delegating score is always related to scores on two other dimensions, Control and Feedback. Examining these shows that Ben is assessed by all groups of respondents, including himself, to be very low (15% and 5%) on both of these dimensions. This indicates that Ben may be delegating, but he is not following up on delegated assignments nor giving others feedback. The last

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<sup>40</sup> In Danish. Ben’s expression is: “*komme på banen*”, which has the connotation of meeting a challenge.

<sup>41</sup> In Danish the word is: “*gennemslagskraft*”.

significant score in Ben's LEA360 report is Ben's own scores on the dimension Management Focus, regarding a leader's willingness to lead. It is at the low end for all respondents (except for colleagues, it is low-middle). This can be interpreted in the LEA360 framework as indicating ambivalence or disinterest in being in charge and influencing others through feedback and follow-up. Also Ben's own score on the Dominant dimension is very low (5%), which in a facilitator perspective, when considered together with the high consensus scores perceived by others, is interpreted to indicate conflict avoidance or uneasiness with disagreements.

In April 2005 during Module 2, Ben explains to the group that he has moved from the management corridor office back to the editorial department, to sit among the journalists. Ben's move has an immediate positive effect in the department, by removing some internal power struggles that had flourished in his absence. But most importantly, the move is significant for Ben's construction of identity. He feels once more that he is contributing to making the product – "*the making of the Magazine*", and he tells how this makes him much more content with his job.

During the third module, Ben updates the group on his leader development progress, saying that he has never felt as weak and exhausted before. He has just had a very stressful period at work and feels his energy is slipping up. Ben describes pushing assignments in front of him instead of solving them, increasing his feeling of stress and of being under pressure. Part of his personal project from the second module was to follow up on employee assignments more closely, but it does not seem to him to make any difference.

At Module 4 in September 2005, Ben has his 2½-hour coaching session with the group. Ben wants to work with conflict management – how to manage conflicts when they occur, or preferably before they turn into conflicts. Ben narrates that part of his struggles with conflict management has to do with "*being candid and saying things as they are*". Another theme of struggle that Ben brings forward is "*displacement activities*", which he often engages in when trying to avoid something unpleasant. He procrastinates by engaging in less tense activities. In the coaching session, Ben focuses on getting himself more into the leader role, emphasizing that he needs more power and conflict management skills. Sometimes, he feels that he is taken advantage of by others because he is too indulgent. Ben thinks he needs to learn "*to get things done*", because this has major consequences in daily work when issues that were not problems to begin with, end up being problematic because they are handled too late.

During the coaching session, Ben identifies the identity story as “*I just don’t want to hurt anybody*”. This is a major impediment to him for solving problems and acting more empowered as a leader. Ben describes feeling guilty if the other person is hurt. He feels responsible for poor employee performance but mostly keeps criticism or negative feedback to himself. However, these identity construction stories are creating a situation in which his energy is drained, and where he would rather redo work instead of telling employees to correct things, or teaching them how to do better. Alternatively, he gives employees negative feedback too late in the work process, which causes the conflicts he is trying to avoid in the first place. Ben is aware of the link between the drain of energy he feels and the passive dissatisfaction with poor employee performance that he summons:

*” I am draining myself with all the things I am not saying.”*

The coaching session ends with four concrete pieces of advice and one crazy, out-of-the-box piece of advice from the group. The group advice for Ben is framed in the following way:

*“We believe you need;*

- *Concrete tools to handle “difficult employee conversations”*
- *A positional lift upwards in relation to the employees in the department in order to give you more space to navigate and to act as the leader for the group, instead of being part of the group*
- *To accept that you are the leader, that you can be “the friendly boss” and still take unpleasant decisions; accept you are not cronies with the employees, you are alone*
- *To structure what you do and use time to improve yourself, think things through*
- *To play rugby; shout, be loud, and be physically dominant”*

Ben’s status in the personal project is feeling pleased about the very positive feedback in the ELTEC exercise, where he played the part of the CEO. This experience has made him aware of the behavior and activities he carries out that are actually working well. Still, he wants to continue to focus on getting “*more me*” into his leader role, and to step up to the plate as a leader. In relation to his LEA360 results, Ben now emphasizes the Dominant dimension, indicating that he still has to work on exercising power and taking charge. The other focus area in LEA360 is the Control dimension, which has to do with following through on delegated tasks and insuring that deadlines are kept. During the fourth module, Ben does not mention

the formerly described tension of feeling pressured into a people-oriented leader role and feeling stress from the increased demands of a relation- orientated leader identity instead of the task-oriented leader identity he has preferred until now.

In the display, I present the significant constructions of problem stories and preferred stories in Ben’s narratives during the ETP program in 2005. The display is to be interpreted as my analysis of how Ben is constructing identity in narratives of problem stories and preferred stories. The wording of each story is kept close to the wording used by Ben; but when in *italics*, the story is directly quoted from Ben. Although not all stories are unfolded in detail in this dissertation, the display reflects the rich multi-faceted character of leader identity constructions in Ben's case.

**Display 8-1 Ben: Problem Stories, Preferred Stories and Consequences**

<b>Stories focusing on</b>	<b>Problem Stories</b>	<b>Consequences of problem stories</b>	<b>Preferred Stories</b>	<b>Consequences of preferred stories</b>
<b>Personal Themes</b>	Becoming a leader by coincidence	Is less focused on leader role	Being <i>More Me</i> in leadership	Act more authentically in leader role
	Having a strong professional identity	Is less interested in leading people; it comes with the job	Having stronger leader role and people skills in addition to professional identity	Be successful with people-oriented leadership. Stay in the present organization
	Being unplanned and not goal-oriented	Wishes for changes	Keeping promises to myself and use planning to structure work	Reaching his goals
<b>Relational Themes</b>	Being number autistic, having poor memory of social interaction	Has no relational focus	Being a people leader	Being in front of the group and strategically directive
	Avoiding conflicts	Waits too long increasing conflicts and wasting time and energy	Having more courage to take action	Minimizing conflicts, better work climate, more energy
	Delegating the best and most popular assignments	Works too much and takes the boring and tedious tasks himself	Demanding more of his employees	Producing better products and more satisfying work

<b>Organizational Themes</b>	New CEO with focus on leading people	Feeling competence loss and self-doubt	Returning to fun professional role	Regaining charge and a less strenuous work situation
	Increasing demands and new expectations on how to lead	Experiences stress, limited short-term memory	Wishing he was goal-orientated and planned more	Re-establishing fun and ease at work
	Interfering in his department's day-to-day work	Experiences work as stressful and not enjoyable	Wishing he was action-oriented and more courageous	Reliving stress and feelings of pressure

## 8.2 A Middle Ground... Narrative Construction of Identity in Storylines

This section is based on the interview in 2006 and presents my analysis of Ben's narrative construction of identity with focus on narrative construction processes in a temporal perspective. In the following, I emphasize and unfold in detail three significant storylines to illustrate Ben's identity work and the storyline construction processes and progression of his case. Besides the three storyline constructs, the following presentation integrates more storyline constructs in order to bring forward nuances and give more insight into particular identity struggles in Ben's case; however, all storylines are not unfolded to the same extent, the focus being primarily on the three core storylines.

### *Storyline 1: Leader by Coincidence*

Ben has functioned as a leader for over 25 years, and when asked how he became a leader, his first remark is still that he became a leader by coincidence. The one overarching storyline in Ben's narrative is that his professional qualifications, his abilities as a skilled journalist, are what have made him enter the leader occupation. According to his own reflections, he never strived to become a leader but was mostly interested in and motivated by making the product: "*creating the magazine*". The journalistic writing of the magazine and the exercise of professional judgment is what gives him job satisfaction. His entrance into his current position is narrated as the result of his professional journalistic abilities more than anything else.

*Ben: "I usually say that I became a leader by coincidence. I am one of those leaders who have a professionalism that has resulted in a leader job. I am good*

*at producing the magazine, but I'm not necessarily a good leader, and that was why I signed up for a leader course – to get a better grip of my leader qualifications. So it was never a... it was more the way it just happened for me.”*

In the work context, Ben's identity is strongly defined by his professional competence and skills. He describes the task as what enriches him. The story of coincidence I interpret as a story of passive choice or non-reflected choice, which over time has come to have significant consequences for Ben's identity construction and ability to reconstruct an alternative identity, as the following analysis demonstrates. In the interview, Ben explains that he really enjoys making decisions and exercising leadership regarding the professional side of the leader occupation, e.g. the tasks and activities connected with his trade, but he does not like or finds the “*relational side*” of the leader occupation more challenging and potentially less interesting to him.

*Ben: “My leader style reflects this. I am very (pause)... delegating, or I need the people I have to be very independent for me to thrive. I am not good at telling people they should pull themselves together; instead, I expect them to run their jobs. And I have been fortunate in that the vast majority have been like that.... So in that sense, it has been easy for me to be a leader, it just sort of happened.”*

Ben's preference for task-oriented leadership is narrated as if the employees in his department do not really need the kind of leadership that he does not want to execute and finds difficult. Ben positions task-oriented leadership as different than and in opposition to relational-oriented leadership. The terminology of task versus relation is common in leadership literature and is found in the widespread Situational Leadership Model (Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson, 2008). Hence, Ben is drawing from the behavior-oriented leader discourse in this storyline construction. He likes parts of the leader occupation (the task-oriented demands), and he dislikes other parts of it (the relational-oriented demands). Hitherto, he has been able to lead with the task at the center of his leadership, but now with the entrance of the new CEO, relation-orientated leadership is becoming more important. Ben describes feeling increasingly pressured to do what he dislikes and that he increasingly feels incompetent. At the same time, there is more interference between departments, resulting in his dispositions being questioned by others in the organization. Ben has to react to such interference, which results in an accumulation of more relational work and social interaction and less time to do what he cherishes.

When Ben describes himself in relation to the leader role, his language consistently has a negative connotation or a hint of irony – for example: *“I have an unfortunate ability to always say yes”*. Ben uses the coincidence story to explain and partly excuse the difficulties he has in finding his way in the leader occupation. In the interview, he describes how he *“came into leadership backwards”*, and he still describes *“having his back to leadership”* even though his mission in the leader development program was to face himself as a leader, which as his developmental goal he formulated as to become *“more me”* in leadership. At the outset of the leader development program, his proclaimed goal was to gain more knowledge about himself as a leader. Ben’s participation and identity work is very much driven by the CEO’s agenda and demands for a particular form of leadership in the organization. In this situation, Ben is obviously under pressure to do something, to work on his leader skills, but since Ben never chose the leader occupation and still thinks that *“leadership sort of comes with the job”*, it can be interpreted as Ben having not accepted being a leader. He does not identify with being a leader and is perhaps not willing to construct a leader identity in accordance with the CEO’s wishes. In Ben’s identity construction, being a leader of people is secondary to the real work, which in Ben’s construction is defined as task-oriented engagement in the journalist craft of writing for the magazine.

### ***Storyline 2: Where my heart lies***

In the interview in 2006, Ben is again telling the story of how he moved from the office next to the CEO back to the editorial department. This move signifies more than moving from the management corridors; it is a metaphorical move away from the leader identity and closer to the professional identity and craft. Ben tells the story of this conversation with the CEO, describing the move as a way of following his heart:

*Ben: “I told him that I thought we should consider if we had the right organizational construction where I was doing a little of both. I felt I was doing left-hand work, and that it was hard for me to do it wholeheartedly. I just didn’t have the time. Then, he asked what I preferred, and I said that it was the magazine that was closer to my heart.”*

Obviously, Ben’s heart is not in leadership, and this storyline of following his heart in a diachronic view positions leadership as a matter of the mind. Ben has not only a conflict between organizational demands and his own desires. He is also struggling with the dilemma of doing what he likes or doing what he is supposed to



do – the identity struggle to balance pleasure with duty and autonomy with the organizational demands.

During Ben's absence from the editorial department, there were some internal "power struggles" between some of the leading people. Upon his return, these problems cease. In Ben's self-reflective narrative, he feels that this has to do with his mere presence, not any actions on his part. This could be interpreted as a confirmation of Ben's coincidence storyline, implying that things happen by coincidence. Ben has impacted the employees almost unwillingly, but his identity conclusion is again a story of passive leading rather than about taking concrete and distinct actions as a leader. Ben narrates that he receives positive feedback from the employees; they are more satisfied now that he is back in the department. In narratives, Ben describes himself as having a natural authority and ability to provide the group with direction. When he is pushed to engage in activities that do not "*feel natural*" to him, he experiences tension and identity struggles.

*Ben: "...I felt that I had been a leader for many years without actually knowing anything about leadership. It was all learning by doing, and you could say that I knew what I was doing but not why, and I had a need to know more about that. And I had some concrete things, too; I am very bad at conflicts. Hmm...and I hoped I maybe could get some tools to better handle conflicts."*

Since the beginning of the leader development program and throughout the last 1½-year period, Ben's wish for change remains relatively abstract. His developmental goal is "*more me*" in the leader role, and his motivation is narrated more as a wish for the organization to return to status quo. Even though he has made a written action plan, his identity construct of coincidence works contra to change. Ben says, "*I am a leader by coincidence, and I just take it as it comes*". This can be interpreted as Ben fundamentally letting circumstances and contexts influence his life and actions instead of actively seeking to shape and influence things himself.

The ideological basis of the ETP program is existential psychological theory, as described in the introduction the key tenets of this ideology are to take responsibility for yourself and your life choices. This discourse disqualifies Ben's approach of wishing for coincidental change, and this probably adds to Ben's increasing discomfort and continued disqualification of himself as a leader and his ability to "*get himself out of the mess*", as he phrases it in the 2006 interview. In the interview, Ben describes how he never makes plans or sets goals but has a life shaped more by coincidence than by active choices and goal direction. Ben sums up

saying, “*I wish I had been better to set up goals*”. This dissertation argues that reconstruction of identity rarely happens by coincidence, but rather by engaging in reflexive identity work, which can probably be more or less goal-directed (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). In Ben's case, his life-long strategy of neither planning nor actively pursuing goals is detrimental to what is demanded in the leader development program. This positions him in the program context as a “bad student” who is not able to fulfill the demands of the program, as he does not follow through on action plans. Furthermore, this illustrates how development ideologies influence what is considered “right ways” of development. Thus, leader development programs impose new pressures of identity work on the participating leaders, and potentially contribute to their experiencing themselves as incompetent and unsuccessful. This is true even in a relatively flexible program context like the ETP, where ideologies are not spelled out for the participants but rather run as an undercurrent of ideology behind the design and pedagogical activities.

The development program offers and facilitates an environment where each leader has an opportunity to hear and learn from experiences of other leaders, support their development by setting realistic goals, and work with concrete action steps. Ben narrates falling short of “*developmental effort and focus*” when he compares himself to the other participating leaders.

*Ben: “That was one of the things that fascinated me with the others and made me look at my own situation in a different light: some of these leaders at ETP were very goal and result-oriented. In the sense that now that my organization has paid all this money for this course, I want my money's worth.”*

Another storyline unfolded in the interview is thematically about how Ben is feeling intensified stress and loss of professional competence. Ben links his lack of goal-directedness with his general approach to his professional life; he explains working best under intense pressure and often relies on his ability to perform at the last minute. Over the years, he has developed a working style where he crams everything to just before deadline rather than planning or preparing in advance. Now, with the increased demands for relational-oriented leadership within his organization, Ben says that he is bending underneath the pressure of an increased work load, has feelings of inadequacy at work, and is experiencing such physical stress symptoms as limitations of short-term memory and an unfocused and demotivated daily practice. He begins to work evenings and weekends to catch up on mails and actual work assignments, tasks he no longer seems to have time for during working hours. This culminates at a board meeting that Ben and the CEO

arranged where Ben is to give an important briefing. When Ben is called into the meeting, he has not only completely forgotten the meeting, he has also not finished preparing the brief. It turns out to be a very embarrassing episode for the CEO and for Ben. Ben tells this story as an example of how he is losing both his competence and goodwill in the organization, even in areas where he used to be sharp and capable. In retrospect, Ben concludes on the episode and links it to his current situation:

*Ben: "...I have to get myself out of the soup, so one way or another I have to get past this level where I am immersed in all the low-practical stuff. If I have to perform as a leader the way the new CEO wishes, then I have to move my leadership to another level. Then, it is no good bustling about with practical matters."*

*Gitte: "Yes, and is there a dilemma in doing this for you?"*

*Ben: "Yes, because I think its fun. I like to write, and I like to have an article in the magazine. I think it is important that the editor is visible in the magazine. Hmm...but in principle, I could have an employee write the article under my name; that is my damn right (pause), but they would probably not write as well as I do..."*

A new theme is seen at the end of this passage: the story of perfectionism. Ben concludes that part of his dilemma with giving up some of his professional tasks, e.g. writing for the magazine, is that he thinks he is a better writer than the rest. The story of perfectionism implies that Ben is the best, and no one else is quite as skilled or meets his writing standards. One aspect of perfectionism is pride in the product, and another implies that others are less capable. Ben's positioning here supports his professional leader identity as the preferred leader identity construct. This positioning also sustains and possibly inhibits the reconstruction of Ben's leader identity to include more positive relational-oriented storylines. Hence, another aspect of perfectionism is control and influence. When Ben creates the product, it entirely reflects his thoughts, and no compromises have to be made. Thus, professional pride and control of the output adds more nuances to the perfectionism storyline. It gives more insight into Ben's having to deconstruct a valued leader identity construct, and thereby offers further insight into the struggles of the construction process. Aspects of perfectionism might also be connected to lack of trust in others, which makes delegation more difficult. However, although Ben delegates to employees, he constructs a problem story that he is delegating all the interesting assignments in order to avoid conflicts. Ben positions himself in

alignment with the professional identity construct, which he narrates to be in opposition to and in conflict with the relational-oriented leader identity. Ben explains that when decisions concern professional journalistic issues, it is easy for him to decide what to do, but when decisions concern people or when he has to deal with social situations or interaction, then he is struggling and it is much more difficult for him.

In the interview, Ben explains the problem storyline of relational-oriented leadership with the story of him being “*number autistic*.” Ben explains that he has the ability to remember organizational phone numbers when he has dialed the number once. For amusement, his employees sometimes call out a phone number request, and he can usually impress them by usually remembering them. Ben tells this story (a story in the landscape of action) right after having constructed the storyline of incompetence regarding interpersonal relations (an identity conclusion in the landscape of identity). I interpret the storyline as being performed in order to negotiate the tensions of being unsuccessful in the area of interpersonal leader skills by showing skills in other areas, i.e. memory of numbers. Thus, the story of number autism can be seen as an example of negotiating a position of inadequacy by claiming to have extraordinary skills in other areas. The story functions to indirectly position him as a logical expert, maybe to comfort and boost his self-identity and thereby ensure the audience (the listener) that he has outstanding competencies in other areas than relational-oriented leadership. The story can be interpreted as an example of how Ben distances himself from constructing a leader identity by constructing an anti-identity (i.e. stories of what is not me). In the stories, he is simultaneously creating distance to and is rejecting leader identity. He is thus avoiding constructing a preferred leader identity construction of what he would like to be and practice.

Three themes of tension involving others emerge in Ben’s leader identity construction: struggles with delegation, giving orders, and dealing with conflicts. First, Ben’s stories of delegation: Ben has notoriously been delegating by giving the best and most interesting assignments to his employees. Now, as he realizes that he has managed to delegate the most interesting assignments to his employees, Ben feels increasingly dissatisfied with his own work situation,. Ben concludes (in landscape of identity) that this is a way to avoid conflicts. It is easier for him to delegate popular assignments and make people happy, but as a consequence he is left with all the boring and tedious tasks himself. The result of this delegation strategy is that work has become less satisfying for Ben, and he is probably doing

work that he should not be doing as head of the department. Ben says that he knows what is needed and explains how he should be more demanding of his employees. Ben wishes he had the courage to be more demanding. Ben explains that his employees would neither leave nor be very unhappy if he were more demanding, but he still feels a tension about this and is struggling with it. He seems to be unable to move himself from a position of wishful thinking (“I should/I wish”) into a position of action or agency with stories that emphasize an “I will/I do” vocabulary. I read Ben’s storyline of delegation as self-reflection about possible solutions, and as increased insight into his own identity constructions. However, it is also an example of how Ben positions himself in an identity construct story of passively hoping for something different without turning wishes into a preferred identity vision. As a consequence, he inhibits reconstruction. The preferred story of less conflict, more job satisfaction for Ben and even better products is very much in the future. Ben is positioning the past as the preferred scenario (the time before the new CEO), and the present is positioned as a tense, painful place. His future vision is positioned as a return to the past when his leader identity was not questioned and he felt competent and content in his job.

### ***Storyline 3: I Wish***

Ben’s approach to identity reconstruction is hope and wishful thinking. Throughout the interview he wished for “*more me*” in the leader role. Examining Ben’s phrasing and choice of words during the more than 2 hour interview, the phrase “*I wish*” is used numerous times, and he tells only a few stories about concrete actions or experiences where he attempts to realize his wishes. I interpret that Ben is waiting and hoping for coincidental change, in line with his dominate storyline construct of coincidence. Ben seems to think that change happens to him by coincidence, or is imposed on him by others. While waiting for coincidence, he feels increasing tension and the strain of his current situation. With this identity construct, he positions himself as a victim of circumstance. In the last part of the interview, Ben seeks to understand and explain his own passivity in a number of problems stories about how he is very poor at meeting deadlines. He makes the connection that he might have done more, if deadlines had been clearer during the ETP program, or if there had been consequences for not meeting deadlines. The Chief Editor in the narratives wishes for deadlines and consequences to support his development; at the same time, he describes how the program has facilitated reflection and insights, and he concludes that turning insights into action sounds easy in theory, but for him this is almost unattainable in practice. Ben sums up:

*Ben: "...I had a wish to learn more about myself and I must say I have learned more about me, but I have not been successful in using it afterwards. And I'm still not good at working with my leadership, and I think I had hoped that I would have been better, that I would simply get a toolbox with me home. That might be a high hope and I know that the most important tool in the box is myself. And then if you do not know how to use yourself, then you're pretty bad off."*

In the quote, Ben assesses in retrospect his own involvement in and benefit from the program. He summarizes that he has gained more insight into who he is (identity construction), but he has not been able to transfer this to his leader practice. This implies that the ETP program has shifted Ben's focus from a behaviorally oriented "fix-it approach" focused on tools for solving leader problems towards a more existentialistically oriented approach according to which he is looking more to unfold the inner potential of himself as leader. In Ben's understanding this indicates a shift that returns responsibility for the developmental process to Ben. This is in alignment with the existentialistic and self-actualizing theories and ideology of the ETP program, which highlights the responsibility of the individual for development (see chapter 1). This does not make identity work easier for Ben; it might actually make him feel even worse, since he finds it difficult to fulfill this norm of the ETP program. In this perspective and because Ben is only making very limited use of his new insights, the program context becomes, for Ben, a context of defeat or one more context in which his inadequacies are exposed. Following this line of interpretation, the fact that Ben did not participate in the 2007 interview can be understood as Ben avoiding being positioned once again as inadequate in the interview context, where he might feel obligated to expose his weaknesses. Because he has not fulfilled the implicit demands of the program context, it may be easier for him not to participate.

Another struggle of leader identity is the problem storyline of not wanting to give orders. When Ben chooses the phrasing, "giving orders", it becomes associated with a military context and strict discipline and thereby signals the negative connotations Ben has about telling people what to do. Ben explains that people tend to follow and execute the orders he gives, but he himself struggles with the act of giving orders to others. Ben shares the following reflections about why:

*Ben: "I can see that it works well in practice. Somehow I think it is because I do not like people to think that I am too bossy, but on the other hand, I am the Boss. It is something about me being the type of person that wants to please people, maybe more the people below me than above me. Otherwise, I would*

*probably have had that assignment ready for the CEO the other day. Now when I think about it, I am a person that does not like to hurt or make other people sad... ”*

*Gitte: “...and you think that could happen if you give an order?”*

*Ben: “Yes, they might not like the order and that is exactly what is completely idiotic! Because my employees know very well that I am the Boss and have to give orders. In a way, they expect me to give them orders, so... ”*

This exemplifies how Ben is struggling with balancing the execution of power in relation to others and at the same time being caring and considerate to other people's needs and wishes. Ben's storyline on giving orders is constructed on the logic that he is being considerate by not giving orders, because orders might hurt people. Ben narrates the story of a company excursion to London, where everybody was looking to him for directions about every minor practical detail: where to take the bus etc. Ben concludes on this experience (landscape of identity) that people want to be told what to do, which would make it more considerate to follow their wishes and give them orders. This is an illustration of Ben's identity work, trying to re-author this storyline of his leader identity. In narrating his leader identity, Ben constructs an alternative identity conclusion in which being considerate is now telling people what to do. The alternative story emerging turns the former identity conclusion up side down by stating that giving orders is in fact giving people what they need and want. This line of self-reflection and identity work does not say anything about whether Ben will actually give more orders in real life, but I argue in this dissertation that such identity work is an important first step – to be able to think about and envision in stories alternative ways to act, and to challenge narrative problem identity constructs, constitute re-authoring identity constructs and are a prerequisite for acting differently as a leader in the future.

Ben's third problem story of leader identity is dealing with conflicts. In the past, a significant event for Ben was dismissing a poorly performing employee. Ben tells the story of how he hesitated for a long time and the process of dismissal was prolonged and went beyond what was good for the department. Ben explains he wanted to avoid the conflict, but instead he experienced that the conflict escalated and worsened, because it was not managed in time. Ben concludes on the basis of this experience that he is a “*soft leader*”. And he understands this story to be an example of his struggles with the relational side of the leader occupation. Again, Ben uses a story to position himself as an unsuccessful leader. He also concludes that he wasted too much time and energy on a non-productive issue; thus, this

storyline adds to the dominating anti-identity storyline constructed by Ben in the interview. He is continuously performing his identity stories as if he is not doing anything right, and if he is doing something, it is phrased in a passive form: “*just being there*” and “*my presence*”. In telling these stories, he is constructing an identity where he is not acting as a leader, and even when he is getting something right, it is storied as a coincidence. The story of coincidence is a dominating problem identity storyline and is supported by stories of anti-identities and stories of personal inadequacies. Ben’s stories entail ambivalence and tensions with no attractive vision or goal for his future leader identity construction. In this sense, Ben’s narrative is dominated by stories about his own liabilities, especially in regard to the leader occupation and tasks. These stories connect him with an anti-identity construct and prevent him from acting and reconstructing a more positive preferred leader identity. In a paradoxical way, Ben cannot succeed as a leader because he became one by coincidence, and he continues to narrate positive characteristics solely in connection with his profession. In this way, he sustains his problem storylines. The list of stories Ben tells about what he is not able to do as a leader is long. He is “*not good at making demands of others, doubts if it is fair to be demanding, has an unfortunate ability to say yes, cannot pressure others, has too much consideration and empathy for others, does not like to hurt others*” – these are just some of the most significant problem stories. Furthermore, Ben’s stories are negative in relation to his ability to improve the situation, and for the most part they undermine any emerging leader identity reconstruction. Below are examples of anti-identity construction stories in which Ben positions himself in problem stories:

*Ben: “I never felt I was a good leader, and I still feel insecure as a leader and have not been able to act on my knowledge to change my leadership after the ETP development program. I am still not good at working with my leadership by myself.*

*....I was not prepared enough and used too little energy while it was going on.*

*....I was not goal-oriented enough.*

*....I need more courage.*

*....I have to keep my promises to myself. “*

Ben’s stories and storyline constructions are illustrated in a storyline map to show the narrative construction process of identity in Ben's case, and are focused on the three significant storyline constructions described in the previous analysis. The storyline map illustrates how Ben connects and clusters narratives into storylines of identity.



### **Storyline 1: Leader by Coincidence**

1. Narrative of identity conclusion: Ben concludes that he became a leader by coincidence.
2. Narrative of experience: Ben is offered a job based on qualifications.
3. Narrative of experience: Ben becomes Chief Editor for the acquired magazines.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: Ben concludes that he is product- and task oriented.
5. Narrative of identity conclusion: Ben concludes that leadership just comes with the job.

### **Storyline 2: Where My Heart Is**

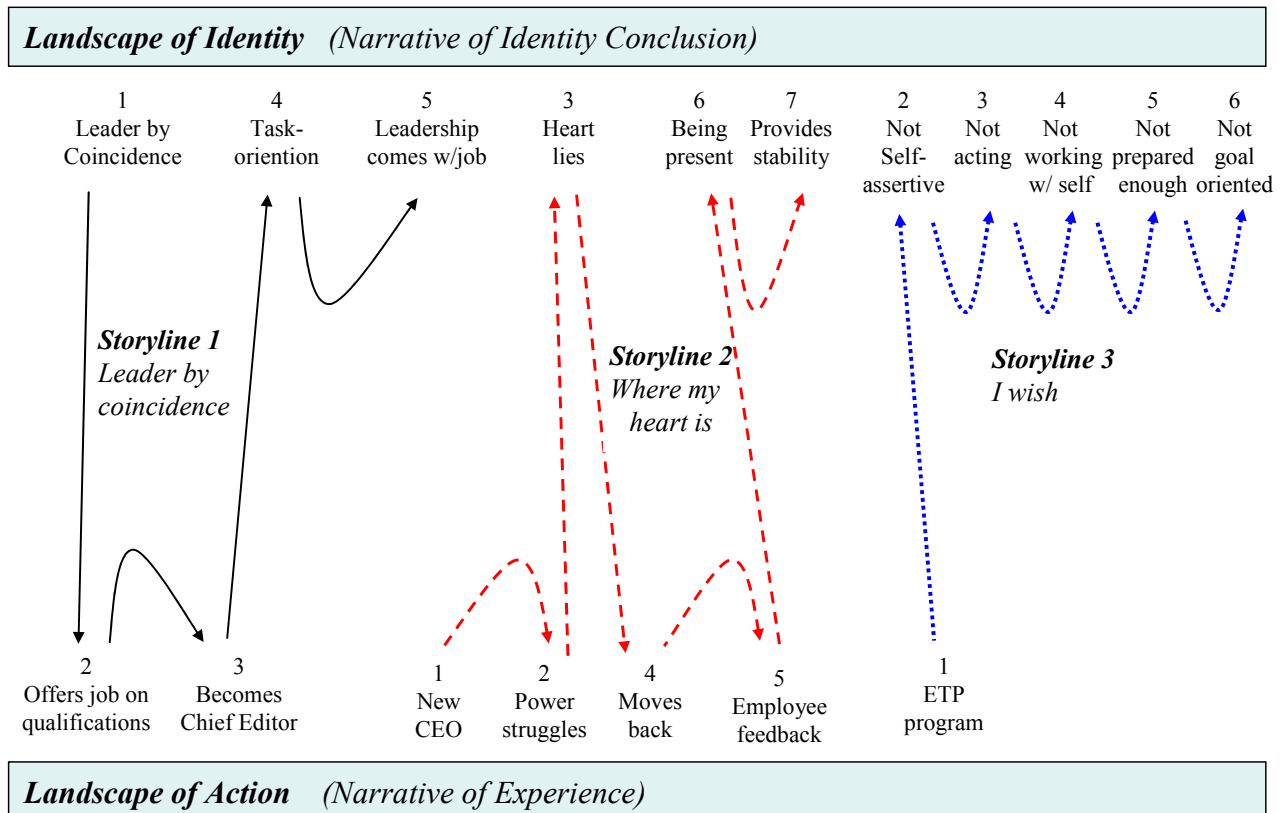
1. Narrative of experience: Ben moves to the management corridor to support new CEO.
2. Narrative of experience: Ben observes power struggles in department in his absence
3. Narrative of identity conclusion: Ben concludes that his heart lies in the editorial department.
4. Narrative of experience: Ben moves back to the department.
5. Narrative of experience: Ben receives feedback that employees are more satisfied now that he is back.
6. Narrative of identity conclusion: Ben concludes that his mere presence eliminates conflicts.
7. Story of identity conclusion: Ben concludes that he creates stability and makes decisions as a leader.

### **Storyline 3: I Wish**

1. Narrative of experience: Ben states that he never felt he was a good leader at ETP program.
2. Narrative of identity conclusion: Ben concludes that he wants “*more me*” in the leader role.
3. Narrative of identity conclusion: Ben concludes knowing more but not acting on knowledge.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: Ben concludes not being good at using himself as a tool.
5. Narrative of identity conclusion: Ben concludes being unprepared and using too little time and energy

6. Narrative of identity conclusion: Ben concludes that he is not goal-oriented enough to change.

**Display 8-2 Storyline Map – Ben 2006**



In storyline 3, I Wish, Ben is positioning most of his stories in the landscape of identity with no reference to stories in the landscape of action. He is constructing sequences of identity conclusions, which consist of stories that are thematically problem stories. These stories are self-critical, and the one-sidedness of the problem stories is significant, as none of these stories are connected to stories of concrete actions or experiences (i.e. are in the landscape of action). Ben's anti-identity construction is based primarily on identity conclusions he is making (i.e. in the landscape of identity), and the absence of stories in the landscape of action indicates that he is not acting on the themes of tension. Furthermore, the absence of stories in the landscape of action indicates that Ben's identity conclusions are not being questioned or challenged by concrete experiences or by others, which further sustains his anti-identity and inhibits constructing alternative and more positive identity conclusions and storylines. In Ben's case, most of his storylines are not reconstructed into preferred storylines. This reflects his sustained identity struggles,

and it seems that Ben's approach of "wishful thinking" is not bringing him much resolution.

### **8.3 An Open Ending...Storyline Reconstruction and Continued Struggles**

Ben did not participate in the final 2007 interview, nor did he complete the second LEA360 analysis. I contacted Ben several times to arrange the LEA360 assessment and the interview; each time, he was very positive and assured me that he wanted to participate. In fall 2007, I sent him the necessary links to the LEA360 analysis, and when he was late and only half of the responses were completed, I phoned him to follow up. Ben was apologetic and reassured me that he wanted to participate and would take care of it, and that we should have the final interview as planned. However, he never completed the analysis, and I decided to understand this interaction and this piece of missing empirical material as a reflection of the dominate identity story in Ben's ontological narrative as it had been analytically unfolded in the previous analysis. Consequently, there are no concluding reflections from Ben in 2007, and consequently, the following section is a brief reflexive analysis of Ben's positioning and negotiation of positions, but based on the empirical material from the 2006 interview and the ETP program.

#### **Storyline Reconstruction and Tensions**

In Ben's narrative construction of identity, the storyline of coincidence is the core to understanding the way Ben is positioning himself as a leader. In the coincidence storyline, Ben is positioned as the task-oriented leader who is pushed into relational-oriented leadership and is pressured to give up a valued profession. Ben is taking a subject position of the victim of circumstance, but he is also positioning himself as a victim of his own inadequacies. In stories, Ben legitimizes not being a people-leader by minimizing the employees' need for such leadership. Furthermore, Ben's case illustrates how fear of conflicts results in Ben delegating all the interesting and popular assignments, leaving the less interesting and tedious tasks to himself. Ben exercises his power through his expertise and task-knowledge and his professional judgment, and feels a sense of belonging by being part of a professional team with a common goal. Ben identifies with his team more than the management team, and he feels alienated from and does not identify with the leader occupation. Instead, he is ambivalent towards constructing a leader identity, and in stories, he negotiates a position of distance to the employees and legitimizes his preferred identity as the professional task-oriented leader. Ben's strategy is to wish

for change, either by coincidence or through the actions of others. He engages in little concrete action. This contributes to increased tensions and identity struggles for Ben, as it becomes increasingly evident in the organizational context that Ben has to make some readjustments. In Ben's stories, this is narrated as him feeling extremely stressed and dissatisfied with the situation and with himself. Ben is unsuccessfully balancing the external pressures with his own preferred identity, and he uses narratives to legitimize not being able (or not wanting) to be a relational-oriented leader and to minimize the need for personal involvement. In Ben's case, narratives are also used to paralyze action and to inhibit personal agency and are thereby keeping Ben in a situation of increasing pressure.

### **Negotiated Subject Positions**

The storyline of coincidence is central to understanding Ben's identity struggles. First of all, Ben never chose to be a leader and over the years he has constructed a leader identity based on professional expertise. Ben has positioned the professional identity storyline as the preferable identity and has simultaneously constructed "*leading people*" as unattractive, negative and unnecessary. In Ben's creation of meaning, "being a leader" is closely connected to being a relational-oriented leader, which to Ben is a poor alternative to the profession he loves and the task-oriented leadership he already exercises. The division between relation-oriented versus task-oriented leadership may be a helpful simplification for communicating about leadership, but it is perhaps more theoretical than practical, where it is hard to separate the two since both aspects are involved in most leader situations.

In Ben's case, the new CEO's pressures for a more relation-oriented leadership forces Ben to act differently. It pushes him to reconstruct the leader identity construct he is most comfortable practicing. This is illustrated by Ben's wish to be "*more me*" in the leader role. Thematically, Ben's stories of problems describe the tensions emerging from this pressure and the consequences for his work experience. Ben's preferred stories are relatively abstract and are not connected to stories of concrete experiences, nor do they point to concrete ways to approach identity struggles. In Ben's case, he appears to be passively wishing for change. It could be hypothesized that Ben is not willing to submit to or is not interested in developing his leader identity in line with what is requested. Ben's ontological narratives can be interpreted as using the storyline of coincidence as an excuse, since the storyline implies that he is not really a leader. He never chose to be a leader, and thus never accepted leadership. Consequently, Ben is now struggling

with an identity construct that he denies, and with pressures to reconstruct his leader identity in a direction opposite to his own wishes.

In the storyline “*where my heart lies*”, Ben metaphorically separates the mind and the heart, differentiating between what he experiences intellectually and logically and what he experiences and feels in his heart. The narrative dichotomy brings the ambivalence Ben is struggling with to the surface and makes it possible for Ben to negotiate a position of following his heart. This indicates that he is following his passion for the product and the task, and evokes an image of the noble knight who follows his heart. However, Ben narrates feeling split between the two, while the situation is narrated as a choice of either-or. Ben follows his heart when he moves back to the Editorial Department, but his ambivalence and identity struggles persist, and in the 2006 interview, Ben describes his situation as unsolved, and he has no plan for how to solve it.

The storyline of coincidence is also a story about how to approach change. In the past, changes just happened to Ben. His career has not been goal-directed or actively planned. Someone has seen his potential and qualifications and has offered him a position. This is how Ben came “*backwards into leadership*”, focusing much more on the product than the people. Ben’s experiences of passive action or change, without planned goal-directed effort, make it difficult for him to initiate reconstruction processes, regardless of the experienced tensions. Ben’s narrative of how to change is initiated from outside himself, illustrated by his wish for someone to give him a push and set deadlines with consequences. Participation in the Executive Training Program could be interpreted as a wish for someone to help him out; Ben says that he knows he is responsible for his own development (i.e. reconstruction of identity), but he still wishes for external forces to shape his future. Meanwhile, the workload and increased pressure at work undermine his resources, and in the long-term, they decrease his ability to act on his situation. These identity construction narratives seem to be paralyzing him by narrating leader identity in clearly negative and passive stories, while he simultaneously wishes for change to happen to him, i.e. coincidental change. Ben is wishing for something in the abstract, but in practice he does not want to give up his professional, and preferred, leader identity.

The storyline of coincidence is used as explanation and excuse whenever Ben feels incompetent or insufficiently skilled in the leader occupation – as when he is not managing a conflict situation. The storyline's function is to legitimize, and it raises

the question whether Ben is at all interested in changing his leader identity or would prefer to return to the old organization where his leader identity was not questioned. Ben is positioning himself in stories as a victim of circumstance, with limited agency in his own situation. His preferred story of change is to wait and wish for change to come around. Ben is waiting and hoping for others to initiate change, while he is intellectually aware and reflective about his situation and at the same time embarrassed about his inability to manage the situation and turn it into something better.

In narratives, Ben desires the abstract notion of more me in leadership, but he finds relational-oriented leadership difficult and in disagreement with his preferred leader identity construct of professional task-oriented leadership. In Ben's storyline constructions, he negotiates the ambivalence; Ben tells stories in which leadership (especially leading people) is narrated as difficult for him and maybe even unattainable (as indicated by the "*number autism*" story). Leadership is therefore undesirable for him or unnecessary in his department (as indicated by the story of the employees not needing leadership). In the dominate storyline of coincidence, Ben positions himself as a victim of circumstance. The coincidence storyline is used to explain his current organizational situation and tensions; it is used to excuse the problem stories, and it is used to legitimize Ben's lack of developmental progress as well as the emotional tensions he describes experiencing.

Ben is positioning himself as a victim of his own inadequacies. In the many stories of his own shortcomings, he is constructing a very negative and passive identity construct, which I interpret as paralyzing any active agency on Ben's part. Thus, the comprehensive anti-identity stories Ben is constructing maintain the current situation, and he avoids giving up his beloved product and tasks. Furthermore, Ben does not have to enter a leader occupation in which he feels incompetent or has difficulties navigating the social-relational scene. An example is when Ben constructs anti-identity stories about his lack of planning and goal direction, which I interpret as excuses for not setting developmental goals and for not engaging in concrete actions. Instead, Ben's predominating strategy is to wish for a preferred identity of "more me". I hypothesize that this identity construct is one that he is ambivalent about from the outset. In a learning perspective, Ben is positioning himself as a "bad student" – in the ETP leader development context and in relation to me as the facilitator. To the group, this becomes oblivious, since Ben increasingly makes excuses about things not completed and progress not made, and as he tells stories about having a "*bad conscience*" for not having followed through

on agreements. The humanistic and existentialist ideology and approach to leader development practiced in the ETP program seems to reinforce Ben's feelings of inadequacy, making ETP another context in which Ben does not fulfill the expectations of others and perhaps of himself.

Ben did not participate in the 2007 interview, but as part of the 2006 interview, I asked him to summarize his leader development challenges for the coming year. Ben's response below shows how the dilemma of his personal desires and wishes in opposition to the new trends in the organization is pushing Ben into a leader development process that he probably is not interested in, but which he nevertheless has to manage if he wants to stay in the organization and become aligned with the new CEO's ideas of leadership.

*Ben: "I think, going all the way back to the start, that I wanted "more me" in leadership. By that I mean to practice leadership, not just do things but think more about why I do things and make use of my strengths. Because I know that one of the things that has come out of this (program) is that I have gotten a much better focus on my strengths, to use my strengths more to make my weaknesses better. But it requires a different mindset; it requires that I am conscious about it all the time..."*

*Gitte: " And you think that is crucial?"*

*Ben: " Yes, it requires that I am conscious and act on my knowledge, and that takes us back to "courage", because when I think about it, I know precisely what to do. I mean, I have plenty of tools and I know my strengths and I know damned well where I want to go. So it is just that thing about actually doing it, that is extremely difficult, and that I have to work very consciously with. But I wish that I am able to say to you in 2007 that I have moved myself into the next leadership level, so I can work more strategically and with a long-term perspective for the magazine."*

*Gitte: " What happens if you do not succeed in this?"*

*Ben: " Then I do not think I am with the organization anymore. Currently, new winds are blowing, and the leadership style I have does not fit in anymore.... Then, I would have to try something else. That would be aggravating because I really love my job and in many ways this is an easy job for me. I love the subject, I love to write, and I love making a magazine – I mean it's almost too good to be true. Then, there is this thing about leadership, and yes okay it comes with the job, but where it is most difficult at the moment is in the relations in the organization, and that the organization in a process of change."*

The quotation strikes the major themes of tension and the identity work in Ben's case, and it adds how courage and identity work are juxtaposed: that somehow reconstruction implies that the leader must act on newly acquired insights or knowledge. Ben is very reflective and insightful about his own weaknesses and strengths, but seems unable to transform wishes into action. Seemingly, the ETP program context provides tools that in my interpretation increase Ben's tension, feelings of inadequacy and guilt. This again seems to maintain his negative anti-identity stories and delimit a more positive reconstruction of leader identity, which in the analysis is interpreted in Ben's strong preference story of a professional task-oriented leader identity, as illustrated in the storylines of "*Where My Heart is*" as well as in the storyline of "*Leader by Coincidence*".

Finally, Ben in 2005 uses the behavior-oriented discourse on leadership tools, whereby identity work tensions are approached and narrated as competency gaps to be filled. By identifying strengths and weaknesses, learning tools can be used to fill gaps and ease tensions. This discourse emphasizes an instrumental approach to leadership, where identity work tensions are understood to resemble problem solving. In the 2006 interview, Ben talks about himself as the most important "tool" in exercising leadership. This I interpret as a shift towards understanding leadership as a fulfillment of inner potential by using his personal qualities in leadership, which is an advanced discourse in the ETP program discourses drawing on self-actualizing theory and social identity theory and emphasizing leaders' abilities to use social skills and understand social reality. At this point in time, Ben knows more about "who he is", and he has a reflexive understanding of himself and his situation. He is just not able to act on his knowledge – or his actions (i.e. the negative anti-identity constructs) accentuate emotionally the balancing act of following his heart and passion (e.g. "*I love my job...*") with the external demands he is dispassionate about.

### **Concluding Reflections – Looking back**

Ben did not participate in the interview in 2007, nor did he administer the LEA360 for the second time. The dialogue I had with Ben regarding his participation is described earlier in this section.



# 9 Walther - The Story of the Wishing Well

*“For me this course came up at a time when I had just told my manager and the HR manager that I would like to move on with more leadership; I wanted to go from specialist leadership to more general leadership, and then this course came up as a good idea from the HR manager.” (Walther, 2006)*

## 9.1 A Beginning...Themes of Tension

Walther is in his mid-forties and works in a large international organization in the consumer industry with a solid position on Danish and European markets. Walther heads the legal department with reference to a powerful yet distant CEO and board of directors. The legal department is highly specialized, and Walther leads a team of ten academic professionals and subject matter experts. Together, they provide crucial information for legally assessments, judgements and decision making in relation to complex and critical business cases within the areas of sales, mergers and acquisitions. In recent years, the organization has engaged in major international transactions in which the expertise of Walther’s department has been extensively used and been vital for the business. Walther has been in his current position since the late 1990s and is known in the organization for his expertise and in-depth knowledge in his field. Prior to this job, Walther worked as a practicing lawyer in several other organizations. Over the years, he has become increasingly interested in leadership, and he wishes to move away from his specialist position into a more generalist leader position. In 2005, Walther’s participation in the leader development program, The Executive Training Program (ETP) was supposed to be a step in that direction.

In the introductory exercise, “why am I a good leader”, Walther explains that when he takes time to lead, he is a good leader, but unfortunately he does not always have the time. Walther sees himself as a demanding leader, both towards his employees and himself. He is also a caring leader, who is engaged with and enjoys motivating his employees. He further emphasizes that he is a good decision maker, likes straightforward communication, and supports an unpretentious environment at work. In making the above distinction between leadership and work, Walther is positioning leadership as distinct from his work as a professional expert; he distinguishes between leading and doing the work/tasks of his trade. Walther positions leadership in opposition to and completely different from his professional work.

At the start of the leader development program, the dominating theme of tension for Walther is how to develop from being an expert professional into position as a generalist leader. To Walther, this shift requires him to behave more like a leader of people and less like a subject matter expert. However Walther's wish to become more of a generalist causes tensions in relation to the organization and the CEO. Over the years, and specifically in the regular yearly employee appraisals, Walther's superiors have made it clear that the organization would like him to continue in his current expert role. Therefore a conflict exists between the identity construct Walther wishes to develop and the demands and needs formulated by the organizational actors. In the first module, Walther pinpoints "*courage*" as a significant factor in helping him develop. He realizes that he has to balance his time more and divide it 50/50 between expert-oriented tasks and leadership. He must become more familiar with and gain more confidence in the leader role. Walther foresees that if he does not take the time to "*do leadership*", this ambition will be overruled by the day-to-day expert production demanded by the organization, and he dreads this. In the first module, Walther explains how he is struggling with this development aspiration, primarily because he feels insecure in the leader role. At this time, Walther's professional expertise and profound legal knowledge is structuring his interaction with people, providing both the content and form of his communication and social interaction. Furthermore, his expert profession reassures him of his worth and gives him the self-confidence to act, whereas a predominant generalist leader role is unfamiliar to him. These stories are used by Walther to explain how until now, he has felt inhibited in taking a more assertive leader role at department meetings and in the organization in general. Walther says:

*Walther: "I feel I do not have sufficient confidence or self-worth in the leader role."*

By constructing stories of inner struggling with self-confidence and self-worth in relation to the leader role, Walther is explaining both his experienced tensions and the lack of progress and limited action taken toward attaining his goal. He contrasts the tensions he experiences in relation to the leader role with the expert role in which he feels secure and on solid ground and considers these roles to be in opposition to each other. Walther contrasts the two, saying: "*I feel more insecure as a leader than as an expert*".

Walther's case illustrates that when appointed, most leaders do not receive any education about how to practice leadership. This is very different from the way we qualify as professionals by engaging in prolonged educational programs. The newly appointed leader most likely already has a professional identity at work. Then, from one day to the next, the professional identity construct has to be juxtaposed with a new leader identity. This is what Walther is struggling with in his stories of feeling the security of his profession and the insecurity of the unfamiliar yet desired leader occupation. Paradoxically, we demand newly appointed leaders to act as leaders without providing them with the necessary education, knowledge and tools. And organizations paradoxically structure organizational life in the expectation that leaders are simultaneously both knowledgeable subject matter experts and fantastic leaders. The balancing act required to keep up-to-date professionally while providing leadership for employees becomes the sole responsibility of the individual leader, who must then struggle to construct a leader identity that meets the different needs of various organizational actors: the organizational strategy, employees, colleagues, external interests, and the wishes and needs of the leader himself. In this interpretation, which emphasizes the dilemma of having to practice before learning as well as the dilemma of practicing leadership within an organizational context with various and conflicting demands, the leader easily appears to be the carrier responsible for the “problems” and tensions that are narrated as personal and individual liabilities or problem stories. One of the main arguments of this dissertation is that the specific contextual circumstances of our Western capitalistic societal system are in fact co-constructing the problem stories leaders seek to solve when they take on a leader occupation or engage in leader development programs.

When he returned for module 2, Walther had spent a lot of time reading and reflecting on his LEA360 report. He says that he has done a lot of thinking, which has not resulted in any fixed action plan. Meanwhile, organizational changes have paved the way for some interesting new job opportunities for Walther, and he has taken responsibility for leading a new department for risk assessment. Walther sees this as a natural expansion of his current area of responsibility and as an opportunity to gain more leader and generalist skills, as he is not the most knowledgeable person in the new department. He concludes that he understands this responsibility as an opportunity to: “*act more like a leader*”. Unfortunately, Walther did not participate in module 3, because he had to have major surgery that required almost two month’s sick leave under strenuous conditions, followed by a potential lifelong physical impairment. Obviously, Walther is very affected by

these experiences when he returns to the leader development program for the final module 4. The months spent fixated in bed have given him plenty of time to reflect on his priorities and life situation.

In Walther's coaching session, he formulates his overall goals to be to become more of a generalist leader, to stop working in his profession, and to have a broader area of responsibility. Walther explains that his dilemma is whether he will be able to do this in his current organization, or if he has to look outside the organization to realize his preferred identity. Walther is being coached by Milton, and during the coaching session, they investigate Walther's generalist leader dream. Walther says he feels very strongly that *"leadership gives him a kick and makes him grow"* and that the reward is leading other people. Walther describes that he is struggling with feelings of insecurity in the leader role, and with his unwillingness to take risks; this is preventing him from acting, which troubles him. Walther understands *"lack of courage"* as a major problem for him in this situation. The group reflects back to Walther that right now others in the organization, e.g. his boss, are choosing for him, so he is not choosing his own way. The session ends with Walther reflecting about *"how you get the first positive experiences in a new area"*, followed by the group feedback and the five pieces of advice to Walther:

*"We believe you need:*

- *To ask for a conversation with your boss to get his assessment of your wishes and the possibilities for you in the organization and any potential competency gaps that need to be filled*
- *To take initiative and to take on new challenges within the organization, expand your area of responsibility*
- *To understand the profile you have as a human being and in relation to being a leader; how does your organization see you as a leader?*
- *To try to apply for another job, another position outside the organization to get feedback about how you come across and sell yourself as a leader*
- *To engage in some humorous and entertaining activities, for example a laughing course or line dancing to get your energies rolling"*

Walther's status on his personal project at module 4 is that he probably needs a new job to fulfill his career wishes. He is uncertain about the kind of position, but he is certain that he needs a new job in which he can be a leader and not just practice his profession. Walther concludes that he will have to examine his marked value, and he considers various future scenarios. Some of these are very far from his current position – for example, he considers applying for a position as HR manager, which he has always thought was an interesting field.

In relation to the LEA360 report, Walther focuses on two dimensions: Regarding the dimension Self, he wants to improve his self-confidence and believe more in his own abilities as a leader. Walther connects this with being “*able to act more courageously in his life*”. The second dimension is Dominant, which Walther interprets to indicate that he should benefit from acting more dominant and self-assured in communicating upwards in the organization, but also in reaching out to more interest groups and colleagues in the organization. Walther links these reflections to a problem story of being an introverted person. He thinks that he would do better as a leader, if he were more extroverted and skilled in using networks to influence political and strategic decisions.

The display below illustrates Walther's problem stories and preferred stories and their narrated consequences, based on the empirical material from the Executive Training Program in 2005.

**Display 9-1 Walther: Problem Stories, Preferred Stories and Consequences**

<b>Stories focusing on</b>	<b>Problem Stories</b>	<b>Consequences of problem stories</b>	<b>Preferred Stories</b>	<b>Consequences of preferred stories</b>
<b>Personal Themes</b>	Being introverted	Becomes invisible as a leader	Being more extroverted	Becoming visible and reaching out to people
	Lacking courage	Stays in unsatisfactory position	Acting on his desires	Realizing himself as a generalist leader
	Having a negative self-perception	Is self-critical and cautious outside area of expertise	Being assertive in communicating	Speaking his mind and being more free
<b>Relational Themes</b>	Being a skilled professional	Is employed as a subject matter expert	Positioning the department and himself through strategic marketing	Having possibilities and a broader range of influence
	Having limited time to lead	Works within his profession and does not develop new skills	Developing generalist skills	Using time primarily on leadership
<b>Organizational Themes</b>	Being a valued and needed expert lawyer	Delimits transition into new position	Becoming a generalist leader of people	Improving social skills, continuous personal growth

## 9.2 A Middle Ground...Narrative Construction of Identity in Storylines

The following is my analysis of how Walther makes sense of himself in narratives. I examine how three significant storylines are constructed temporally in the interview. The section is based on the interview material from 2006, and the three storyline construction processes are illustrated in a storyline map

### *Storyline 1: From Expert to Generalist*

The 2005 empirical analysis already describes the dominating story in Walther's case as the development from an expert leader identity into a generalist leader identity. At first, this development is constructed in narratives as abandonment of a negatively valued expert identity and a dissatisfactory present situation to construct a positive future vision of Walther as a generalist leader focused on leading people. This future aspiration originates from Walther's experiences with establishing the legal department. Walther tells the story of discovering the joy of organizing the department and building the team. This experience is significant for Walther's construction of his preferred story, to pursue a career as a generalist leader and leave his profession as a lawyer and expert, which he begins to reconstruct as a problem story. The vision is elaborated to entail another preferred story; Walther wishes to become engaged in continuous personal development as a result of practicing a more generalist-oriented leadership. In stories, Walther describes enjoying team building and the organizational aspect of leading, and he emphasizes the "*human side of leadership*" as the most important for him as a leader:

*Walther: "...it is the contact with people, to make people work together, to make the team work. The human part of leadership is very important to me. It gives me a kick to make people perform better and making people grow, that I think is really exciting. "*

Walther also describes having two dilemmas in relation to his boss and the organization. One dilemma is that he feels the CEO's leadership is incompatible with his own values. He characterizes the CEO's leadership style as "*management by fear*", whereas he is focused on motivation and personal integrity. If he accommodates to the CEO's line of leadership, He would not be true to himself and his own values. If he does not adhere to it, he risks being perceived by the CEO as practicing a "wrong type" of leadership, or being categorized as not having "leader potential", which limits his options to become a generalist leader in the organization.

The second dilemma is the story of the CEO not being interested in helping him become the leader he aspires to be. Walther tells the story of how at a board meeting, the CEO brushed aside a request from an employee representative to look at the results of the last employee attitude survey. The CEO bluntly stated that “*he did not care how the employees were feeling as long as they did their job*”. Although Walther tells the story from a listener position, the story implies that the CEO does not care about Walther’s feelings, as long as Walther does his job. The CEO is indifferent to whether he is thriving or not. By telling this story, Walther sends a strong message of both the power positions in the organization and the tension he feels, as he is indirectly neglected and diminished in the story. The CEO is positioned as the epitome of an anti-identity and as the villain of the story, an enemy agent who purposefully obstructs Walther in his effort to reconstruct identity. At the interview, Walther concludes this story as an example of how the CEO lacks respect for people and their work. Thus, Walther is using the story to understand, and to explain, his current position of dissatisfaction and feelings of powerlessness in the face of the seemingly omnipotent and dominating CEO. Walther explains that he feels successful in leading his current department and generally finds leading employees easier than leading “*upwards*” and influencing leader colleagues.

In the ETP program as well as in the 2006 interview, Walther describes struggling with limited access, both to his nearest boss and the CEO. Walther finds his department is not being involved in critical cases at the right time, and Walther constructs a problem story of not being “*political enough*” and of not knowing how to navigate and be influential in the organization. He elaborates that to him this means the ability to strategically maneuver in the organizational political game. Walther explains that navigating politically takes a lot of “*reaching out*” in order to convince and influence others in the organization. Walther links this problem story to another problem story of him being a fundamentally introverted person who finds extroverted behavior somewhat challenging. In this way, Walther constructs the storyline of developing from expert to generalist by clustering problem stories focused on his own liabilities. Walther constructs a storyline in which he explains one problem story with another problem story, whereby the complexity of the problem story is enhanced and the tension increased. Walther makes sense in trait-oriented discourse terms and explanations, in that he explains problems by personal characteristics (extrovert versus introvert). However, he also applies the behavior-oriented discourse provided in the LEA360 analytical tool to make sense of himself

as a leader, and in a beginning reconstruction of problem stories into the third storyline: “*finding courage*”, which is unfolded later in this section.

Walther is struggling with himself and with the organization; he is pursuing an identity reconstruction that the organization is not willing to support. Since the organization needs Walther’s expertise in his current position, adhering to his wishes is not aligned with the strategic goals of the organization. So far, the CEO has managed to accommodate Walther on a superficial level by granting him leader development courses and coaches. Walther describes how each yearly appraisal conversation with the CEO involves intense heated debates, but eventually ends with the same inconclusive outcome. The CEO has been very blunt, however, and has repeatedly stated that he sees Walther primarily as a lawyer and cannot imagine him developing out of that role.

*Walther: "I have a yearly employee appraisal with my boss and three years ago I told him that I wanted to move on as a leader. Since then, we have had intense debates at these meetings, because I think he is perfectly happy with me in the position I am in. He states that lawyers are hard to move, which is his basic attitude. I have tried to tell him many times that he has to help me on now that he knows that is what I want, and then it usually ends with him promising me another development course (laughs)."*

It can thus be interpreted as the goal of the yearly appraisal is simply to keep Walther in his current position. By giving him a taste of “leader development”, he will probably stay in the organization a year longer; but from the organizational point of view, Walther’s wish for change is, as indicated above, seen as inconvenient and incompatible with the current organizational needs and strategy.

### ***Storyline 2: Acting Without Knowledge***

In the 2006 interview, Walther explains that in entering the ETP program, he was convinced that his problem is “*how to communicate upwards*”, and his goal to prepare himself to qualify for a generalist leader position.

*Walther: "I went with the wish to become a generalist; that was one of the purposes of participating. It was clear to me that I wanted to move on as a leader."*

I ask Walther to evaluate whether he feels he has taken any important steps toward becoming more of a generalist leader. In his response Walther emphasizes two aspects; first, he feels he has become more “*knowledgeable about what it takes to*



*be a generalist leader*". He links this to the story of realizing that "*being more extroverted*" might be a prerequisite for his current organization to accept him as a generalist leader. Secondly, he explains how he uses the LEA360 report from 2005 as a reference guide to inspire and keep him on the right developmental track. Walther describes consulting the LEA360 report weekly and keeping it on his bedside table. At first, this seems an example of trying to please the interviewer, but on the other hand, Walther describes in detail his use of the report, and the thoroughness with which he consults the written text when in doubt resembles law practice and is in alignment with Walther's overall identity narrative. Walther explains:

*Walther: "Because these things are not ingrained in my backbone, it helps to remind me where to focus. I reread the parts that include my development areas, and I look at my personal action plan; then I return to the section on Dominant and Self to get inspiration, and I write down an action point list at work that includes two or three things. I do not read everything but sort of turn the pages to get inspiration. That is how I use it in my daily work."*

In his work with the LEA360 feedback report from 2005, Walther focuses on three areas: Dominant, Outgoing and Self. At the 2007 interview, when discussing the new LEA360 feedback report, Walther is still particularly interested in these three dimensions. The Dominant dimension in the LEA360 framework is about the extent to which a leader is perceived to be determined and willing to use power and to actively dominate others in order to have his way. High scores on this dimension are considered a liability within the LEA framework, because intensive or exaggerated use of power is believed to undermine trust, erode motivation and discourage others. In 2005, all respondents perceived Walther to be at the low end (10-20%) with his boss slightly higher (30%), indicating that Walther was perceived as exercising very little dominating behavior in his relations. In 2007, Walther's score was still at the low end, but all the respondent scores had moved into the low middle area (35-55%), indicating that the respondents now perceive Walther to exercise more dominant behavior.

To return to the 2006 interview: Walther describes having made very concrete and specific action points on the basis of the feedback to improve his dominant score. One action step is to prepare differently for meetings, to reflect on the relevant strategic aspects and potential political interests involved in issues, and to lead focused and stringent meetings. Another action step is to avoid taking consensus decisions by default. Instead, Walther wants to be more decisive and more directive

and clearer when debating decisions. Interestingly, Walther's self-assessment scores are more unchanged than the respondents', who have generally adjusted their scores in the direction that Walther has been struggling toward. I interpret this as indicating that Walther is succeeding in practicing more of the behavior he identifies as "lacking" in his leader identity construct. However, the LEA360 feedback scores can also be interpreted to indicate that Walther himself has not fundamentally nor radically reconstructed his identity construct of introversion and domination.

The Outgoing dimension in the LEA360 framework is about the extent to which a leader is perceived to be relaxed, open and socially adapt, communicating and building relations easily. Walther's self-assessment on extroversion is exactly the same, 10% in both analyses, indicating that his construct of himself as an introvert is a relatively stable construct over time. Nevertheless, colleagues' and employees' respondent scores have risen slightly in the 2007 report towards a middle position. This indicates that respondents perceive Walther as more extroverted than he does himself, without seeing him as extremely outgoing or outspoken. Interpreting the LEA360 framework from a consultant perspective, this is a common occurrence; leaders who consider themselves predominately introverted are perceived to be more extroverted by the people they lead and work with.

This points out a significant aspect of leadership – leaders with predominately introverted identity constructs are able to behave more extroverted as leaders, or are perceived by others to be more extroverted than they see themselves. Perhaps this is because the leader occupation and practice demands a certain level of social interaction; leading can hardly be done without social contact and extensive communication with others. This may seem self-evident but can nevertheless be identified as a significant identity tension that accumulates in identity work, as Walther's case Walther illustrates. Walther says he has not done much about this dimension yet; he interprets the score to be about marketing and selling himself in the organization. In general, he has formulated action points that emphasize being more present, communicating and being in contact with various people within the organization. The action points include having face-to-face meetings instead of communicating by email, and participating in strategically important meetings instead of sending his staff. In the LEA360 framework, the Self dimension implies the extent to which the leader is perceived to act with self-confidence, trusting his own judgment and making independent decisions. The only noticeable change in the re-test is that the employee respondents' score has risen from 25% in 2005 to

65% in 2007. This indicates that Walther is perceived to be behaving more independently than before (Management Research Group, 2000). In the 2006 interview, Walther makes sense of himself and the Self dimension as follows:

*Walther: "...It is about believing in yourself and doing things that are outside the professional skill area. I mean in my area of expertise, I am filled with self-confidence – I'm world champion! While outside my area I am very cautious. Perhaps I feel I don't have sufficient insight and therefore I am very careful not to speak with too much conviction."*

The storyline of *Acting without Knowledge* I read as amplifying how the actual profession of the leader influences the approach that a specific leader uses in the process of building a leader identity. Due to the relatively abstract notion of what a leader is, and what leadership involves, leaders are mostly left to their own devices when engaged in leader identity work. In action-oriented and practical organizational settings, they are forced into acting and practicing leadership without having much knowledge about what they are doing or are supposed to do within the organizational setting. This enhances the probability that the appointed leaders will construct leader identity with the tools and approaches they know from their profession. Following this argumentation, the struggles the leader experiences can be understood to be related to tensions between storylines that certain professions foster and encourage, and the demands of being a leader in a specific organizational setting.

In the case of Walther, his story of knowing and feeling self-assured before he is able to act as a leader can be read as an illustration of identity struggles related to the lawyer profession's approach to leadership. Likewise, the virtues of particular professions (for example, university professors, medical doctors or marketing directors) may accentuate particular tensions in the leader occupation and accentuate identity struggles that reflect the profession and cannot only be attributed to personal idiosyncrasies and biography; however, like most of us, Walther is narrating stories of struggles and problems as stories that are mostly about personal failures or liabilities of his "personality".

### ***Storyline 3: Finding Courage***

The problem story theme of lacking courage and stories of struggling with fear are prominent in Walther's narrative construction of identity. Walther returns repeatedly to these themes of tension, and most often the tension is told as problem stories about his own liabilities. In the 2006 interview, Walther has not yet "*found*

*courage*”, for example. This story has not been re-authored. I ask how the ETP group might have contributed to Walther’s development, and Walther describes how the group has helped him gain more self-confidence and supported him in doing something about his personal project. However, the developmental tension of being afraid to act without knowing enough is very dominating, and Walther’s project is still unfulfilled.

*Walther: “My personal project is to change my job, maybe completely, or to get a broader area of responsibility in the organization. What I am afraid of is to take the step. If I am honest with myself then, I doubt that the organization will help me with the development; this means that I have to take a major leap at some point, if I want to move on. That is where I feel the group helped me out by pushing in the right direction and reassuring me that I can do it and should try it out. Since then, I have moved a little forward in my mind, but action-wise I have not come much further...”*

Returning to the extroversion problem story, Walther concludes that he thinks he is behaving more extroverted and tells the story of how he has slightly changed his way of approaching work. Earlier, he would approach and solve a task solely from the point of view of the organization and only with the interest of the organization in mind. Now, he still has the organization's interests in mind, but he also considers what is important for his department and what is important to him. Walther tells that he expects this to result in an increased branding and marketing of the department and himself in the future. Walther gives the following status of his struggles, developmental progress, and the work still ahead of him:

*Walther: “Clearly, there are things I can work with, and I think that I am focusing on the right things at the moment, but one thing is the small adjustments I am making. Another thing is what it takes for me to move on and here I am really in doubt that I am on the right track...”*

So far, Walther has been hoping and politely asking the organization (e.g. the CEO) to help him transfer into generalist leadership. The above quote indicates that Walther is beginning to realize that the organization is not going to accommodate his wish but is more interested in keeping him in the expert role. This reflection positions Walther at a crossroad, as it accentuates the question of whether Walther can find the courage to leave the organization to become a generalist leader or not, whether Walther’s urge for change is stronger than his fear of leaving a solidly successful position, or if he is able to contain the building tension and continue to simply wish for something better. Walther's case accentuates a developmental

dilemma; in order to achieve and build new skills, you have to step into unknown and unfamiliar territory. Reconstructing leader identity is in this perspective an excursion into new land with no reassurance that you will succeed. Since most appointed leaders are successful in their professions, giving up a safe and successful position for a rather vague leader occupation could be perceived as a risky endeavor regardless of the financial benefits, enhanced status and broader range of influence that are entailed in most leader positions. Walther's case and his narrative identity construction process illustrate the importance of courage (realizing this is also a narrative construct) as central to the narrative construction of leader identity. Below is a summary of the three storylines:

### **Storyline 1: From Expert to Generalist**

1. Narrative of experience: Walther establishes the legal department from scratch.
2. Narrative of identity conclusion: Walther concludes that generalist leadership is to be his future goal.
3. Narrative of experience: Walther attends board meeting; CEO neglects his employees' opinions.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: Walther concludes that he lacks political and strategic skills.
5. Narrative of identity conclusion: Walther concludes that he is too introverted and lacks network.
6. Narrative of experience: Walther attends the leader course "ETP" as a result of yearly appraisal.

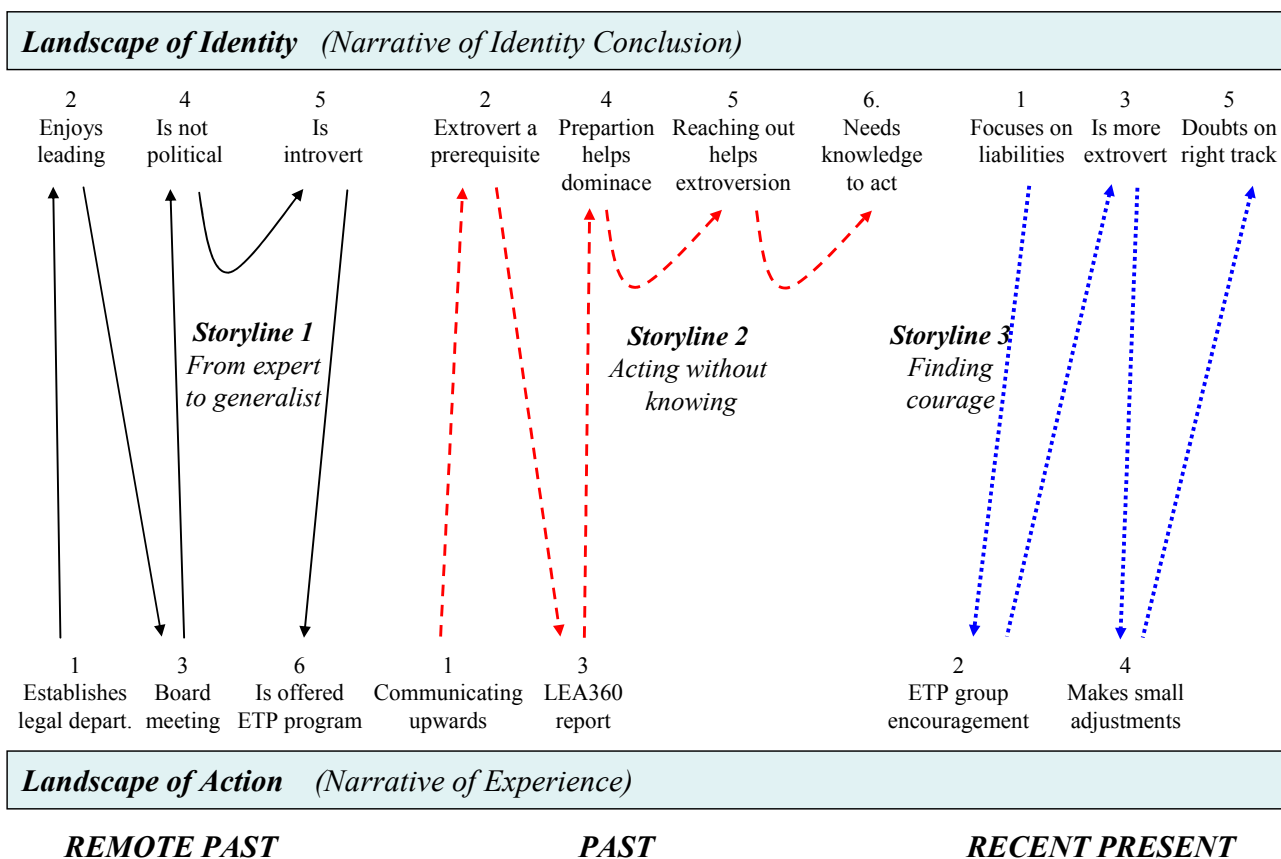
### **Storyline 2: Acting Without Knowledge**

1. Narrative of experience: Walther experiences difficulties in communicating upwards.
2. Narrative of identity conclusion: Walther concludes extroversion is a prerequisite for being heard.
3. Narrative of experience: Walther continually consults his LEA360 report for answers and knowledge.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: Walther concludes that preparation makes him more dominant.
5. Narrative of identity conclusion: Walther concludes that reaching out makes him more extroverted.
6. Narrative of identity conclusion: Walther concludes that he needs knowledge to build confidence to act.

### Storyline 3: Finding Courage

1. Narrative of identity conclusion: Walther concludes that fear of the unfamiliar is inhibiting development
2. Narrative of experience: Walther receives encouragement and positive feedback from ETP group.
3. Narrative of experience: Walther plans steps to make small adjustments to his leader behavior.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: Walther concludes that he lacks the courage to take a bigger leap.
5. Narrative of identity conclusion: Walther concludes that he needs knowledge to act self-confident.

Display 9-2 Storyline Map – Walther 2006



The storyline from expert to generalist illustrates Walther's identity struggles in relation to the organizational demands and his own wishes. The expert identity is positioned as a negative anti-identity and so is the leadership of the CEO. In the second storyline is about the specific tension of having to act as a leader with only little knowledge about “being a leader”. The storyline construction is interpreted to show how the lack of knowledge of leadership accentuates the virtues of the leaders’ profession in constructing leader identity. The third storyline puts into

perspective the emotional aspects of the construction of leader identity, by illustrating how narratives of tensions construct a storyline of courage as a leveling device to bridge the gap between a secure professional position and an unfamiliar, uncertain leader occupation. This serves as an example of how tensions and identity struggles are storied as if the individual leader is “lacking something”. The leader positions himself as a failure, because he lacks courage or other qualities associated with leadership. In this perspective, the construction of a leader identity through the appointed leader’s attempt to make sense of identity in narratives of problems and preferred stories interacts with the specific organizational contexts and circumstances.

### **9.3 An Open Ending...Storyline Reconstruction and Continued Struggles**

The point of departure for this section is the 2007 interview. The first half of the interview focuses on Walther’s reflections on significant events and current themes of tension in relation to his leadership and organizational situation. The second half of the interview is based on the new LEA360 report. As Walther and I go through the report, he reflects on and makes sense of the feedback scores by constructing stories of differences and similarities, and by relating the feedback scores to his own expectations and temporal identity construction.

#### **Storyline Reconstruction and Tensions**

Since the last interview, the top management team has undergone major changes and the CEO has been replaced. This has significantly changed Walther’s perception of his work situation. Walther explains how he for years has wished for a generalist leader role and has hoped to become included more in top management decisions. Now, with the arrival of a new CEO and a re-organization of the board of directors to include more administrative functions, Walther finds himself in a situation with the influence he has been hoping for.

*Walther: "...it means that I am much closer to top management and have a broader area of responsibility. As a result, a lot of the frustrations I have had for long periods of time have now disappeared, and I feel just filled with tremendous joy in the work and job satisfaction at the moment."*

Furthermore, the top management team and the CEO have a strong need for close interaction with Walther and the expertise Walther and his department have,

because the organization is currently involved in a critical business transaction with extensive media coverage and intense public interest.

### **Establishing the Foundation for a Generalist Position**

Several organizational circumstances contribute to establishing a new work situation; in Walther's department almost the entire staff has been replaced. Walther has already recruited new staff and recognizes that there are advantages and disadvantages to building a new team. He personally is mostly thrilled by the challenge. He foresees that the new team will need him to practice a "coaching role" so that the predominantly young professional staff can come to work at full capacity. This situation is similar to when Walther first started in the job and established the legal department from scratch. The story of this achievement was encapsulated in the 2006 interview, when Walther described the joy of organizing and building a team and a well-functioning department. Now, in 2007, Walther seems to be in a similar situation, and he tells how this has revitalized his work motivation.

During the summer, a huge and demanding business transfer is under way, which brings Walther and his department to center stage since their expertise is much needed. This is described by Walther as a turning point. He finds it extremely exhilarating, and from that point on he ceases to think of leaving the organization and begins to feel motivated again. Walther concludes that being in the center of things and being needed is "*good for your self-perception*". This I interpret as reflecting back on the low Self score of his LEA360 report, which underpins Walther's problem story of doubting whether he has the skills to be a generalist leader. The story is narrated as connected to his story of being cautious – e.g., you only speak when you possess knowledge and know what you are talking about. The experience of being the center of attention and "useful" within his area of expertise boosts his feeling of worth and self-confidence and influences his reconstruction of a more positively valued professional identity.

*Walther: "I experience that the new management uses me much more, ...and it is such a pleasure to be used at the right time instead of being used when the fires have to be put out."*

Walther also says that he has become chairman in his children's kindergarten and has contributed to the group's functioning by structuring, planning and leading the meetings. He concludes that this experience has given him new leader experience



outside his professional area, and has helped him gain more self-confidence leading in unfamiliar contexts. Finally, Walther has attended a corporate finance course at an international business school. Walther found the course very interesting and thinks it has positively influenced his interaction with the CEO and colleagues. Walther explains that the course gave him the financial understanding and language that then enabled him to contribute in a more qualified way to the economic discussions in the top management team. This I interpret as another example of how Walther gains through education the knowledge he feels to be a prerequisite for constructing a story of self-confidence in interaction with others. In the story, Walther describes how the course helped him create more networks and a broader range of influence in the organization, and perhaps most importantly Walther concludes that it has given him more courage to unfold his thoughts and to exert influence the organization.

*Walther: "I think the course has had a positive influence and has made me more daring now. I am less afraid to have an opinion in the specific economic area."*

*Gitte: "What kept you from that, when you think back?"*

*Walther: "Well, I didn't want to look like an idiot. Clearly, I am the type of person who, if I am uncertain, would rather be quiet than say something stupid, that's for sure..."*

Besides the changes already described, Walther received responsibility for two new and only remotely related business areas. This responsibility further augments the need for Walther to move in the direction of generalist leadership and to lead outside his area of expertise. In relation to the 2007 LEA360 report, the scores of respondents (e.g. his employees, boss and colleagues) range from 85% to 95%, indicating that they see him as a specialist with in-depth professional knowledge. Walther's self-assessment score is in the middle section (45%), indicating more of a generalist leader role. Walther responds to this discrepancy by laughing and saying that they have got it all wrong. He explains that today he is no longer a specialist but uses his employees to go into things in depth. Walther reflects that the "misperception" might arise because he sometimes communicates conclusions made by his team to other departments and is therefore easily associated with in-depth specialist knowledge. Clearly, Walther is taking time to make sense of this feedback, since it is in contrast with his expectations and aspirations for constructing a generalist leader identity. I interpret the firmness and humor with which he does this to imply that Walther feels confident and is already well

constituted in the generalist leader identity construct; therefore, he does not have any excessive need to defend himself or attack the contradictory feedback in the LEA360 report. This hypothesis is further sustained in the following storyline of Walther's reconciliation with the expert identity.

### **Reconciling the Expert Identity**

The replacement of the CEO and top management described above took place six months prior to the interview. Walther says that the previous situation was immensely frustrating for him. He had consulted several headhunters and former colleagues, and was definitely in the process of leaving the company. Walther describes having made an important realization during this process:

*Walther: "I had been doing a lot of thinking about what position was the right one, and it became more and more clear that it had to be wider than law, but maybe it should be related to the law, because that is where I have my strength. A position that somehow combines law with something else so there is a little broader scope. I think I have tracked down pretty well the type of work..."*

While Walther has in the process of thinking himself out of the organization, he made several contacts and was investigating the possibility of starting up a small law firm, and he ruled out working in the government sector. Walther's investigation of options and possibilities, and his reflections on where he could fit in and thrive ruled out some positions and led him to the conclusion that maybe he should not abandon the law altogether, as he had positioned the reconstruction of identity in the 2006 interview. The reflective process and maybe the identity tensions and identity work had led Walther to a new identity conclusion: to integrate with or maybe build his new position on the safe foundation of his professional expertise. Walther's wish for developing into a generalist leader was first formulated as an absolute exclusion of his profession; his profession was made the anti-identity that was standing in the way of his desired transition to a generalist leader.

Now, in 2007, he tells a story of having reconciled himself with his profession, e.g. by integrating it into a preferred identity construct that can help him achieve the goal of becoming more of a generalist leader. The change in the organizational situation with the new CEO, the building of a new team, the two new areas of responsibility, all interact and co-construct Walther's new storyline of the generalist leader, which Walther considers to be more realistic than the undefined wish for change he first formulated. In the 2006 interview, Walther experienced the tension

of being dissatisfied in a safe and successful position and the tension of wanting to follow his aspiration but not knowing how. These tensions are reconciled in the new storyline, and the tension decreases with the possibility of practicing generalist skills inside the organization, and the integration of the preferred generalist identity with Walther's professional identity. Walther has re-authored his storyline of becoming a generalist leader to include and be fueled by his expert profession, which is not to be completely abandoned. This, along with the changed organizational circumstances, make it possible for Walther to develop as a generalist leader inside the organization, and he can now build change from the secure base of his professional expertise.

In the 2006 interview, one of Walther's significant storylines was *finding courage* to act on his wishes. Since then, the organizational situation has changed considerably, establishing a new work situation for Walther. It has also established an organizational foundation on which Walther can practice generalist leader skills in his job more than before. The storyline of finding courage has become less significant, as it seems that Walther has achieved what he wished for without acting more courageously upwards in the organization. The storyline of Walther being "*more realistic*" about his own possibilities relative to his wishes has taken the center stage in his narrative construction of identity. Walther now finds himself in a work situation where to a large extent he has the possibility of practicing generalist leader skills from a secure and successful position.

### **The Fantastic Listener and the Political Animal**

The problem storyline of being very cautious and only speaking when absolutely certain of the content is given a positive turn by Walther in the 2007 interview. The Self dimension in the LEA360 framework at first triggers stories that are in line with the problem storyline already described. However, after having described the liabilities and connected the problem story back to his father's behavior as a role model, Walther emphasizes that his approach to leadership gives him credibility and makes him more convincing instead of "*just prattling away*". This is a positive re-authoring of the storyline of acting without knowledge that until now had been authored as problematic. Walther concludes on these reflections that "*All things considered then, I am a fantastic listener*".

This is a markedly different identity conclusion on the same problem storyline, and it illustrates how problem storylines can be altered or re-authored into more positive and supportive identity constructs. Not to disregard the significant

organizational changes to Walther's work context, the example bears witness to the elasticity of narrative identity construction processes and the relative ease with which storylines can be re-authored and identity constructs reconstructed.

Walther says he still needs to improve his ability to build alliances, fertilize networks and strategically influence actors within the organization. He concludes that he is "*not a political animal*", and he consciously has to remind himself to attend to this kind of interaction. Thus, the animal metaphor can be interpreted as a positional distancing from the political leader identity construct; nevertheless, he acknowledges that it is an important part of successful leadership in the organization. Then, Walther constructs political flair as something he should work to improve, and thus he reconstructs a new problem story and illustrates the continuous identity work of the leader occupation and the never-ending journey toward becoming a leader.

### **Negotiated Subject Positions**

Walther is positioning himself as a victim of the needs and demands of others: the organization's need for legal advice and professional knowledge, and the CEO's prejudice about lawyers (e.g. the attitude that once a lawyer always a lawyer). Moreover, he is the victim of the HR department pseudo-support in trying to keep him in his current position by granting him leader development courses such as the ETP. This positions Walther in opposition to these actors and alone with his wish for change, while the organizational actors are attempting to keep him in his professional role. The organization has succeeded in keeping Walther in a position where he meets their needs for a skilled lawyer, but where Walther's future aspirations are not being accommodated. In the storyline of *Finding Courage*, Walther is negotiating the conflict of interests by ascribing tensions to personal liabilities, e.g. his lack of courage, a story I hypothesize eventually increases his sense of dissatisfaction and tension.

Walther's case accentuates the dilemma of balancing an organization's goal and needs with the goal and needs of the individual leader, and the extent to which these can match or be aligned. When goals are altered on either side, identity work is enhanced in the individual in order to determine whether the organization can still accommodate the employee's altered goal, and the organizational actors interact with the leader in order to re-align with company goals and wishes.

In Walther's case, the storyline of not finding courage is constructed on the logic of the profession, i.e. to be well prepared, know the details and minimize risks. Now, Walther is in a situation of change because he wants to take a step into a generalist leader position, which to him is unknown territory; thus, he must leave behind the security of his profession and expertise. When Walther approaches the situation with the two virtues of preparation and minimal risk, it is detrimental to change and Walther is positioned in a deadlock. In this perspective, Walther's wish for change can be interpreted as a struggle with wanting to prepare and qualify before practicing, as if Walther is struggling with wishing to change without the risk of failing.

### **Concluding Reflections – Looking Back**

When asked for his central insights, Walther goes back five years to describe how he started as a specialist. Later, came a period when he was willing to throw himself into any kind of leader position, as long as he could work more as a generalist leader than as a professional expert. Today he feels that he has become more realistic about what kind of leadership he should practice, and he has narrowed down the leader he would like to be, but Walther emphasizes that his current position is still narrower than what he hopes for in the long term.

*Walther: "...I think I have to be a realist. Everything shows that I like to have solid ground under my feet, and I think I have to be realistic about not being the type who can bluff his way through. Others might be good at that but not me. So being on firm ground is what I think I want."*

Walther emphasizes that his developmental process has made him much more relaxed about work and that his months (i.e. years) of frustration have made him more conscious that life is too short to spend his time being dissatisfied and irritated. He says he might be a different person in two years and still might consider leaving the organization at some point. Walther thinks he will then be better prepared and have a better approach, because he has been through this "thought process" and is much clearer about what he wants to do. In conclusion, Walther makes the final status on his progress and insights:

*Walther: "I am very satisfied at the moment, happy and motivated when I go to work, and I am not at all where I expected to be when I look back at two years ago. But I actually feel satisfied, and I think it is because I have become more realistic about my goals and what is important to me; the most important thing is to be happy and satisfied with your job. Now there is a job to be done, and*

*then I have to see where I am at in two years time – whether I feel the same satisfaction.”*

*Gitte: “So your own satisfaction has become a parameter?”*

*Walther:” Yes, absolutely.”*

# 10 Adam - The Story of the Lions' Roar

*“Why did I land in this program on that day in April? Well, it was on request of the owner, who owns the organization, and the goal, which I think was very clear, was to smooth out some edges. I was to be more “round” and easier to be around. I should be less controlling and less result-fixated. That is what I think I was requested to be. I think our owner knew the program or Right Management and thought it would be a good idea. Oh, I have to mention that it was voluntary, that I accepted to participate. It was not as if someone was twisting my arm or anything. It was more to make me sort of broader in certain areas” (Adam, 2006).*

## 10.1 A Beginning...Themes of Tension

In 2005, Adam is the CEO of a Danish-based manufacturing company. The organization is located in Jutland and produces primarily for the European market. Adam is in his mid-forties and has held the position for about 6 years when he enters the ETP leader development program. He has an education in engineering and has more than 23 years experience in leader positions in middle-sized production companies. It is characteristic for Adam's career that he has worked in family-owned organizations and has worked side by side with the founders or company owners. Hence, Adam has throughout his career interacted with strong, charismatic company founders, and he emphasizes that their mentorship has significantly influenced his development as a leader. Adam is currently in the organization where he was first employed after finishing his education. He left the organization twice to pursue new opportunities, but returned each time to upper leader positions, most recently to lead a turn-around process at a division in England. Approximately eighteen months prior to the ETP program, a new owner bought in to head the European organization, and a new European management team was appointed as part of a new globalization strategy. Hitherto, Adam had been leading the Danish organization successfully with good economic results and has been very satisfied with his job. The new global strategy introduces a more central European top management group, and it entails major investments other places in Europe with less focus on developing and investing in the Danish organization. These changes led to major disagreements between Adam and the new owner and in 2005 these disagreements are escalating. According to Adam, these conflicts are the reason he is attending the ETP program, at the owner's request.

The specific circumstances leading to Adam's participation in the program are important to understand Adam's case. The introductory quote illustrates a

pronounced ambivalence when Adam says that the new foreign owners *have sent him away to be straightened out* and simultaneously assures the listener that it is voluntary and that no one is “*twisting his arm*”. This accentuates another prevalent theme in Adam’s case: communication or “double-talk” in Adam’s stories when constructing leader identity is present in his communication with the program's ETP group and with me in the interviews. In the ETP program's introductory exercise in 2005, Adam gives a first construction of his leader qualities, emphasizing that he is a good leader because he gives employees’ freedom and responsibility and provides a secure environment in which it is no shame to make a mistake. He thinks that he is pragmatic, communicates very directly, and is good at answering questions. Furthermore, he gives positive feedback, and because he is direct, the employees do not have to guess what he wants. In the first module, Adam is influenced by the critical circumstances in his home organization, a situation that in his own view he has failed to solve, and which has therefore resulted in increasing disagreements. These circumstances make Adam's motivation to participate less a matter choice than is usually the case for the average participant. Adam openly explains to the ETP group the reason for his participation: “*Because I yelled at the new CEO, I had to attend this program.*”

His ambivalence about joining the leader development program is expressed in narratives throughout the program. Adam explains how he has been sent off to “*smooth out the edges*”, thus stating indirectly that something is wrong with him. Adam uses the metaphor of fighting when he says, “*No one is twisting my arm or anything*”. In using this metaphor, he conveys his feelings and denies them simultaneously, which can be interpreted as a way to overcome or handle the apparent double-bind situation he is in. When Adam defines his personal project in module 1, he narrates three significant themes of tension. His developmental goals are described as the struggle to become more patient, to work on his communication, and the use of dominance, which at this point in time he specifies in relation to identity work as: “*...to become more emphatic, more patient, and less dominating*”.

Adam perceives that he is as not very empathic with other people, reflecting that he is perhaps not trying hard enough to see things from others people's point of view; e.g. he is not trying to put himself in their shoes. Adam also describes struggling with his impatience. This is a theme of tension that he experiences is damaging the quality of his relations with other people. Being dominating is a third theme of tension and is described by Adam as a potential problem to him as a leader. Adam



emphasizes communication as an area for improvement and elaborates that he has difficulties accepting others and showing appreciation and acknowledging their results. Adam is worried that he might discourage others in this way. Furthermore, Adam describes feeling a sense of time urgency, as if he is under constant time pressure, not only at work but in life in general. Adam reflects that he somehow is always in a hurry and acts as if everything is an emergency, both in his family and in other close relations. He thinks that as a consequence of this problem story, he is “*losing his nuances*” and missing out on something. In the second module, Adam (like Jim) describes how shocked he was by the openness and willingness to share different experiences in the group and with the other participants in the ETP program. Adam says:

*Adam: “When you come from the part of the country that I do, that kind of openness is almost deadening.”*

This experience of openness makes Adam reflect on how he uses his time in his home organization. Adam explains that he suddenly realizes he is “*spending a lot of time getting back at his superiors*”. He describes how he is always poking at the top management team, often indirectly but with persistency and every time he has the opportunity. Adam realizes that this behavior is the opposite of being open, and he concludes that he might be hiding behind ambiguous communication in order to let his dissatisfaction be known while preserving a cooperative appearance by not being too open or too bluntly confronting the powerful new owner. In module 3, Adam tells the group that he has become more conscious of “*his tendency to be dominant*”. He says that he has become more aware of the fights he wants to take and the fights he should not take. Adam explains feeling he has improved his ability to control himself, and that he is also delegating more than before. One aspect of Adam’s personal project was to reduce his working hours, and he explains that he has succeeded in reducing them by 25%, resulting in more time for himself and his family.

During the coaching session, Adam is investigating two themes. The first theme is how to be more open with other people and with himself. Adam explains this theme is about being emotionally honest with others and with himself about “*how he feels about things*”. The second theme involves considerations about pursuing a career as self-employed. In Adam's description, there is a tension between holding on to his dreams and concern that others would not understand and support him. Moreover, Adam is reluctant about sharing his thoughts with others, because that would give

others the opportunity to influence him and thereby decrease his influence and sense of independence. The coaching session ends with the group feedback and advice to Adam:

*“We believe you need:*

- *To be provoked in your preconceived notions about life – we say this with affection!*
- *To build on the openness you have achieved. You have opened up from the program start and until now – you should try to open up at home, too*
- *To train your communication skills; less circular communication and more straight talk*
- *To make a decision about what you would like to do, be honest with yourself and act on your conviction*
- *To try to loosen your need to control every situation; take your wife on a survival trip and let her make all the decisions”*

Adam writes this advice in his personal logbook<sup>42</sup> but to the part about being more emotionally open, he adds the three words: *“Pride, vulnerability and honor”*. These reflections indicate what Adam is struggling with when having to reconstruct his identity according to the advice he has received. These terms were not explicitly mentioned by Adam in the coaching session, which I understand as a sign of his lack of openness. Nevertheless, I interpret the reflective insight made by Adam in connecting his development to these identity aspects to signify identity work and an increased understanding of his identity construction. With the benefit of hindsight, it would have been interesting to investigate these identity themes in the coaching session in order to unfold how Adam makes sense of these terms in relation to constructing identity in stories of pride, vulnerability and honor.

In module 4, Adam gives a status report on his personal project. He emphasizes needing to work on his patience and still needing to take time to relate to others and to try to see situations from their points of view. He adds that he should try to be more emotionally open to and let others take the lead. Adam has also become aware that over the years he has become a lot more pessimistic than he used to be. He concludes that this is because he is compromising his own wishes more than before, which is making him bitter and negative. Adam says he feels as if he has lost his dreams and maybe even part of himself, and talks about finding himself again and revitalizing his *“youthful self”*.<sup>43</sup> Adam writes in his logbook that he used

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<sup>42</sup> Adam’s log book was made available to me when I collected written empirical material as part of the 2006 interview.

<sup>43</sup> In Danish, the expression is literally: my youth's I (*“Mit ungdoms-jeg”*).

to be an optimistic and happy person but has now become a pessimist, and that he feels guilty when he is absent minded and not spending enough time with his family. In constructing this story, Adam refers to and uses a life assessment exercise from the ETP program to support the argument that his motivation and enthusiasm has dropped markedly. He explains that five years ago he had his “*dream job*”, and when looking forward, he still feels confident that in five years time he will have re-establishment his old optimism, which according to Adam would happen if he realized his dreams. Thus, the present is positioned as a time of disillusion and discomfort for Adam, and the past and future are positioned as more attractive.

The third module includes a feedback exercise in which all participants in the program give and receive feedback. Feedback is given on thirteen different behavioral dimensions on a scale from 1-5. It is written on a one-page form for each person, and then the participants engage in an interactive process, consulting each other for elaborations and exemplifications of the scores. The aim of the exercise is for each leader to receive concrete feedback on how his behavior is perceived by others and to practice giving and receiving feedback. One feedback dimension is about communication. It assesses whether the leader is perceived to: “communicate in clear language, is easy to understand and expresses opinions clearly”. On Adam’s feedback sheet, all members of his basic group give him a significantly lower score on this specific dimension than the rest of the class. I interpret this to indicate that the norms of honesty and openness that characterize the smaller groups are challenging to Adam and to his group. In the group, Adam’s communication style of hiding behind vague or unclear statements contrasts with the openness required for identity work. Therefore, Adam’s communication is provoking for the other group members, as it threatens their potential gain from the group process. The group members feel that they are perhaps wasting their time and effort when Adam does not respond within the established interaction patterns, is not “playing by the rules” (i.e. norms) of the program, avoids self-disclosure and rejects identity work.

At this point in time, the group is not including or referring to Adam’s organizational situation in understanding his behavior and communication. Instead, they are more explicitly trying to make Adam understand the group norms of honesty and pressure him to “*say things like they are*”. From an analytical perspective, this group process resembles the intentions of the new owner by sending Adam on the program “*to smooth the edges*”. Seemingly, the group at this

point is concerned with Adam’s concrete interaction in the group and with the way he communicates with them. The group's struggle with Adam on these issues places him at the periphery in the group, which might make it even more difficult for him to open up. On the other hand, the group is still communicating respectfully and stressing its positive intentions, which is indicated when they add: “*We say this with affection*” to their first piece of advice that his preconceived notions of life should be provoked.

In relation to the LEA360 report, Adam focuses first on his communication skills upwards in relation to his boss, and secondly describes becoming aware of a very dominating behavior towards others, a behavior he ascribes to having a high level of self-esteem. Adam says that he will try to keep this insight in mind, especially in the critical conversations he will be having with his boss in the near future. However, Adam also raises the issue of his relation with authorities as a theme of tension. He feels authorities increasingly constrict his range of action, and this is very tension-provoking for him, because he has a strong drive to be free, in charge and to make independent decisions. Therefore, in his current situation, Adam “*feels like a bird with the wings clipped off*”. Adam describes how feeling free is central to him, but because he simultaneously feels very responsible for supporting his family, he cannot just follow his own wishes. Ironically, he is struggling to solve the tension by working long hours, which makes him feel guilty in relation to his family for not spending more time at home. This story illustrates the dilemma of balancing family life demands and job demands, as well as the dilemma of balancing the wishes and needs of the organization with those of the individual leader.

**Display 10-1 Adam: Problem Stories, Preferred Stories and Consequences**

<b>Stories focusing on</b>	<b>Problem Stories</b>	<b>Consequences of problem stories</b>	<b>Preferred Stories</b>	<b>Consequences of preferred stories</b>
<b>Personal Themes</b>	Being part of the new European Management team	Feels encaged and limited	Being autonomous and independent	Feeling powerful and in charge
	Being dominant and having a sense of urgency	Gets his way and results faster, sustains power	Listening more to others	Establishing better relationships
	Becoming negative and pessimistic	Compromises his own dreams and wishes	Following his dreams more	Being more optimistic and positive

<b>Relational Themes</b>	Being closed, not emotionally open	Hides his own feelings, feels dissatisfied in relations	Spending more time with others, having closer relationships	Feeling less alone, more as part of a community
	Bullying and being impatient	Damages relations	Being more patient	Getting more out of relations, less conflicts
	Lacking empathy	Focuses only on results	Focuses on results and people	Getting people on board
<b>Organizational Themes</b>	Disagreeing with new owner	Is restricted by authorities	Reestablishing the positional power of the past	Sustaining organizational influence

This section shows how Adam constructs problem stories from the feedback he receives from the different exercises in the ETP program. Adam also integrates the LEA360 report in his construction of identity stories, and he refers to the concrete feedback given to him by others during the program. However, Adam does not incorporate the new CEO's positioning of him in the problem story, which I read as Adam rejecting the problem story and insisting in constructing his own identity, which is in accordance with the independence and individual freedom stories that are prevalent in Adam's overall leader identity construction.

## 10.2 A Middle Ground...Narrative Construction of Identity in Storylines

The first interview takes place in Copenhagen, approximately eighteen months after the end of the ETP program. Adam has taken the early morning plane and explains that he has used the commute to think about the process he has been through. He has a piece of paper with prepared notes in front of him. In setting the scene for the interview, I ask Adam for his accept to use a dictaphone, and as I turn it on, Adam's spontaneous first remark is: *"Now, I have to mind what I say"*.<sup>44</sup> In this way, he strikes the significant theme of communication as a game of hide and seek that has influenced Adam's communication with the ETP group and influences the interaction and dialogue in the subsequent interview. Using communication as a strategy to achieve particular goals is a central construct in Adam's construction of leader identity, which I unfold in the storyline of communication as strategy later in this section.

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<sup>44</sup> In Danish, the specific expression for this is *"Nu må jeg vare min mund"*.

First, I ask Adam about the circumstances leading to his enrolment in the ETP program. Laughing, Adam says that he was sent off to be straightened out, because he shouted at the owner and disagreed with the new strategic changes. Major organizational changes had taken place; a new international owner had entered the scene with ideas about a more homogeneous organization with a global range of operations and reorganization of management into a central European management group. Since the program end, the organization headquarters had moved to Copenhagen, leaving Adam in Jutland with decreased influence. In Adam's understanding, these organizational changes symbolize a transition:

*Adam: "... from a leader style with a high degree of independence to what I would call an AP Møller leader style, where you are supposed to just click your heels and agree."*

Adam tells the story of meeting the new owner for the first time. After a whole-day meeting, they meet in the bar to have a drink. In this informal setting, the owner tells Adam a story of how some employees might be very good at achieving results but not very good at being team players. During the conversation, it becomes obvious to Adam that even though his organization has good economic results, this is not enough for the new owner. He realizes that he is expected to be part of the team and to adapt to the decisions taken. He is left with the impression that the new owner perceives him as one who only plays by his own rules. Adam responds that management should rather focus on getting better results in other parts of the company, instead of focusing on his organization and his lack of team playing. Later, the team-player problem story is unfolded with a more defensive stand towards the new management, as Adam connects this story to human rights and advocates for his freedom of speech. The quote below indicates that the organizational conflicts have not culminated, but could have turned into even more rigid opposition:

*Adam: "You know what, Gitte. I think that I am disappointing them, because I want to reserve the right to say what I think and don't want anyone to come and change that! Of course I have to be relevant and factual, but if someone wants to deny me my freedom of speech then it is without my cooperation. I feel very strongly about this, and I think others have realized that too, by now..."*

In the following, I unfold three significant storyline constructions in Adam's case. The narrative construction of identity is first expressed in the storyline, *The Lion's*

*Roar*, about executing power, persuasion and position as a leader. The second storyline, *Communication as Strategy*, focuses on communication and relationships, and finally the storyline, *Choosing my Battles*, is thematically about reflective insight and behavioral modification.

### ***Storyline 1: The Lion's Roar***

The storyline of the lion's roar is constructed in several narratives in the 2006 interview. Adam uses power struggles and fighting metaphors to describe his leadership and organizational circumstances, and themes of influence and power are central in constructing leader identity. Adam constructs the storyline of *The Lion's Roar* with its outset in lessons learned in his first job as an engineer in the organization where he is now CEO. Adam describes that in his opinion the organization offered him the best apprenticeship possible. When asked to elaborate, Adam tells the story of the lions. Adam describes being turned down the first time he applied for a job in the organization. The foreman sent him away because he lacked an education. He takes a degree in engineering and returns to the organization and is hired as one of the first engineers in the company's history. At this time, according to Adam, the organization had a strong leader combination, with a very dynamic, opportunity-seeking owner and a very administrative and well-disciplined CEO. Adam was the first young engineer to enter the organization and was physically located on the management hallway in an office between the two leaders. Adam explains:

*Adam: "It was such a hallway made of marble; we called it the hallway of the lions, and you can rest assured that I got inputs to both my right and my left ear."*

Hence, the construction of leader identity is marked by strong mentors and the presence of role models. Adam emphasizes being a "*competitive person*", which means that he always tries to do the best he can. Adam emphasizes that preparation is vital to a strong performance, and he describes how he always prepares himself by imagining the opponents' role, arguments and points of view, and how he loses respect when other people are not well prepared. In conclusion, Adam says that over time he became one of the lions; he was included in top management decisions, and the CEO and owner eventually used him as sparring partner in the daily work. Adam elaborates on the meaning of his mentors to him and to his development as a leader:

*Adam: "That is one of these gifts you cannot buy for money. All respect to you and the other facilitators, but such a pair of mentors... (pause), and at 26 I was also at an age when you can still accommodate something new. This was such a gift."*

*Gitte: "What did you learn about being a leader there?"*

*Adam: "Well, I learned a lot about customers and customer relations. I learned much about developing the business; to have visions and be aware of business opportunities, but managing the personal was not something we were very good at..."*

Adam first explains the problem story of managing personal with reference to the geographical location of the organization in Jutland, which is a part of Denmark where people are described culturally as notoriously shunning praise and recognition. He explains that if in this part of country you give positive feedback, employees want to have a raise. Adam also connects this to the story of how one of his mentors used to say leadership is all about "...*finding talented people and then keeping them*". According to Adam's understanding, this means that employees ideally simply carry out the assigned job, because that keeps the organization running – "*you should just stay and take care of your job*". Adam does not reflect on the implicit message of not wanting employees to develop in the job. He tells the story without explicitly agreeing with this attitude, except for the fact that he brings it up and gives the story space. Adam is constructing leader identity by using these stories of how to manage power and relations as a leader. In the interview, I return to the lion metaphor and ask how the "*lion hallway*" got its name. Adam tells the following story:

*Adam "If you knew the owner – I mean, of course he wasn't a lion, but he could roar like a lion. You were never in doubt about who was the king of the organization. The elephant might be big, but the lion knows how to be respected. But it is not a name I have given; it was there before me."*

Adam does not answer my question about whether the owner was feared; instead, he tells some of the lessons he learned from the owner. These stories construct leadership using positional power to influence people and get your way. The use of power is described in ambiguous terms: first, you roar to announce your kingdom (your power) and gain respect on the basis of your positional power. Thus, Adam explains that when the lion roars to scare everyone, the lion does not have to fight, because the fear is sufficient to keep everybody in their place. Adam narrates the



following identity conclusion, referring to lessons learned from one of his mentors, the company owner:

*Adam: "The day you use the power you have, you will lose it. Because then you lose respect and without respect you have dropped your leadership on the ground."*

*Gitte: "Then what did he (the owner) mean by power and how concretely are you supposed to use your power?"*

*Adam: "Well, you shouldn't ever put people down or sit on people just because you can, and the owner never did that himself."*

*Gitte: "Then what did he do?"*

*Adam: "He used persuasion, argumentation, and motivation, which is also persuasion. And inspiration, by being the one in front; and to me that is the clearest role model for good leadership."*

Later, this storyline is supplemented with the stories of a third mentor who helped Adam construct leader identity in regard to the relational dimensions of leadership. This storyline is not illustrated in the storyline map but is included here to show how storylines are reconstructed or integrated with new storylines over time. It shows how narrators use new experiences to modify and reconstruct the meaning of leader identity. After returning from England, Adam gets a job in a small family business where Adam is invited into the absolute inner circle and becomes in his own words "*part of the family*". The bond is so close that he is written into the family will. In this strong relational context, Adam is reconstructing leader identity as the third mentor becomes his role model for managing the human aspect of leadership. Adam describes how this mentor teaches him things he would never have learned in the hallway of the lions. Primarily, Adam learns "*how to appreciate things*", even small and seemingly mundane things like remembering people's birthdays and making phone calls to wish a Merry Christmas. Adam describes discovering how these small things really matter to people and to him, and he experiences how leading people this way makes everybody feel appreciated, recognized and creates a positive welcoming environment. Adam describes noticing how this third mentor always treats everybody as equals; he would remember and include the production workers and would always talk respectfully to everybody. Adam contrasts these experiences with the silence, the lack of feedback and "*the freedom of responsibility*" that prevailed in the lion organization. In his storyline construction, the more authoritarian leader identity is now

positioned as less attractive, and in these stories Adam is distancing himself. Adam concludes this storyline construction by describing how he integrates some of the concrete ways of appreciating people in his own leadership and behavior – mostly the parts about giving recognition with gifts or by writing a personal note, and less the parts that demand face-to-face interaction and verbal appreciation.

### ***Storyline 2: Communication as Strategy***

Adam describes himself as a very result-oriented and goal-oriented leader, and stresses the importance of being well prepared for meetings. He contrasts this preferred identity construct with “*small-talk leadership*”, stating that he is not particularly interested in the social aspects of leading. Adam dislikes receptions. He struggles with managing people in closer face-to-face relations, and sees communication primarily as a way to control the social situation. Adam positions the social aspects of leadership as an anti-identity and concludes that “*I am social when it serves a purpose.*”

Adam thus constructs a leader identity in which he is primarily goal-oriented and result-oriented, also in social relations. This indicates that Adam sees people as a means to an end and that he interacts and maybe manipulates people to achieve results. As illustrated in the first storyline construction, leading is in Adam’s understanding closely connected to persuasion. Such an identity construction that emphasizes persuasion positions the other person as an opponent to be over won, one to be manipulated towards a certain end. In the interview, Adam reflects on how his goal-oriented approach to other people might relate to empathy, referring to the LEA360 analysis, to the feedback exercise from the ETP program, and to feedback given by the basis group. Adam again describes one of his problem stories to be lack of empathy. In the LEA360 framework, the Empathy dimension assesses the extent to which a person is perceived to be relating socially to other people and expressing understanding for other people's feelings. In 2005, all respondents perceive Adam to be low on the Empathy dimension, and he gives himself the lowest score (5% out of 100%) in his self-assessment. This score contributes to the construction of empathy as a problem story with which Adam is struggling, but this problem story is reflected in Adam’s story of being uninterested and poor at “*personal management*”.

*Adam: "...empathy was scored very low in the LEA360 report, but during the ETP program I realized two things; I became more conscious about why my empathy is not there. And two, I got reaffirmed that I can be empathetic if it*

*serves a purpose. And I actually think that my group told me that they thought I had empathy beyond that, and the feedback from the entire class was also much more positive. I was actually quite surprised by that... ”*

In stories, Adam talks me through his way through the educational system, starting with primary school, and he is very explicit about his generally negative attitude towards education and learning. Adam tells the story of how he only received a higher education because of some local school mergers that made it easier for him to attend the more theoretical “high school” located closer to his home. Throughout the interview he positions learning as unnecessary and as an anti-identity. However, he describes how over time he has realized that education, i.e.. “*the paper proof of education*”, may be important and even necessary to achieve positions of influence and to become included in the organizations he aspires to.

*Adam: "I have always thought that learning is a necessary evil to reach some goals, and education I have seen more as an institution that steals your freedom."*<sup>45</sup>

In school, Adam did fairly well in story-telling, because he could do “*performances*”. He explains how he would turn a difficult subject around or twist it with his presentation skills. Adam says that he would not call it “*magician tricks*”, but he would make diversions with his left hand to distract the audience while buying time so he could get his case together. This story implies that Adam is consciously using communication skills to distract and manipulate the audience in situations where he would otherwise appear incompetent or unknowledgeable. Therefore, this is a story from the past of how Adam uses communication strategically; he makes a performance and in this way hides his own ignorance. Communication is thus used as a strategy to overcome situations in which he might appear vulnerable, and as a means to gain control of the situation. The way Adam uses communication as a strategy is central to understanding Adam's case. The coaching episode in the group described earlier is an example of how Adam's communication strategy can become a barrier to interaction and relationship building. In a similar way, my communication with Adam in the interview is characterized by unclear passages and chains of reasoning that are difficult to make sense out of.

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<sup>45</sup> In Danish, the wording is “*uddannelse er en frihedsberøvende insitution*”.

In the last part of the interview, Adam tells stories about how he actively uses communication as a strategy with other people. Together, these stories construct the storyline of *communication as strategy*, which illustrates Adam's construction of leader identity. Adam says he uses communication as a strategy because he feels most comfortable when he can hide behind unclear, vague communication. Adam narrates by using various tactics to blur his communication; one tactic is including a lot of seemingly unimportant facts or irrelevant details and information. Another tactic is jumping between different, remotely related subjects. This confuses the listener and makes it difficult to follow Adam's logic in the situation. It also makes it difficult for the other party (here, me as the interviewer) to follow my own line of thinking and interests and obtain answers to my questions. By using these communication tactics, Adam can control and redirect the conversation into areas that are less likely to threaten him with self-disclosure. An example is when Adam talks at great length about the community school system and the public reform when asked about his education. As the interview progresses, I ask many questions to try to get back on (my) track and make Adam answer my questions, with little effect. I become increasingly blunt and direct, returning to questions when stories seem to me be detours that no longer make sense. As the interview progresses, Adam becomes more explicit about how he uses communication as a strategy. At the very end of the interview, Adam explains that he carefully chooses his words in conversations and how he uses communication as a tactic with other people. Adam says that he "*talks around a subject*", especially when he perceives the subject to be "*a hot topic*". A hot topic, in Adam's understanding, is one that can "*undress him*", in other words a topic that might make him look weak, ignorant and intellectually naked. In addition, he describes using unclear communication as a strategy to influence people.

*Adam: "...I have to choose my words carefully, and maybe there is always a certain ambiguity in what I say. Depending upon how it is received, I always have the possibility to say that the other person has misunderstood what I meant."*

*Gitte: "What is the good thing about that strategy?"*

*Adam: "It is a communication strategy – I talk and beat around the bush. I try to mirror the other person and buy myself more time to think about how to get away from a subject I do not want to talk about."*

Adam considers interaction to be "*basically one big game of chess*" and explains that by keeping more doors open, he avoids being "*checkmated*" by anybody. His

language implies that he understands interpersonal relations as a power game to be won or lost. However, he says this way of communicating feels natural to him and is almost like his “*extended backbone*”. It keeps more paths open for him to exit from any unpleasant situation. Adam says he does not distinguish between business negotiations and personal conversations when using this strategy, which underlines the central significance of this storyline in Adam’s narrative construction of identity. More stories are added to the storyline as Adam describes how he never uses conversation for just small talk. When he communicates, it always serves a purpose. This is a link to the storyline of being a goal-oriented and result-oriented leader. Adam says that his ability for small talk is underdeveloped, and he characterizes in an ironic tone other leaders as being “*world champions in small talk*”, a position he finds undesirable and an anti identity. Adam implicitly makes a meta-reflection on our interaction and communication in the interview:

*Adam: "Well, there is always a goal with communication. So be careful, Gitte. When I say something, then it is because I want something (laughs)."*

This is an illustrative example of the double-talk Adam practices, narrated as a joke on the one hand; but on the other, as just described by Adam, it is not. Moreover, the story of purposeful goal-oriented communication seems to me like a threat; as the interviewer, there is something I should be careful about. Subsequently, I ask Adam if his way of communication makes it difficult for other people to understand him and get a sense of what he stands for. Adam responds:

*Adam: "I do not disagree with you on that one, but maybe that is when I feel most comfortable. But of course it shouldn't be dangerous for people, because then you do not establish confidence, and if they get too confused then they will not follow you."*

Adam links this story back to the storyline of appreciating people. He states that he feels he is very good at motivating and reaching goals with his employees, and then he adds: “...*but it has to be my way, because I have a tactic inside my head which I follow*”. In other words, employees should trust and follow Adam in his leadership, which I interpret as authoritarian leadership with room for only one lion in the pack. In relation to a contextual understanding, Adam has experience leading manufacturing companies, and this might contribute to this construction of leader identity. My hypothesis here is that it would be difficult to uphold this highly authoritarian leader behavior in organizational contexts comprising highly educated employees (e.g. academics) who typically demand a higher degree of involvement

in decisions and more pronounced empowerment. I hypothesize that Adam is using communication as a strategy to avoid being open about his feelings and wishes, and this strategy protects him from being perceived as vulnerable, incompetent or powerless. Through ambiguous communication, Adam can hide his intentions and goals and thereby preserve a stronger position of negotiation and maximize his own freedom and independence. Adam uses communication as a strategy to avoid making promises that he would later have to fulfill, and perhaps also to hide the fact that he considers people to be a means to business ends. Ambiguous communication gives Adam room to influence and persuade others in subtle and implicit ways, which might inhibit others in noticing that they are being manipulated.

Adam also combines words with positive connotations with words with negative connotations: Experiences are “*badly enriching*”; the basis group's interaction is characterized as “*terrifying openness*”. This rhetoric leaves the audience with an unclear and maybe diffuse picture of what Adam is feeling; is it bad, or is it enriching; is he terrified or does he want to be more open. The contradictory phrasing and ambivalence is transmitted to the listeners and gives them work to do. This social interaction tires people and might make them give up and leave decisions to Adam. Thus, this communication strategy succeeds and gives Adam control of the situation and maximum influence.

### ***Storyline 3: Choosing my Battles***

Throughout the 2006 interview, Adam consistently gives examples of how everything was better before. Most likely, the specific circumstances of Adam's participation has contributed to this positioning of the past as a better place, where Adam's position was not threatened and he had more autonomy and influence in the organization. When Adam is asked to describe his development or the insights acquired during the program, he emphasizes that the time for self-reflection has made him more self-aware and helped him reconsider what is necessary for him to thrive as a leader. Adam says his own values have become clearer to him:

*Adam: "...definitely my own values and what I would like to invest my energy in, and what I would like to fight for... I mean that is very clear to me now."*

What is most beneficial to him is to understand his priorities better, but also the interaction with the other leaders in the program has been significant for him. Between modules, Adam has worked with issues in a goal-directed way in his

home organization; concretely, he has made more time for himself by stepping down from four different boards, and by placing a daily leader at three satellite production sites. Adam maintains that regardless of how he entered the program, his attitude has been to get the best out of it. He does not know if he has become a better leader, but he has received feedback from people in the organization about how surprised they are that he is not engaging in some fights as they would have expected. Based on such feedback, Adam concludes (i.e. in the landscape of identity) that he has become better at reflecting before jumping into action. For him, the change is that he is now actively considering whether to step into a particular battlefield or not.

*Adam: "I am choosing my battles better than before."*

Adam says that he now argues his case once; if people are not convinced, he might argue his case once more in a different way. If people are still not convinced or do not agree with him, then he considers how important the issue is to him and whether to let it go and accept that not all decisions are exactly the way he wants them to be. Ultimately, Adam says, this realization leads him to consider if he still wants to be a part of the organization or if he should leave. This is an example of an identity conclusion, which signifies a reconstruction of the storyline, *communication as strategy*. the meaning of persuasion is reconstructed by setting a limit beyond which another strategy should be used that might prove to be a better approach, e.g. the storyline of choosing your battles. In relation to this storyline construction, Adam describes realizing he would rather be "*a big fish in a small pond than a little fish in a big pond*". If the organization's change processes are "*turning the organization into a big pond*", then he thinks he is probably not the right person for the job. I read this metaphor to indicate a beginning realization of what is necessary for Adam in order to thrive as a leader, and it indicates that he has to make some important decisions about his future work life. Adam says it is time for him to set new goals for himself but also keep open the possibility of staying with the organization. At this point in time as Adam leaves the table and heads home to Jutland, much is still undecided in the organization where he started his working life, and where he has been a leader for most of his adult career. The storyline map illustrates how narratives are clustered together to construct the three storylines in Adam's case. In summary, the three storylines are:

### **Storyline 1: The Lion's Roar**

1. Narrative of experience: Adam applies for a job in the organization and is turned down because he lacks education.
2. Narrative of experience: Adam becomes an engineer and is hired in an engineering position.
3. Narrative of experience: Adam is placed between two strong mentors, a fantastic apprenticeship.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: Adam concludes that business is more important than people.
5. Narrative of identity conclusion: Adam concludes that it is best to keep people in their place.
6. Narrative of identity conclusion: Adam concludes that positional power and fear wins respect.
7. Narrative of identity conclusion: Adam concludes that persuasion is good leadership.

### **Storylines 2: Communication as Strategy**

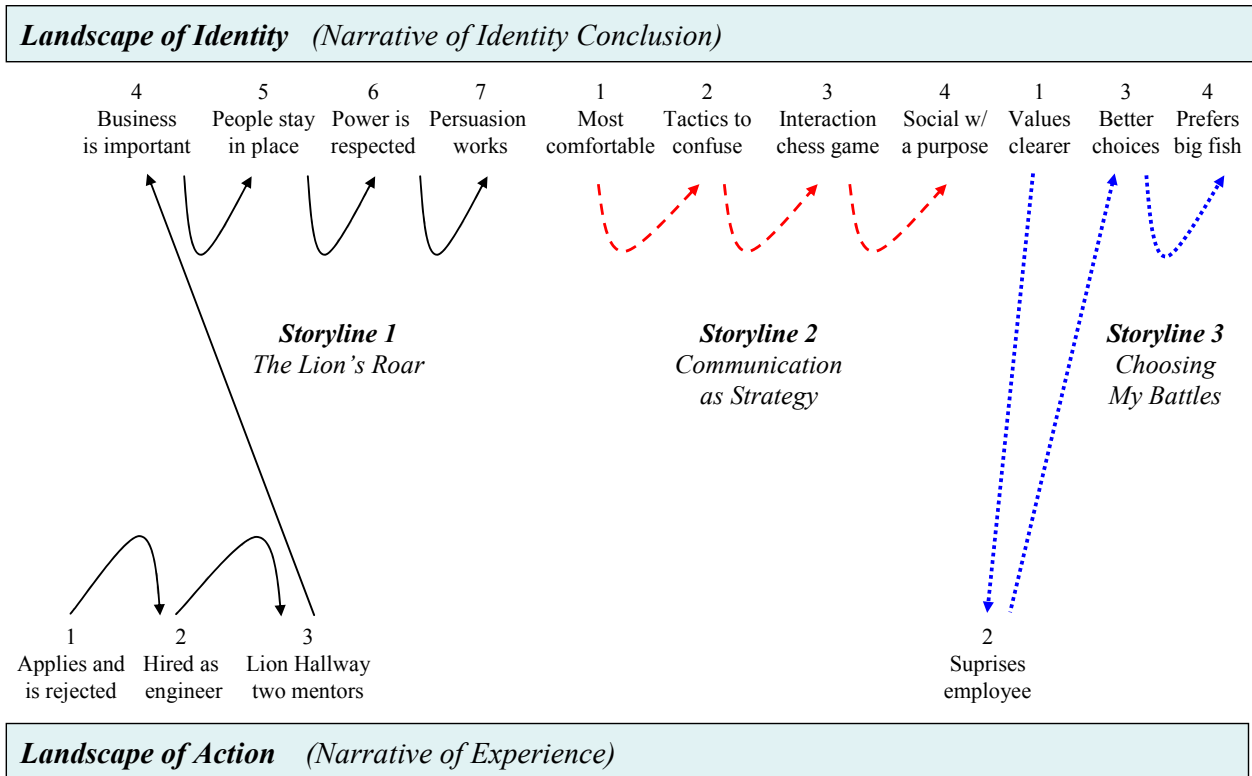
1. Narrative of identity conclusion: Adam concludes he is most comfortable hiding behind unclear talk.
2. Narrative of identity conclusion: Adam concludes that tactics work to confuse the listener.
3. Narrative of identity conclusion: Adam concludes that interaction is a big game of chess.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: Adam concludes that he is social with a purpose.

### **Storyline 3: Choosing my Battles**

1. Narrative of identity conclusion: Adam concludes that he has become more clear about his values.
2. Narrative of experience: Adam receives feedback that employees are surprised when he does not take a certain fight.
3. Narrative of identity conclusion: Adam concludes that he is making better choices than before.
4. Narrative of identity conclusion: Adam concludes that he prefers being a big fish in a small pond.



**Display 10-2 Storyline Map – Adam 2006**



**Landscape of Action** (Narrative of Experience)

**REMOTE PAST**

**PAST**

**RECENT PRESENT**

The storyline map illustrates how Adam in storyline 1 is constructing significant leader identity conclusions on the basis of narratives of experiences that took place over 30 years ago. Adam’s case illustrates how, on the basis of certain narratives of experience, he constructs four central identity conclusions that significantly constitute his leader identity. It is interesting that in his narrative construction of leader identity, he primarily links narratives of identity conclusions together and makes more limited use of narratives of experiences when constructing leader identity (i.e. storyline 2 and storyline 3). This I interpret to imply that Adam to a lesser extent applies narratives of experience to construct who he is, and that he prefers to make his own autonomous conclusions; therefore, he does not include narratives of feedback from others, as for example Jim did in his construction process.

The significant themes of tension for Adam at this point in time are accentuated by his disagreements and power struggle with the owner. Adam is fighting for his own organizational survival in the organization where he started his professional life and where he has been the CEO for the past six years. The disagreements with the owner accentuate significant identity constructions of Adam: to be autonomous and independent. The owner’s introduction of the team player problem story can be understood as a response to Adam’s leader identity focus on results and goals and

independent decision making. The storyline of *The Lion's Roar* illustrates how Adam is socialized into an authoritarian leader style by his first two mentors. At first, Adam constructs the stories with little critical reflection. The stories are told acknowledging that he induces fear in others and uses power positions to persuade, but the potential negative consequences for the employees are not included in the storyline. Later, however, he contrasts this first experiences and leader identity construct with experiences and lessons learned from his third mentor. In this relationship, Adam learns appreciation of others and leadership based on respect and care. He is distancing himself from the leader identity construct from the lion's hallway, thus understanding the benefits of people-oriented leadership; he adopts some of the behavioral gestures but does not significantly reconstruct the storyline of "*people being a means to an end*".

The second storyline of communication as strategy is not positioned as a problem story by Adam, although he acknowledges that others might consider his "*talking around things*" as tiresome and confusing. Adam is very explicit about how he uses communication tactics to obtain certain results, to persuade, and to sustain a sense of control of situations. This identity construct, *communication as strategy*, is positioned by Adam as beneficial to him and entails a preferred story which reaches back into experiences in the past, e.g. in primary school, as a way of overcoming things and as a helpful strategy to avoid being socially exposed as ignorant and incompetent.

The third storyline; *choosing my battles*, indicates a beginning reconstruction of the storyline of persuasion. The storyline implies a realization that not all battles can be won, and that the lion strategy of persuasion has limits. This realization leads to the identity conclusion than instead of fighting every battle, it might be wiser to consider the importance of the issue first. On one hand, the storyline indicates that Adam has reconstructed the storyline of the autonomous persuasive fighter into a more reflective position. I interpret this to indicate that Adam has come to terms with the fact that organizational processes and decisions can never be a complete reflection of one mindset but have to be negotiated among many interests. However, the storyline can be read to resemble a "divide and rule" strategy, which is yet another way to persuade and to sustain power.

### **10.3 An Open Ending...Storyline Reconstruction and Continued Struggles**

This section is based on the 2007 interview and unfolds significant events and identity conclusions made by Adam in regard to the narrative construction of identity in problem stories and preferred stories up to this point. The section examines whether storylines have been reconstructed and subject positions recaptured, and analyzes Adam's identity negotiations at this specific point in time.

#### **Storyline Reconstruction and Tensions**

During the past 12 months, major changes have happened in Adam's professional life. Shortly after the last interview, Adam resigned after a total of almost 23 years in the organization, including seven years as CEO for Denmark. The founder died in spring 2006, and Adam describes that with his death his immunity is removed. Until then, a series of events had accumulated into a situation in the fall of 2006 in which Adam feels that either he resigns or he will be fired. Until the very end, Adam hopes he can take on leadership of one of the business areas, but communication from the new owners is clear: Adam has to go.

Adam resigns with a feeling of relief but also without a new job, and without having looked at other business opportunities. For the first time in his adult life, Adam is without a job and has to start from scratch re-inventing himself. Adam describes the situation as "*scary and liberating*", and clashing with what he considers in general to be his security and stability oriented profile. The situation is particularly a strain for Adam because he is without concrete goals for his professional life. This is contradictory to his identity construct, which is result and goal oriented, but simultaneously Adam feels a tremendous relief and sense of liberation. Adam is re-orientating himself, which he concretizes thus: he has something to offer smaller family-driven companies, where he feels able to contribute with stronger business understanding and more professional leadership. After his resignation, he is unemployed for a year, during which time he is negotiating with more than one family-owned organization about managing a generational shift process. Eventually, he enters a small organization to take over leadership together with a capital investor. Adam has somehow re-established the situation of the past as described in the former section in stories of the three different mentors. I interpret this as Adam having managed to place himself in a well-known position, thereby recreating stability and security in his professional life. The prolonged and turbulent transition from the old organization and the

scattered dreams he left behind has been a dramatic experience for Adam, and so has the experience of being unemployed for a year. Together, these experiences signify a turning point in his life and in his perception of his own professional identity.

In the following, I examine how these experiences have resulted in alternative storylines for Adam. The 2007 interview and the re-test with LEA360 are significant input to this analysis. This time the LEA360 analysis is administered in Adam's new organization after approximately five months in the job. The employee respondents have worked with Adam for five months and the colleague respondents for eight months. Thus, the respondents are not the same as in 2005, but all respondents have had sufficient time and interaction with Adam to assess his leader behavior and give feedback based on their perceptions and experiences.

### **There are Other Things to Life than Work**

Adam says that the process from 2005 and until the 2007 interview has made him more aware about what he values and what he wants in the future. Adam says that the process has resulted in a change in his self-perception, since he experienced suddenly having his hands holding on tightly, but to the wrong end of the rope.

*Adam: "Yes, it has changed me. It has changed my view on certain things, but how I can use it, I don't know (laughs)."*

Several times during the interview, Adam gives concrete examples of jobs he could take if necessary: he could be a security guard at the airport; or he would not mind for a shorter period cleaning in a warehouse and sweeping the floor. In these stories, Adam communicates a changed attitude towards work; in his stories, he minimizes the value of work and diminishes the importance for him of power positions and career. He is mostly worried about the economic consequences of such a career change and is concerned about his family's reaction if he no longer contributed to the household economy as they are used to.

*Adam: "I reached the conclusion that if another job didn't turn up, then I would just have to go outside and enjoy the good weather. If you understand what I mean; there are other things to life than work."*

Hitherto, Adam has spent most of his adult life working hard to pursue career and business goals, and he has been an active member of numerous industry interest groups and boards; therefore, this indicates a completely different approach to work

and life. Furthermore, Adam says that his feeling a need for stability and security has changed, and he has become more aware of the value of taking time to be with people and to listen to others.

### **In a Learning Mode**

In 2007, Adam entered a new organization, and the first period is characterized by him being in a “*learning-mode*”, since he has little knowledge of the product. His leader identity construct is formed by his need to listen and understand the business, and to learn from scratch what the organizations is all about.

*Adam: "I do not approach the task with the same kind of self-confidence, maybe my self-confidence has grown, but I do not approach things with the same conviction – a little more humility. You could reach a wrong conclusion – I think that is necessary in this situation."*

The dominant persuasive leader storyline taught by the mentors was culturally the right one in the “lion” organization, and it was a leader identity Adam was comfortable with and which worked for him in that context. Looking back, Adam proposes another reason for him becoming excessively dominant in his former organization. Adam says that because of his socialization into the organization and his deep knowledge of almost every part of the business, from the product materials to sales and customer relations, he simply felt that he always knew what was best, and therefore did not need to listen. In Adam’s case, the new organization context forces him to listen more, to approach the task with the help of social skills, and to approach the leader occupation with more humility than before. Back in 2005 in the old organization, all LEA360 respondents perceived Adam to be extremely dominating with a 75% score on the Dominate dimension, while Adam in his self-assessment scored himself in a middle position (45%). Now, in the 2007 re-test, Adam assesses himself as very low (5%), which indicates almost the opposite behavioral tendency. And the respondents assess the Dominant dimension in 2007 as low middle range (35%), which is a much more moderate dominance position than before. In the LEA360 theoretical framework, excessive use of dominance is considered a liability, because it implies that you bully and force your way on others. In this perspective, the modification of Adam's dominance score indicates an improvement of his interpersonal and relational skills.

The overall picture of the changes from the LEA360 assessment in 2005 to the re-test in 2007 is that Adam's leader profile has become modified and especially the social interactive scores are more moderate than in 2005. Adam’s self-assessment

scores from 2005 to 2007 have changed significantly in the dimensions of Cooperation (self score from 55% to 90%), Empathy (self score from 5% to 45%), and Outgoing (self score from 40% to 70%). This indicates that Adam has changed his self-perception of who he is as a leader and that he values and includes more interpersonal skills than before – this compared with the Dominant score decreasing (self score from 75% to 35%) and Adam’s score on Self significantly increasing (self score from 30% to 95%). Overall the two reports indicate that Adam has engaged in identity work that has significantly altered both the way others perceive him as a leader and Adam’s LEA360 self-assessment, which I interpret as indicators of leader identity reconstruction, primarily of the storyline of the lion's roar, which is thematically about dominance and power-based leadership, but also reconstruction of the narratives of empathy and social interaction.

*Adam: "I am more involving. I listen to others more, and I am less dominating, because I am in a situation where I am in a learning mode."*

Interestingly, Adam explains this reconstruction of leader behavior as due to “*the situation*”. He thereby makes use of the behavioral-oriented leader discourse of matching behavior and situation (see chapter 3). Adam's reaction to the changed score on cooperation is that he believes it expresses a wish on his behalf to be more cooperative. Adam is very careful and reluctant to draw identity conclusions based on the feedback in the LEA360 report. Instead, he again stresses that he is in a learning position in the organization, and maybe also with himself. Adam says he feels that he has the ability to be empathic from his childhood, but he has somehow lost it on the way and might even have become callous. Now, he feels time is running out, and based on his professional experiences and the ETP program, he ascribes the empathy problem story to the “*organizational situation he was in*”. Adam makes the identity conclusion that he has the ability to adapt to any situation, which is an affirmation of his identity theme of survival that is implicit in the narrated persuasion and power storylines. In concluding the interview, Adam says that he is happy about the higher scores on empathy, which to him is a confirmation that in relation to this aspect of leadership he is moving in the right direction.

*Adam: "I think it confirms a bigger self-awareness about what is important to me."*

Adam remarks that, metaphorically speaking, he has become not only older but also more “*round*”, thus linking this story to the 2006 storyline of *choosing your battles*. He still thinks it is important to fight for what you believe, but in retrospect there

are things he regrets not having pursued when he was younger, referring to his dream of being self-employed. This I interpret as the revitalization of the autonomy identity construct, but Adam now constructs this as a problem story never to be realized. In the 2006 interview, one of the most significant identity themes was the different ways Adam used communication as a strategy to obtain results with people. The storyline was never unequivocally reconstructed by Adam as a problem story, although in passages in the interview he acknowledges the drawbacks of the strategy in that it creates distance to others and makes them feel manipulated or used. Simultaneously, he describes how the communication strategy was central to his leader identity construct and proved helpful and efficient in achieving results in the organization of the lions. Adam did construct the lack of openness with others as a problem story and expressed a wish to be more open and to have more significant relations with others. In 2007, communication, positional power and persuasion tactics are not at all on the agenda for Adam. Instead, he is preoccupied by his new leader position and is more concerned with adapting, understanding and listening.

In the previous section, I emphasized how both the interaction with me and the empirical material reflected double-talk, beating around the bush, and just pure ambiguity. This also made the analysis of the storylines difficult in Adam's case. To my surprise, the 2007 interview contains only minor examples of this communication strategy. On the contrary, the interview is characterized by long and clearly formulated passages. In a context perspective, this can be interpreted as reflecting Adam's entering a new organizational context. In his new position, he is less powerful and much more insecure and dependant on others than in the old organization. In a cultural perspective, the "lion" organization was characterized by a leader culture with very explicit use of power, and where leading people by fear and persuasion was undisputed and accepted. Entering a new organization also makes Adam free to reconstruct himself as a leader; he is no longer limited by former leader role expectations, and in that sense, he is set free to construct a different leader identity in interplay with the new organizational culture.

Finally, the past events Adam has been through can be considered a significant life crisis. The strain of 2½ years of organizational power struggles with the new owner, the negative exit from the organization, and a full year of unemployment have accentuated identity work and contributed to the reconstruction of dominant identity storylines into what, at the time of the 2007 interview, seems to be an almost opposite leader identity construct. As of now, we can only guess whether

these reconstructions are primarily situationally imposed and express Adam's ability to adapt to the new situation and whether the dominant and persuasive leader strategies will remain reconstructed when Adam feels more knowledgeable and at home in the organization.

### **Negotiated Subject Positions**

The specific circumstances of Adam's experiencing being enrolled in a development program to "*smooth the edges*" position Adam in opposition to the owner and to the ETP program. This positioning contrasts with the autonomous positional power Adam exercised as CEO and in stories about Adam negotiating that things were better in the old days. He is therefore negotiating a new subject position of being "wrong", as e.g. the new owner states that Adam is not a team player, and challenges his autonomy by ordering him to participate in a development program. The new owner has exercised his power over Adam, has twisted his arm, and he has been forced to comply so far.

Throughout the 2006 interview, Adam is positioning himself as a strategic fighter who primarily relates to other people with the aim of achieving a goal. Adam positioned people as means to ends and as opponents to be persuaded and manipulated in the direction Adam desires. When Adam constructs other people in this way, he simultaneously position himself as "a lone cowboy" with no social strings and little relational interest. In the story of the third mentor, Adam negotiates understanding the value of appreciating people, but only minor reconstructions seems to be made to the dominating storyline of *The Lion's Roar*.

In the storyline of *Communication as Strategy*, Adam positions himself as a performer and player on the social scene. Social interaction is a big game of chess and by using ambiguous communication Adam avoids being checkmated by someone else. In ambiguous communication, Adam can hide his feelings of ambivalence and still communicate them. He can negotiate his socially unacceptable approach to other people as means, and hide feelings of insecurity and incompetence, e.g. "*being undressed*" and feeling powerless.

In the 2006 interview, Adam has positioned education and learning as a necessary evil, as an anti-identity he only submitted to in order to gain positional power. However, in the 2007 interview, Adam is turning this identity storyline upside down. He is now positioning himself to be in a learning mode, approaching people by listening in order to understand the new organization. The subject position of



Adam is one of humility and signals more respect. He is dependent on others to succeed. These constructions of leader identity in the two interviews stand out as direct opposites. It appears that Adam has re-constructed this anti-identity storyline of learning, because his survival and success in the new organizational context depend on his ability to learn from others.

### **Concluding Reflections – Looking Back**

In the last part of the interview, I ask Adam to try to pull together his reflections and the important insights made during the last three-year period. At first, it is hard to make sense of the answer, so I thank him for participating and turn off the Dictaphone; but then the conversation continues and I turn it on again.

In the subsequent sequence, Adam reflects on the ETP program, referring to feedback from an ETP participant who told him that he is “*not very open to other people’s way of doing things*”. Adam tends to agree with her and explains that he has to think things through for himself first before interacting, which is in accordance with Adam’s emphasis on preparation. Adam stresses that development requires “*blind faith*”, and when asked if this has been an issue in relation to the group or facilitators, Adam tells the following story, making reference to the old and now deceased owner:

*Adam: “Yes, without having thought much about it, I think so. The people I have called my mentors I have had faith in. They have been people who have formed me, and because I trusted them, they have been part of what has moved me.”*

*Gitte: “No?”*

*Adam: “Maybe someone might think that I have stopped developing, but there are other reasons... What I really want to say is that being curious about the whole of the business, that is where I score extremely high; that the organization has to be kept on its toes...maybe sometimes a little bit too much.”*

The open ending for Adam is giving up his dream of continued leadership of the lion organization, which implies that he has lost the power struggle, which is to him an unsatisfactory exit from an organization that has been central to his professional life for more than 25 years. Adam's participation in the development program was imposed on him, but the years of struggling also entail a new beginning for Adam, since the pressure has forced him out of the comfort zone and has made way for a reconstruction and modification of former dominate identity constructs to accommodate the new situation and organizational context.

Finally, in closing, Adam gives his last reflections on his own developmental progress and interplay with the leader development program:

*Gitte: "Now, we have gone through the LEA360 report. It seems some things were stable but there were also significant shifts?"*

*Adam: "Yes, that's right and the stable things I ascribe to basic programming."*

*Gitte: "You mean upbringing?"*

*Adam: "Yes, upbringing, I mean everything that lies in the cultural background and upbringing. Of that I am convinced, and I think if I went through fire and water once again, I don't think another program or two would change it."*

*Gitte: "Probably not...?"*

*Adam: "So, I think that in developmental program such as this, you can learn many methods and concepts and can facilitate self-reflection. However, what you use it for afterwards that is....."*

*Gitte: "That is up to you?"*

*Adam: "Hmm..."*

# 11 Five Paradoxes of the Leader Occupation

*“I was surprised by how easy it was for the group to understand my situation and how many of the problems that I was struggling with the other leaders shared, maybe slightly different problems on the surface but on the whole: the same kind of problems” (Walther, 2007).*

This dissertation aims to better understand the ways in which people make sense of themselves as leaders. This is done by investigating the narrative identity construction processes of five leaders on the basis of their participation in a leader development program in 2005 and subsequently in two interviews in 2006 and 2007. In the foregoing chapters, I present thematic analyses, structured in three analytical steps, of how the five leaders, through narratives, construct leader identity. First, I have focused on the construction of identities in problem stories, preferred stories and their narrated consequences in an interpretive framework of re-authoring conversations (White, 1995, 2007; White and Epston, 1989; 1990). The analytical aim is to approach the tensions involved in becoming a leader and to better understand what leaders are struggling with when engaged in identity work in the context of the Executive Training Program and to use the narrative resources offered in this particular context (Alvesson, 2003, Svenningson and Alvesson, 2003). Second, I conducted a temporal analysis applying the interpretive framework of landscapes of identity, and stressing a process-sensitive analysis of narrative identity construction, I unfolded the five leaders’ construction of significant identity storylines by clustering narratives into storylines in a time perspective, based on the 2006 interview (Bruner, 1986b; 1987; 2001). Finally, as the third step, in a relational analysis, I examined how the leaders negotiate different subject positions by positive identification and opposition distancing. This interpretive framework builds on positioning theory and the construction of subject positions in conversations (Davis and Harré, 1990; 1991; Harré and Van Langenhove, 1992; 1999). This last analytical step is applied to the empirical material from the 2007 interview. Although it must be acknowledged that these three steps are intertwined and entangled in practice, the analyses stress thematic, temporal and, relational aspects of narrative construction of identity in order to further our understanding of this complex social phenomenon.

In the introductory quote, Walther describes feeling how the participants, as leaders, were struggling with similar problems and issues. In my process of

analyzing and working with the empirical material, I also found common themes that run like an undercurrent through the unique descriptive details of the individual narratives. This empirical observation is supported in Watson's claim that the leader occupation is central in producing core identity issues with which leaders struggle, and that the leader occupation creates paradoxes for the leader to mediate (Watson, 2001a). This dissertation argues that the leader occupation poses particular tensions and paradoxes for leaders when constructing identity. This indicates that even though each construction of leader identity is unique, it is possible to examine patterns of what is significant to the process of becoming a leader (Watson, 2001a). This dissertation suggests that paradoxes of the leader occupation significantly interact with the narrative construction of leader identities; therefore, the following analysis aims to demonstrate how distinctive paradoxes empirically interact with five leaders' narrative constructions of identity.

Through work with the five individual analyses presented in previous chapters, I analytically identified five common patterns of paradox in the empirical material. I propose that the five leaders constructed leader identity as an attempt to manage particular paradoxes of the leader occupation, and analytically, I distinguished five particular paradoxes which will be described and unfolded in this chapter.

#### **Display 11-1 Five Paradoxes of the Leader Occupation**

- The Paradox of Care and Efficiency
- The Paradox of Autonomy and Organizing
- The Paradox of Empowerment and Monitoring
- The Paradox of Collaboration and Executing Power
- The Paradox of Nearness and Distancing

The following thematic analysis examines across the sample to identify and illustrate how the leaders construct leader identity in interaction with these five paradoxes. In this perspective, identity work is understood as the leaders' attempt to manage certain paradoxes of the leader occupation. The purpose is to give insight into the thematic content of identity by working *across* the individual analyses in order to specify *what* particular paradoxes are at play and illuminate *how* paradox interacts with the narrative construction of identity.

## 11.1 The Paradox of Care and Efficiency

A core theme of tension for leaders is how to produce the required organizational results and at the same time create a congenial environment; how does the leader balance performance demands and care for his employees. Most organizations explicitly measure performance, goals and efficiency, whereas care and caring for employee wellbeing are more difficult to assess. Through organizational climate surveys, however, employee appraisals and leader evaluations can be seen as attempts to value and assess care and organizational prosperity. Nevertheless, caring for employees is sometimes detrimental to organizational efficiency and achievement and may at times even jeopardize performance. In a leader position, the leader is simultaneously responsible for both advancing results and caring for employee job satisfaction. This has also been described as the paradox of treating people as ends in their own right or caring for people as means to organizational ends (see also Watson, 1986; 2001a; Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini, 1998:289).

In the empirical material, this paradox is accentuated in different ways. In the case of Milton, the storyline of *The Distant Leader* is an example of a leader identity construction that overemphasizes efficiency and result-orientation at the expense of involvement and care for employees. Milton explains in the interview in 2006: “*I had become in relation to work extremely systematic in my way of seeing things; everything suddenly turned into functions and numbers*”. Hence, in relation to the paradox, Milton positions himself by neglecting the caring dimension and as the central dimension constructing distance and detachment to people. In Milton’s leader identity construct, he is managing the paradox by choosing one dimension over the other.

The case of Jim exemplifies another leader identity construction accentuated by this paradox. Jim is struggling to be simultaneously in control and able to “*let go*” in his first storyline construction. In the second storyline, in the context of a value dispute, Jim is struggling with the tension of a leader identity that is either “*soft on people*” or “*hard on people*”. These storyline constructions illustrate the paradox of being simultaneously a business-oriented leader and a softer, caring and people-oriented leader. In the narratives, however, Jim both legitimizes his preference for control as caring for people, and he rejects the efficiency-focused leader position. For example, in the “*number fun*” narrative, he opposes control of employees and positions control as an anti-identity story. Thus, he rejects a strong performance focus and positions himself in a preferred identity story, as the developer of people. Moreover, Jim emphasizes the storyline of care by linking the prosperity of the

organization to people's growth: "*organization growth through people growth*". This can be interpreted as an attempt to bridge the paradox of efficiency and care by making the two dimensions interdependent, in the sense that one is dependent on the presence of the other. However, in Jim's narrative construction of identity another significant storyline indicates that he is "*taking too much care of others*", which he narrates as detrimental to efficient employee performance. I hypothesize that these two contrasting stories are expressions of the two contradictory and simultaneously present dimensions in the paradox, and as such they illustrate how Jim positions himself towards the paradox by including both dimensions in his construction of identity.

A central identity construct in the case of Ben is becoming a *Leader by Coincidence*. In this storyline, Ben positions himself as primarily interested in and focused on the task of producing the product of his trade. In his narrative construction of identity, the caring or relational dimension is generally described as "*difficult*" but also as less interesting to Ben. To Ben, a significant problem story is handling relational conflicts. Interestingly, Ben uses care as an explanation for avoiding conflicts; he is afraid to hurt others and therefore avoids conflicts by postponing confrontation. However, he also narrates being aware that this is jeopardizing efficiency and performance in his department, as described in chapter 8. Thus, in Ben's case in relation to the paradox, he positions himself by being aware of both sides but struggling with the care and relational dimension of the paradox, as described in the storyline *Where my Heart Lies*. In Walther's case, this paradox is not the most prominent in his construction of identity, although the paradox interacts with Walther's storyline construction *From Expert to Generalist*, in the sense that the organization needs Walther's expertise to be efficient in fulfilling business goals. Therefore, his wish to become a people-oriented generalist leader is in opposition to organizational demands. The organizational strategy for handling this is to grant Walther a taste of what he desires, leader development courses, coaching etc. In this way, the case of Walther can be interpreted as Walther positioning himself in relation to the paradox as a victim of external organizational forces that support certain practices and delimit others. Thus, Walther is practicing a leader job in accordance with the organizational performance goals, but he wishes to practice leadership focused on the opposite dimension of the paradox.

The Lion's Roar storyline is central to Adam's construction of leader identity. This storyline describes a strong focus on results, business opportunities and external

customer relations, but the storyline also implies very limited attention to internal relations and care of people. In contrast, narratives that “*people should stay in their place and just do their job*” and the metaphor of the lions indicate that Adam is positioning himself in relation to the paradox of care and efficiency by ignoring and disregarding the caring side. Adam says that “*he is social when it serves a purpose*”, which I interpret to indicate that Adam is positioning himself in relation to this paradox by focusing on efficiency and business results. Thus, in Adam’s construction of identity, people are means to an end and not in themselves an end.

## **11.2 The Paradox of Autonomy and Organizing**

We often speak of organizations as pre-established and fixed entities characterized by organizational members working towards some common goal. This dissertation has positioned the leader as continuously in a process of becoming, an identity construction of on-going achievement in social interaction and identity work. In a similar way, the choice of the word "organizing" implies that also organizations are brought about through the talking and relating of the people within them. Hence, the word organizing indicates the constant processes of becoming and negotiation that bring about what we call organizations (Watson, 2001a: 223). The paradox of autonomy and organizing implies that the individual has to submit to the organization’s goal, strategies, and cultural norms. Complying with something larger than the individual entails giving up some aspects of autonomy in exchange for becoming part of the team, and being part of an organization accentuates the paradox of balancing autonomy and organizing.

Since work organizations must be understood as highly complex contexts with multiple interests, the individual joining an organization is confronted with balancing the needs and demands of the individual with the needs and demands of the organization. Organizing work typically limits the autonomy of the individual and involves submitting to considering the interests of the whole organization when practicing leadership and making decisions. Sometimes, to contribute to a result, to achieve a common goal, the individual has to compromise or dispense with personal interests and needs. In this perspective, entering an organizational context implies identity work to preserve aspects of autonomy that are important to the individual. The freedom to act, talk (and think) as an individual has to be balanced with demands of the organization for loyalty, coherence, and commitment. The tolerance margins for individual diversity and autonomy vary in different organizational and cultural settings and within different localized situations. Some organizations have very narrow margins and do not allow much individual

autonomy or deviation, whereas other organizations have broader margins and perhaps even encourage and reward autonomy and difference.

In this dissertation, the construction of leader identity is understood as interacting with particular paradoxes of the leader occupation. For some of the five leaders in the empirical material, this paradox of organizing and autonomy has been prevalent; for others, it has not been the focus of attention at the time of the inquiry. However, the paradox accentuates different storylines for different leaders. In the case of Adam, this paradox is central to his narrative construction of identity. Adam's participation in ETP was initiated by the new owner with the declared aim of "smoothing out the edges". Taking the hierarchical power distribution into consideration, this implies that Adam must comply with the new organizational strategy and give up the autonomy and positional power he has had until now. This case illustrates the intricate balance between what degree of autonomy can be accepted or tolerated in an organization and when borders are crossed and the leader considered a disloyal organizational actor who cannot to be trusted to support the organizational strategy and decisions. In narratives, Adam is distancing himself from the CEO's request to become a "*team-player*" and negotiating his independence and power position by attempting to prove the others wrong and by fighting back. Thus, Adam's positioning in relation to this paradox is to fight for his independence and autonomy, "*his right of speech*", and thus affirming an identity construct of autonomy. The conflict with the CEO accentuates the importance of independence and autonomy for Adam. Eventually, Adam loses the battle and leaves the organization and in this sense reclaims his autonomy.

In contrast to Adam's case, Jim is the CEO of a successful organization and in a hierarchical power position. Jim chooses to engage in identity work to become more knowledgeable about himself but without any external pressure. On the one hand, Jim's leader identity construction emphasizes inclusion, and he describes identifying with the organization to an extent where it becomes difficult to differentiate between them, as illustrated in the analysis of the "*we*" language in chapter 7. However, Jim's construction of leader identity also indicates a need for extensive individual freedom and autonomy, illustrated in Jim's narrative that he is not able to take an order, i.e. he has difficulties with compliance. Due to his organizational position, Jim has considerable influence on the values and practices of the organization. In his storyline *Values as filter*, Jim is positioned as a rather independent constructor of company values, and he narrates how he demands employees to adopt and comply with the organizational spirit and values. Jim



describes this as “*looking out for the organization as a whole*” in terms of care and organizing, but the compliance Jim demands of others is still significant. In the 2007 interview, Jim’s demands have expanded and are not solely focused on performance; they now imply that employees must comply with organizational values (i.e. to develop oneself), and to demonstrate that they “*fit in*”. The organizing and autonomy paradox is managed by Jim by expanding his autonomy. In a sense, he has become the organization. Furthermore, Jim’s positioning in relation to this paradox is somewhat contradictory. He is one with the organization, while at the same time emphasizing his own autonomy, and he has difficulties submitting to the demands of others. This eventually leads to the open-ended conclusion that he “*he is not able to do himself, what he demands of others*”, as described in chapter 7. Hence, the paradox interacts with Jim’s narrative construction of identity with a simultaneous identification with the organizing and a distancing from it, thereby preserving his own autonomy.

In Ben’s case, he is pushed to submit to the new organizational standards of being a leader that his new boss introduces. Ben narrates how his past position of relative autonomy and freedom to construct leader identity is becoming jeopardized by new demands for people-oriented leadership and practices. First, Ben tries to comply with the new organizational demands and reconstruct his leader identity construct. But in his reconstructed storyline *Where My Heart Lies*, he is willing to compromise his autonomy, primarily to preserve an interesting job. Later, Ben explains in storylines how the pressure to become more relation-oriented undermines his feelings of competency and his ability to practice his professional skills and do what he finds interesting. In relation to this paradox, Ben is at first positioning himself so as to accommodate the demands of the new CEO and reconstruct his leader identity, i.e. give up aspects of autonomy. In the identity work process, therefore, Ben is distancing from his passion for the task, and his identity construction is predominantly negative and narrated in problem stories. Ben returns to the editorial department and his preferred identity construction of professional autonomy, but still with the tension of being less the organizational leader he is supposed to be in the eyes of the new CEO.

The storyline of *Expert to Generalist* in Walther’s case describes the tension between the organizational need for an expert lawyer and the lawyer’s wish to become a generalist leader. In his organization, Walther manages to incorporate more departments into his area of responsibility and thereby meet his own need for a more extensive generalist leadership. In choosing this strategy, he is still meeting the needs of the organization while trying to make room for more autonomy for

himself within the organization. However, Walther narrates perceiving the organization to have the upper hand in the situation, because he is reluctant to leave the organization for fear of failure and losing an economically secure job that he does well. In this perspective, Walther interacts with the paradox of autonomy and organizing by enduring the tension of having to fulfill the organization's demands for an expert leader even though he wishes to pursue his own wishes. Walther distances and opposes the organizational demands, but he still fulfills and works in accordance with the preferred leader identity construction of the organization. First with changes in top management are there possibilities for Walther to follow through on his wishes for a generalist leader identity from a secure organizational position. Thus, external changes and Walther's compliance with the organizational demands over time resolve the conflict for Walther, and he eventually seems able to balance the two dimensions of the paradox within the organizational context.

The foregoing empirical analyses of the five leaders demonstrate how organizations directly or implicitly communicate about leadership practices and define preferred leader identity constructs. This can be communicated in written material describing expectations and demands in various positions, but none of the leaders made reference to any such narrative resources. Instead, their narratives illustrate that leaders were most often promoted into leader positions without guidance and with only limited direction from the organization. The empirical material suggests that leaders will look to their nearest leader as a role-model for how to be a successful leader in a given position, in an attempt to figure out what the leader position entitles and what is expected of them in their capacity of being a leader. Therefore, this research stresses the importance of the relationship with the nearest leader, as a co-creator of leader identity and representative of the organization.

In the empirical material, we have seen in the case of Adam how this relationship can take the form of mentorship where significant leader identity storylines have been molded and constructed from experiences with mentors in the lion's hallway. The process of adapting to or mirroring the nearest leader as a role model is further exemplified in Milton's case, where he describes how for years he constricted himself to be serious and overly responsible as the older brother, a positioning where Milton unreflectively enacted some of the anti-identity constructs of his father, specifically the angry and short-tempered leader. Milton's reconstruction of this significant identity construct is an example of an alternative approach to managing the paradox of organizing and autonomy, as Milton constructs a leader

identity that feels more in accordance with himself (his autonomy) and less as a non-reflected accommodation to his father's role model.

The empirical material also illustrates that the nearest leader has a significant impact on the leader's construction processes, also when they oppose or reject the leader style or conduct of the nearest leader. Evidently, the nearest leader evaluates subordinate leaders, and his expectations and ideas about what leadership should look like and the patterns leader behavior should follow have a significant impact on the leader's own evaluation and construction of leader identity. In the empirical data, changes in upper leader positions have directly influenced four of the leaders to engage in leader development, and their perceived need for change is narrated as being related to tension with higher management (i.e. the cases of Milton, Ben, Walther and Adam).

Identity tensions and struggles emerge if the leader perceives organizational demands to be incompatible with his personal values and ideas about being a leader and/or about life. Tensions emerge if the overall notion of the leader role is incompatible with other important constructs of identity – for example, the notion of people-oriented leadership in the case of Ben, and the notion of being a team-player in the case of Adam. Tensions can relate to particular delimited aspects of a leader role, and the leader may still enjoy other aspects of being a leader (e.g. in the case of Adam, the tension of being put under pressure to comply with the new strategy while still enjoying responsibility and positional power; and Ben enjoying the professional work while being less interested in leading people). Nevertheless, organizations can prescribe a specific preferred leader identity that is remote from the individual's former experiences with leadership or very different from his personal preferences and behavior. This creates tensions of balancing the organization's expectations and demands with the needs and expectations of the leader. The needs of the organization and the leader can be in conflict, as in the case of Walther wanting to become a generalist leader, and in the case of Adam wanting to preserve his autonomous position of power.

The amount of empirical material dedicated to constructing anti-identities indicates the importance of distancing and opposing the construction of leader identity. In narratives, the five leaders all construct their preferred identity constructs by positioning them in opposition to something; the leaders distance and create differences in relation to particular actors, actions and perceptions (Garcia and Hardy, 2007). Thus, the empirical analysis also shows that the leaders position

themselves as similar to or different from certain discourses of leadership and concrete feedback from others. The study indicates that the applications of anti-identity constructs are as important for identity construction processes as envisioning a preferred identity construct. Perhaps due to the lack of clarity regarding the leadership concept and practice, it is easier to explain “what is not me”, than to narrate what leadership is or preferably should be.

### **11.3 The Paradox of Empowerment<sup>46</sup> and Monitoring**

Most organizations are divided into minor sections and departments, which can complicate the distribution of tasks, communication and interaction. The dispersed work organization fuels the tension of how to integrate tasks into shared results and cohesive products. It accentuates the paradox of how to work in the same direction, preserve a holistic view of the organization, while being physically removed from the action and other people. This accentuates the paradox of how to monitor the tasks and processes involved in everyday operations, how to act as a global entity and simultaneously be present in the local, as well as how to acknowledge local diversities in global organizations. The paradox of empowerment and monitoring resonates the paradox of autonomy and organization, but here the leader's challenge is focused on how to balance empowering and monitoring when delegating tasks to other people, primarily employees (see Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini; Watson, 2001b:392).

The paradox of monitoring and empowerment in the divided organizational context accentuates the question of how to preserve control of the result by monitoring tasks and performances when physically removed from activities, e.g. when work takes place in decentralized and dispersed locations. And how can the leader have updated information and knowledge of employee performance and task progression, when work takes place under the direct supervision of somebody else. Hence, one aspect of this paradox is how leaders can monitor and stay in touch when physically removed; another aspect is how leaders can monitor the work of employees in a way that will not undermine the employees' own sense of responsibility, initiative and engagement and thereby jeopardize empowerment. How can the leader avoid monitoring the employees' work and performance too much and thereby introduce a sense of insecurity in employees who might feel that

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<sup>46</sup> For the purpose of this dissertation, I consider empowerment a relational dynamic or the process by which a leader shares power with subordinates. Power, in this context, is interpreted as the possession of formal authority or control over organizational resources (Conger and Kanungo, 1998).

the leader distrusts their ability to carry out the task. Monitoring employees too often or being very directive when monitoring can lead to the perception that the leader has not actually let go of the assignment, which can cause employees to decline responsibility. The risk of too much empowering could result in the leader being totally unaware of what is being accomplished and work progress and ignorant of any potential problems in sub-units that can jeopardize deadlines, quality standards and the successful completion of tasks.

Empirically, this paradox is accentuated when leaders talk about delegating<sup>47</sup> assignments, tasks and responsibilities to others, primarily employees. The empirical material is rich in stories indicating the different struggles involved in managing this paradox in everyday life. In traditional leadership theory, delegation is considered an important leader tool, both because the leader can not do everything on his own but even more because delegation is a tool to develop employees by assigning new challenging tasks, building new skills, and enhancing motivation. Hence, delegating in this perspective is a necessary tool for distributing tasks and getting things done through other people in the organization.

In the empirical material, delegation is narrated as creating tensions in various ways; the five leaders struggle with different aspects of delegation: to communicate expectations clearly up front, and to follow up and monitor progress as illustrated in the case of Milton, who also struggles with trusting employees to have sufficient skills and qualifications to solve tasks. Jim has been a bottleneck in his organization, because he prefers to have control and therefore monitors too much and in too much detail. Finally, Ben attempts to manage this paradox by empowering his employees, e.g. by giving employees the best assignments, and this to an excess that leaves Ben out of touch with the production phase. Ben negotiates the need for him to monitor employees in the story of "*employees are grown-ups who can run their own job*" - a narrative construction of identity that implies that he rejects monitoring and control. In the case of Jim, the storyline of *Letting Go* signifies that Jim's identity work with this paradox involves his attempts to stop controlling and monitoring everything that is going on in his organization. It thereby exemplifies yet another narrative construction of identity in interaction with the paradox of empowerment and monitoring.

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<sup>47</sup> For the purpose of this dissertation, delegation is defined as the act of assigning tasks as well as responsibility for completing tasks to others, primarily employees.

## 11.4 The Paradox of Collaboration and Executing Power

The paradox of collaboration and executing power accentuates the question of how leaders can make use of the power of their position in ways that are acceptable for the people they lead. How can the leader make use of power in ways that do not jeopardize collaboration or damage the continuation of work relations? And how does the leader establish a position from which to influence and lead without disrespecting, diminishing, or humiliating others. In practice, this can be done in numerous ways, but it still prevails that leaders who exercise power, significantly affect other people's work and life circumstances. Organizational contexts interact with leaders' construction of identity, but organizational contexts and cultures differ as to how explicitly power is managed in face-to-face relations, and how power is executed in organizational procedures and structures. The organizational need for leaders to execute power can be justified by the necessity for getting things done, coordinating production and making decisions in order to move processes towards organizational goals. Because organizations need to coordinate and organize procedures and tasks, the execution of power has to be balanced with the maintenance of relations and collaboration with other members of the organization. Collaboration is often vital for organizations to be able to produce complicated and knowledge-intensive products and services, which again accentuates the need for balance in relation to the paradox of collaboration and execution of power.

Empirically, the leaders in my sample constructed leader identity differently when attempting to manage this paradox. The leader can position himself as part of the team, thus emphasizing collaboration and signaling loyalty downwards, as in the case of Ben in the storyline *Where my Heart Lies*. Or the leader can position himself as above the employees and signal positional power and loyalty upwards, as in the case of Adam in the storyline of *The Lions Roar*. When the leader has to execute unpleasant decisions or is requested to demonstrate loyalty to organizational strategy and decisions, different tensions are activated depending on the narrative construction of leader identity. The identity construction of being part of a team might make the leader feel included in the team and less alone. This would contradict the fact that he is no longer an equal member of the team and could jeopardize his execution of power and his loyalty to management decisions. Forceful execution of power, however, could jeopardize the employees' loyalty to the leader and violate the social interactive norms of equality or decency that can potentially derail the leader-employee relationship by delimiting trust and respect.

In the case of Adam, the narrative construction of identity very explicitly positions the leader above the others. The particular organizational context and Adam's mentors have been influential in co-constructing the centrality of power relations in Adam's construction of identity. Adam's case also exemplifies how power can be executed through the use of ambiguous communication, and how communication tactics can be used to negotiate control of the situation and preserve Adam's ability to strategically navigate in social situations, as described in the storyline of *Communication as Strategy* (see chapter 10).

The narrative construction of identity in Ben's case is centered on executing power primarily in relation to the task in order to secure the quality and professionalism of the end product. Ben does not narrate specific interest in executing power nor in collaborating. His narrative construction implies that he prefers to focus on his own possibilities for doing what he likes, i.e. task production. It appears that Ben manages the paradox by rejecting both the execution of power and collaboration, at least if collaboration entails intensive involvement with people and social interaction. In the individual interviews, Walther describes certain values that guide his leadership, specifically values of personal integrity and a basic notion that other people strive to do their best and are motivated to grow and improve themselves. These are values Walther understands to guide his leadership and his execution of power. Walther is also probably the most knowledgeable and experienced in his department, which sustains his expert power position. Outside the department, Walther says that he has to work hard to establish networks and collaboration, because regardless of his expertise, he is not a "*political animal*". Walther also negotiates this paradox of collaboration and execution of power by explaining that because of his more subdued, quiet and introverted leader identity, he easily becomes invisible in the predominately empowered outgoing organizational context. Hence, in Walther's case, different organizational contexts significantly influence his balancing of the paradox, making it more difficult for him to balance the paradox outside the department context than within.

As already described, Jim identifies with the organization to a great extent and introduces organizational values similar to his own. Jim communicates leading by values of equality and care, but he still executes significant power within the organization as well as in employee relations. In the organization, he does this by being involved in many activities, such as the introduction of new employees, although some of these activities could be considered peripheral to his CEO position. In relation to employees, the story of the one-day appraisal talk with the new director, which ends with a "*take it or leave proposal*", is an example of Jim

executing his positional power to forcefully make this newcomer comply with organizational values. Thus, Jim positions himself in relation to this paradox by communicating in terms of collaboration, respect, and equality, while through various forms of involvement and control, he is nevertheless executing considerable power within the organization. It can be questioned how much deviation from Jim's point of view he would tolerate, what level of influence from others would be welcome, and how collaboration is practiced in the organization. In the family business context, Milton in a sense inherently has the power position, as it is passed on from the father to the two brothers. Over the years, Milton has constructed a leader identity in which he is interacting with employees as "*the angry boss*" who only communicates when dissatisfied and when problems arise. Often, his approach has been aggressive and intimidating, and Milton describes the effect on the employees "*scaring the old and de-motivating the young generation*". Milton has overemphasized the execution of power at the expense of collaboration and at the expense of plain decency in his social interaction. Milton describes coming to terms with this by realizing that he has legitimized his right to be sulky and angry with the heavy burden of responsibility he felt for the continued success of the family business, and the responsibility he felt for his younger brother. The storyline of *The Butcher and the Sunshine* illustrates a reconstruction of these identity constructions and thereby a new beginning for the brothers, with more interaction, communication and collaboration. Also in relation to the employees, Milton's narratives are re-authored as he begins systematically interacting by practicing common social practices like saying good morning and smiling. Thus, Milton also starts positioning himself differently in relation to the paradox at the end of the study, by integrating more collaboration and a more subtle and less negative emotional execution of power.

## **11.5 The Paradox of Nearness and Distancing**

This paradox accentuates the question of how to maintain sufficient distance to employees to be able to function as their leader, and at the same time be near enough for employees to experience that their leader knows who they are and is genuinely interested in them as people. This accentuates the question of how friendly and open you can be with your employees without being too close and overly involved. How much personal disclosure is suitable in the leader-employee relationship? How distant and "professional" can a leader be without being perceived as cold, calculating or indifferent?



This paradox is present in everyday organizational life but becomes especially relevant when the leader participates in social events with employees. Leaders are often promoted to lead a department where they were formerly employees, and the transition from colleague or maybe friend to a leader-employee relationship creates tensions about how to manage the particular paradox of nearness and distancing. This paradox initiates identity work that makes the leader reflect about his professional relations and consider whether he can be friends with former colleagues and the potential impact this might have on the team as a whole and his leader practice. In this perspective, balancing nearness and distance can be seen as an attempt to not jeopardize the ability to lead with equal fairness for every employee and avoid favoritism. Furthermore, the paradox accentuates identity work by identifying the leaders' preferences for distance or nearness. For example, an identity construction preferring nearness in relations might not be considered appropriate within an organizational context subscribing to a more distant professional leader identity construction or vice versa.

When professionals are promoted to a leader position, they often remain motivated by and interested in their professional field and may also want to preserve their professional status. This initiates identity struggles for the skilled professional leader and can result in a leader identity construction of a mediocre expert and a half-hearted, dissatisfied leader. In the empirical material, this is illustrated by the case of Ben. A new CEO makes Ben leave his beloved professional identity and construct a leader identity quite different than the successful task-oriented leadership Ben prefers. This initiates identity work for Ben who begins to consciously question and devalue his abilities as a leader. Ben finds himself in an organizational context that demands more people-oriented leadership, which I interpret to imply more relational nearness. This is in opposition to Ben's preferred leader identity construction, and the storylines reveal that he is struggling with this paradox. However, Ben's narrative construction of identity also implies that he negotiates distance to make his preferred task-oriented leader identity legitimate, avoid conflict with others, and perhaps also avoid social contact. Hence, Ben's case is an example of negotiating distance and managing the paradox by minimizing the need for nearness and legitimizing distance.

The five leaders in this study all related to this paradox in narratives of when they were first appointed and how they struggled with relating to employees in the light of their new position. In the case of Milton, this paradox is central to his narrative construction of identity. Milton decided after the first experiences of firing

employees that it was better to keep a distance to people. In his storyline of *The Distant Leader*, Milton unfolds how he constructed a leader identity that eventually turned people into “*functions and numbers*” and stopped relating to others at work. Milton’s narrative construction of identity can be understood, first, as an attempt to manage the emotional reactions of others and to legitimize decisions better by keeping a distance. In the later interview, it can be understood, secondly, as reconciliation or balancing of the paradox as Milton begins to communicate more with his brother and key employees, and starts re-authoring a storyline of nearness in his social relations. Walther aspires to become a generalist leader, which to him implies becoming a more relationally oriented leader with more social interaction and nearness to employees. In Walther’s narrative construction of identity, he positions nearness as a motivating factor for employees and for himself. Walther describes in the interviews that for him the nearness of the generalist leader identity indicates that he too has to develop, which is very motivating for him. Walther negotiates identity by making the leader expert equal to distancing from others, and by making the generalist leader equal to nearness in social relations; thereby he manages the paradox by choosing one over the other and by making the distant expert leader an anti-identity construct. In the last interview, in the story of *Reconciling the Expert Identity*, Walther positions himself in relation to the paradox as more integrated or balanced, when he describes how he is now constructing leader identity as a generalist from the secure base of his expert identity.

In Jim’s case, he very explicitly demands openness and nearness of others, and that employees are willing to engage in personal development to qualify for organizational membership. Jim’s emphasis on *we* and his strong focus on values indicate closeness in social relations and signal organizational belonging. However, Jim seems to be remote and distant from this *we*, since to an extent it is he who orchestrates the organizing and is hierarchically in a power position. He is communicating a strong organizational culture of togetherness and coherence, but I hypothesize that his communicated preference for nearness and social responsibility is mixed with an identity construct of distance and privacy. This identity construction is seen in glimpses in the empirical material, as in the storyline *Letting Go* and in the narratives of being shocked by the openness in ETP at the first interview. Hence, Jim positions himself in relation to both sides of the paradox, preferring organizational belonging and nearness in social relations, but simultaneously having a strong personal preference for controlling the situation and preserving autonomy.

In Adam's storyline construction *The Lions Roar*, his positioning of the leaders as lions indirectly implies that employees hold inferior positions, which I read to indicate relational distance. Furthermore, when Adam narrates seeing social interaction as a game of chess, he is again distancing himself from others and objectifying people. In this way, Adam is negotiating distance and rejecting nearness in his narrative construction of leader identity, perhaps to preserve his own positional power and sense of independence, and perhaps to hide from others. In the last interview with Adam in 2007, in his new position and new organizational context, he re-authors this storyline into narratives of being *In a Learning Mode*. Adam describes how he has to listen and interact with people in order to learn the new business, which implies re-authoring more social nearness into his leader identity construct. But as the previous analysis showed, this might be mostly a situational and temporary reconstruction, as Adam's preferred storyline of independence and positional power still co-exists. Thus, the case of Adam exemplifies how the paradox of nearness and distance is managed by preserving a preferred identity construction of distance, but accommodating to the new organizational context by re-authoring an identity construction of needing social nearness to learn the new business, which is ultimately necessary to secure his organizational survival.

## **11.6 Summary**

This chapter examines and illustrates how the construction of leader identity takes place in interaction with the paradoxical conditions of the leader occupation within an overall western capitalist societal context. The thematic empirical analysis provides a glimpse into the multiple ways leaders construct leader identity. This analysis supports Watson's (2001a, 2007) argument that the leader occupation entails paradox, and it contributes further by specifying and defining five specific paradoxes at play in the empirical material.

The analysis further illustrates how the five leaders in the sample all relate to these five leader occupation paradoxes in the process of construction identity, albeit in different ways. Therefore, I argue that the leader occupation entails paradoxes that create both tensions and identity struggles for leaders, and that the process of becoming a leader accentuates identity work in relation to specific common paradoxes of the leader occupation. Empirically, the analysis shows that regardless of the five leaders' organizational context, and regardless of the idiosyncrasies of individual bibliography, they relate to and attempt to manage these five particular paradoxes.

In general, the empirical analysis demonstrates that leaders construct narrative identity by negative positioning, thus distancing themselves from certain actors, behaviors, or tasks; and by positive positioning, thus identifying with a certain subject position when constructing leader identity. They thereby construct narratives of anti-identities, problem identities and preferred identities. However, the prevalence of certain paradoxes in their ontological narratives differs, and the five leaders emphasize and combine different subject positions. Thus, the leaders position themselves differently in relation to the same subject positions, and in negotiating and balancing these five paradoxes of the leader occupation. I hypothesize that what one individual leader perceives as unique to his narrative construction of identity is actually shared with stories told by other leaders, because the process of becoming a leader entails managing and relating to particular paradoxes accentuated by the leader occupation.

The leaders represent five different Danish organizational contexts, and as demonstrated in the empirical analysis in this dissertation, the leaders' specific organizational context accentuates identity work by defining particular aspects of leadership to be "problem stories" – e.g. being too product-oriented in the case of Ben, or being too independent in the case of Adam. The analysis also demonstrates that the context of the leader development program ETP interacts with the five leaders' narrative construction of identity. The ETP program's existentialistic, humanistic and psychologically oriented ideology is co-constructing the problem stories and preferred stories of identity, and the small group processes and ETP culture of openness and self-disclosure interact significantly with the leaders' narratives of development processes and of being "successful" or being a "bad student", as described in previous chapters.

Judging by the empirical material, the everyday process of becoming a leader is an ongoing drama in which the individual leader constructs identity in response to central paradoxes of the leader occupation. In this sense, becoming a leader is a continuous struggle to manage paradoxes ingrained in the leader occupation, and stretch the leader's ability to endure tensions and engage in identity work.

The next chapter describes the potential contribution of this investigative work in relation to narrative identity research and leader development theory, and reflects on the limitations and possibilities of the study. Finally, the research and investigation is put into perspective and future implications are drawn.

# 12 Concluding Reflections, Contributions and Perspectives

This chapter revisits the theoretical frame and research question as a backdrop for my concluding reflections and discussion of the findings and contributions of the study. I consider the possibilities and limitations of the investigation, and in the last part, I discuss possible practical implications as well as future research perspectives.

## 12.1 Theoretical Frame Revisited

The point of departure for this project is a research interest in leader development programs, and the investigation is initiated by the question: *How is leader identity narratively constructed by leaders in the context of a leader development program?* During the three-year research project, I have followed five Danish executive leaders in order to explore how they construct leader identity in their development as leaders in interaction with *The Executive Training Program* and through two subsequent interviews.

My exploration implied an investigation of both the *how* and the *what* of leader identity processes. These two questions presuppose each other in the analysis, since it is difficult to say something about the how without knowing the content of the what. Hence, the research interest is to examine both the content level of what leaders are thematically dealing with when involved in identity work; and how leaders' reconstruct leader identity in a leader development program context that is intended to facilitate these very processes. In developing the narrative analytical framework, I have striven to bring to the fore the participating leaders' own wording and narrative construction processes, and to remain sensitive to the complexity of the process as well as to the co-constructive practice of the narrative research.

This research takes as the theoretical point of departure a *moderate social constructivist* research position, which implicates that the central concept of "leader identity" is socially constructed rather than predetermined by essentialist forces of nature. The aim is to explore the processes by which people come to account for themselves and their world from an investigative position focused on *process, social interaction* and *language* (Gergen, 1997; 2001; Burr, 2003). The

research question implies a process orientation: that identity is a continuous process of becoming; the leader is always in the making, and therefore leader identity has to be approached and investigated as an emerging process. It further indicates that identity construction processes take place within social relations and through interaction with others in everyday situations and in interaction with the larger societal and cultural context of socially constructed norms, structures and organizations (Berger and Luckmann, 1992 [1966]; Rasborg, 2004; Burr, 2003). Hence, people's social interaction does not take place in a vacuum but is embedded in context. Building on critical management theory, I argue in this dissertation that the capitalist economic and Western societal system is characterized by the organization and division of work and power that significantly influence and co-construct the leader occupation as a position of tension and struggle (Alvesson, 2003, Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002). In critical management theory, Watson has argued that the leader occupation can be understood to contain certain inherent *paradoxes*, which are a consequence of the capitalistic system and which structuring it maintain and sustain (Watson, 2001). Accordingly, leaders are not only engaged in processes of continuous reconstruction of their leader identity, conceptualized as *identity work*. They are also trying to reconcile and manage paradoxes accentuated by the leader occupation. The term *identity struggles* indicates that engagement in the construction of identity is neither an unemotional process nor a sociopolitically neutral endeavor. And from the perspective of the individual leaders, identity work is experienced as an emotionally challenging process characterized by tension (Svenningson and Alvesson, 2003). A last implication of a moderate social constructivist position is emphasis on language. Embedded in a moderate social constructivist position is the process through which the individual *creates meaning* of self, others and the world s/he inhabits by narrative means. *Narrative resources* are provided by the localized context, and narrative resources are to a large extent provided by predominant societal discourses. A *discourse* provides a frame in which particular ways of talking, writing and conducting ourselves are ruled in or out. Certain discourses define some ways of construction as acceptable and others as less acceptable; thereby, discourses actively interact with the narrative construction process of the individual leader (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

In this dissertation, I have unfolded narrative resources relevant to the narrative construction of leader identity in several ways. I have unfolded the empirical context of the leader development program ETP and the ideology, theoretical foundation, design and the narrative construction of leaders that are promoted

within this particular context (in chapter 1). I have extensively reviewed the construction of the identity concept in social psychology, and psychological theories in a historical time perspective. This review brings to the fore how the construction of identity differs significantly when seen from different perspectives in my theoretical review through the lenses of early, modern and postmodern perspectives. However, discourses and theoretical notions of identity continue to reappear in contemporary narrative construction across the historical time zones. This theoretical part of the dissertation further situates the research project within a narrative epistemological understanding, unfolding how to make sense of narratives. Finally, I theoretically specify how the narrative construction of identity serves the following functions for the individual: to make sense of self, understand social reality, negotiate power, and change identity (in chapter 3).

Since leader identity is embedded in the leadership discourse, I review how leaders are constructed in leadership theory, which provides some of the vocabulary and narrative resources leaders draw on to build leader identity. In the review, I identify three prevalent discourses in leadership theory; these three discourses are not exclusive, but nevertheless prevalently present in the selected leadership theories: **(1) Trait-oriented discourse** constructs leaders with narrative resources from personality characteristics and essentialist vocabulary, and where the construction process of becoming a leader is seen as the individual unfolding of innate qualities and talent. **(2) Behavior-oriented discourse** constructs leaders with narrative resources from behaviors, roles and styles, and where the construction process of becoming a leader is seen as a learning process, in which the leader acquires the competencies and skills necessary to match the job or task at hand. **(3) Process-oriented discourse** constructs leaders with narrative resources from identity process and identity struggle, and where the construction process of becoming a leader is seen as an integrated part of living and as a continuous process of identity work in interaction with localized contexts and resulting in highly fragmented, issue-specific and emergent identity constructs (in chapter 4).

Later in the analyses, I discovered how different discourses in leadership theory intermingle in the empirical narratives in that the five leaders typically drew on vocabulary, terms and notions from all three discourses when constructing identities, regardless of whether the discourses were mutually contradictory or conflicting. However, the empirical context of *The Executive Training Program* builds on notions from especially the trait-oriented and the behavior-oriented discourses. The narrative resources provided in leadership theory discourses

empirically appear and interact with the particular identity construction processes as described and illustrated in each of the five individual analyses, while this dissertation investigates leader identity within a moderate social constructivist, narrative and process-oriented framework.

In the context of the dissertation, identity is understood to be a process of construction, and every societal and cultural context is believed to contain particular discourses. Identity construction processes take place in narratives, using narrative resources to construct stories about: who I am, what I have done, what is important to me, and where I am going. The challenges of such research are: by which means to make sense of this complex social phenomenon, and how to analytically approach identity construction processes.

To meet these challenges, I first built a theoretical frame for approaching the leader occupation, and then developed the analytical framework and strategy inspired by and drawing from critical management theory, narrative therapeutic theory and positioning theory. Theoretically, I understand the leader occupation as entailing tensions, identity struggles and paradox, and analytically I have developed a three-step narrative analytical framework. The first step is a thematic analysis focusing on how leader identity is constructed in *problem stories* and *preferred stories*, and how the five leaders over time re-author identity stories (Riesmann, 1993; Epston and White, 1990). The second step is a temporal analysis focused on how the leaders in conversation link narratives together to form storylines, which are clusters of narratives with the same thematic content or adding to the same meaning creation. These two first steps theoretically apply concepts and build on ideas from narrative therapy and psychologist Bruner's notion of landscapes of identity.

The aim is to create an analytical framework sensitive to and illustrative of process and the potentially conflicting, multiple, and possible identity construction, and thus, analytically examine a process of *re-authoring*, in which identity *storylines* are altered and reconstructed to transform temporary *landscapes of identity* (Bruner, 1990). The third analytical step is a relational analysis focused on how the leaders, in interaction, negotiate different subject positions and position themselves relative to other actors, perceptions, or practices. This final step integrates central concepts from positioning theory into the theoretical approach, primarily because positioning brings to the fore the power aspects of identity construction and the relational processes in which the *negotiation of subject positions* takes place (Davis and Harré, 1991; Harré and Van Langenhove, 1999).

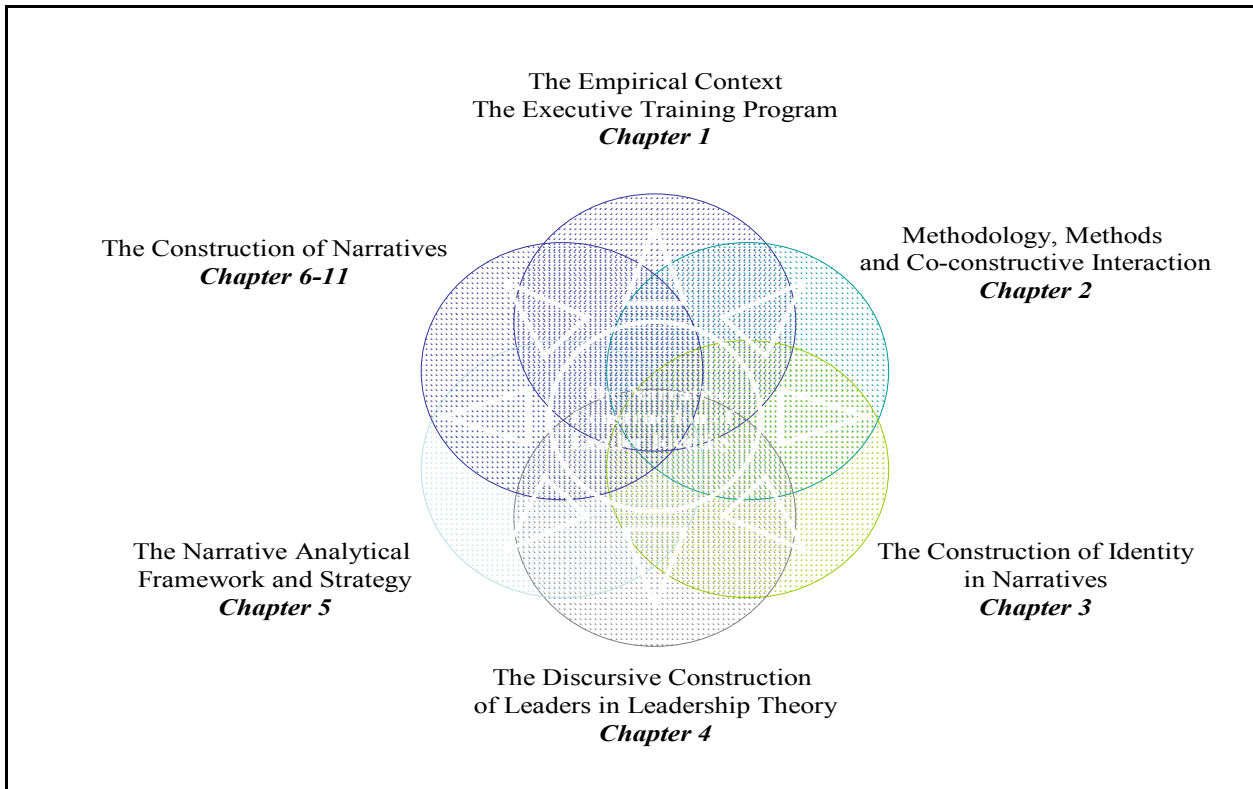


The concept *positioning* (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003) accentuates the power aspects of narrative construction processes, as subject positions are constantly being negotiated and evaluated in conversation between the narrator and the audience (in chapter 5).

The five individual analyses in this dissertation are unfolded in chapters 6-10. Each analysis describes the construction of problem and preferred leader identities in a time perspective, following the narratives through time by dividing them into three empirical episodes: *A Beginning* (2005 empirical material), *A Middle Ground* (2007 empirical material), and *An Open Ending* (2007 empirical material). In each case, the micro-process of constructing leader identity is analyzed as the clustering of narratives into three significant storylines for each leader, illustrated in the analytical model of Storyline Map. Finally, the negotiations and subject positions of the leaders are analyzed on the basis of the last interview and in relation to previous identity constructions, the intention being to identify leader identity reconstructions or repositioning in the last interview.

The point of departure for the final analysis is the empirical emergence of five paradoxes of the leader occupation. In my interaction with the empirical material, I identified five paradoxes: the paradox of care and efficiency, the paradox of autonomy and organizing, the paradox of empowerment and monitoring, the paradox of collaboration and executing power, and finally the paradox of nearness and distancing. In chapter 11, I conduct a thematic analysis across the empirical material to illustrate how the individual construction of leader identity interacts with the five paradoxes of the leader occupation. The findings of the analyses are described in the next section, with focus on the contributions of the study. Below an illustration of how the study is unfolded in different chapters, which layers to construct the research process and contribution.

## Display 12-1 Dissertation Composition Overview



## 12.2 Contributions

This research project, and particularly the narrative analysis, is essentially hermeneutic and does not allow the researcher to prove anything; instead, it deepens our understanding of the perspective of the narrator in interaction with the audience and tracing experiences in ways that enrich our understanding of language and social life (Labov, 1997). Although this study does not prove anything or allow us to draw causal conclusions, it does contribute to further our insight of leader identity construction processes in a leader development context and through conversation. In this section, I summarize the contributions of this study in relation to the research question, and to how the findings contribute to relevant research fields.

### 12.2.1 Contribution to Critical Management Theory

In the context of this dissertation, critical management theory has provided a frame of understanding; however, the critical political notions related to the macro arena of society may have been slightly underplayed in my study, and any emancipative intentions have been less evident. This study focuses on individual leaders' narrative construction of leader identity and the societal norms are implied by

discursive and socially interactive negotiation and positioning with various audiences.

The conceptualizations of identity work signify identity construction processes but do not specify exactly what identity work entails (see chapter 5, Svenningsson and Alvsson (2003) and Alvesson (2003)). This research contributes to the theorization of *identity work* of leaders *by specifying the content of what leaders are struggling with* when engaged in identity work, and *by specifying how identity work processes unfold*, i.e. this study contributes insights into how leaders narrate construction processes in interaction with a leader development program and in conversation in the interviews.

### **Themes of Tension**

The study explores first the themes of tensions experienced by leaders when engaged in identity work; in the context of the leader development program, the leaders position themselves to varying degrees in stories of problems and struggles. The individual analyses over time brought to the surface that when entering the leader development program, some leaders constructed leader identity or aspects of leader identity as negative and others as positive and preferable; however, identity stories of tensions and struggles were dominant. Some leaders had very specific aspirations for future preferred leader identity constructs, whereas others leaders did not know where they were heading and did not narrate a preferred possible identity. The empirical analysis shows that leaders performed coherent stories of “leadership issues or liabilities”, and when constructing leader identity narratives, they used a variety of narrative resources. The leaders constructed leader identity from narrative resources and vocabulary provided by the ETP program context, but also in different discourses regarding leaders from leadership theory. The empirical analysis shows that what the leader constructed as a tension or a problem story was predominately connected to interaction with others, and especially with the nearest leader and his notions of leaders and leadership. The analysis also reveals that narratives of personal values and the perceived match between organizational demands and the leader's personal values and wishes were influential in narrating leader identity as either a problem or an asset. Hence, the study shows that the leaders flexibly use a wide range of different and sometimes contradictory narrative resources when narrating similarities and differences in identity constructions.

Leader identity constructions were positioned as anti-identities or as preferred identities in stories where the leader opposed or identified specific actors,

perceptions, identities and practices. The individual analysis shows that anti-identity constructions are as important in narrative identity construction as a positively narrated preferred identity. This study analytically demonstrates how narrated leader identities position leaders differently in relation to the leader development program and to how they engage in identity work. This is exemplified in the unfolding analysis of how one storyline of coincidence positions the leader as a victim of circumstance, and how this storyline is used to legitimize disengagement from the program and avoid reconstructing a cherished leader identity.

The individual analyses identify themes of tension for each leader, illustrated in displays exemplifying the multiple themes of tension that indicate that identity tensions are prevalently told in relation to specific domains, e.g. the leader would narrate a story as specifically related to “who he was” (i.e. stories focused on personal themes of tension), or stories related specifically to “how he relates to others” (i.e. stories focused on relational themes of tension), and finally the leader would narrate stories as related specifically to “how he interacts with or relates to his organizational context (i.e. stories focused on organizational themes of tension), I hypothesize that this focusing of stories facilitates both the telling of a coherent story and perhaps also self-understanding, by providing thematic structure to the multitude of possible identities and identity tensions.

### **Paradox of the Leader Occupation**

In working with the empirical analysis, I realized that the leaders’ different ontological narratives thematically related to seemingly shared or similar struggles, which led me to distinguish five paradoxes of the leader occupation. In line with the literature, I argue that paradoxes of the leader occupation are at the core of the identity construction processes of leaders, and that the leader occupation positions the leader as the mediator or manager of inherent paradoxes. This study specifies five paradoxes of the leader occupation, and analytically demonstrates how paradoxes are interactively negotiated by leaders in relation to their organizational context in the process of constructing leader identity. I have empirically identified these five paradoxes to be: the paradox of efficiency and care, the paradox of organizing and autonomy, the paradox of monitoring and empowerment, the paradox of executing power and collaborating and, the paradox of distancing and intimacy.

Thus, the leader occupation is seen to accentuate core paradoxes that the individual leader has to manage as part of everyday leader practice. Regardless of the idiosyncratic biography of the leaders, and regardless of their specific organizational contexts, every leader in the sample in the process of identity work interactively attempts to manage these paradoxes when constructing leader identity.

On the basis of the analysis, I suggest that within a particular context specific leader identity constructs make certain leader identity struggles more prominent than others. For example, constructing a leader identity that emphasizes *executing power* accentuates particular identity struggles of how to empower others, or of how to execute power when you are not the subject matter expert. In this way, tensions or identity struggles emerge from leader identity construction; a reconstruction of identity does not remove tensions, but it may accentuate other tensions or other paradoxical aspects of the leader occupation.

Thus, leader identity construction processes are also strategic, in the sense that people perform and negotiate particular identities by identifying with, or by opposing, particular constructs of leadership. Dominant discourses in leadership studies are important narrative resources from which the individual can strategically pull vocabulary and rhetoric for building narratives of particular discursively defined preferred leader identities to be applied in particular organizational or situational contexts.

### **12.2.2 Contribution to Narrative Identity Theory**

This study also contributes to narrative identity theory by providing a new narrative analytical framework for analyzing narrative leader identity construction, and by presenting some further specifications of how to understand and approach narrative identity construction processes.

#### **Narrative Micro-process and Storyline Construction**

By applying the narrative analytical framework to the individual leaders, the analysis shows how significant identity storylines are constructed by the clustering and linking of narratives, illustrated in a Storyline Map. The analyses unfolded how leaders, when constructing identity, link narratives of experiences or events with narratives of identity conclusions. When leaders narrate, they position their narrations in time, and their narrative construction processes combine them to form the past with narratives from the present; they also connect them with narratives of

the leader's aspirations for the future. In this sense, identity construction processes reach back to narratives anchored in the past and simultaneously reach out to the future in narratives of possible identities. This dissertation argues that identity construction processes take place in the space between experiences and the identity conclusions made by the leader on the background of specific events and experiences – in other words, identity construction processes emerge in the interaction between action and talk.

At a micro-process level of analysis, the Storyline Map illustrates how leaders on the basis of certain experiences or events, link narratives of experience to particular identity conclusions. The analyses show that a particular narrative can be used in the construction of more and different storylines; thus, a narrative can add to different storyline constructions regardless of the storylines distinctively different meanings. In the context of this dissertation and based on the analysis, I argue that narratives are linked together in conversation, and narratives are connected into distinctive meaning creating constructs called storylines. Storylines are clusters of narratives with a similar meaning that creates quality, and the temporal combination of storylines taken together makes up the phenomenon we call narrative identity.

This study also shows that significant reconstructions of storylines and of the leaders narrative identity construct can be made within the relatively short period of investigation (i.e. a three-year time span); thus, dominant storylines can be dramatically reconstructed within a relatively short time, but the extent to which identity constructs are reconstructed vary in my sample, as do the processes by which reconstruction is accomplished by the individual leaders.

The narrative analytical framework, which emphasizes the thematic, temporal and relational aspects of identity construction, contributes to the narrative identity field by providing a narrative analytical framework and new analytical tools, which combine concepts from narrative therapy, including Bruner's metaphor of landscapes of identity, with positioning theory. This framework is flexible in unfolding the richness of the leaders' own narrative construction processes, without limiting a priori identity categories and roles, and it thereby provides new insights into the micro-processes of narrative identity construction.

### 12.3 Possibilities and Limitations

Constructing a research project entails a long range of decisions, and many choices have to be made. These choices, which specify the research field and framework, make some investigations possible and limit others. In this section, the limitations and possibilities of this study are reflected upon briefly, just as possibilities and limitations have been considered throughout, particularly in chapter 2.

The focus of this research project has not been practical implications or applicability of the study; nevertheless, the study shows that leaders tend to approach becoming a leader as a problem to be solved, which probably reflects a problem-solving approach that leaders use successfully at work. Therefore, with this approach, struggles are understood as something to be overcome with the right leader tools and means. From a moderate social constructivist position, this research argues that leader identity is *not* a problem to be solved nor can it be managed once and for all. Instead, this dissertation argues that becoming a leader involves continuous identity work, active, persistent engagement in identity struggles, and perseverance in the face of tensions. On the basis of the empirical analysis, I have argued that the leader occupation accentuates paradoxes, and analytically identified five paradoxes of the leader occupation. The key to understanding paradox is that it cannot be solved by making either/or choices, nor can hard work or the force of will dissolve the tension. Paradoxes are defined as the simultaneous presence of contradictory forces, which can only be handled or managed by constantly balancing both sides of the paradox (Stacy, 1999).

Hence, this dissertation brings to the fore that paradox is defined by opposites in combination. The potential practical implications of this are: (1) leaders cannot be considered to be wrong, inadequate or failures, when they experience tensions as leaders, since the troubles they experience are accentuated by paradoxes of the leader occupation originating from Western society's organization of work and life; and (2) becoming a leader is a process that implies that the leader is always at work managing himself and others in interaction with the paradoxes of the leader occupation, all within different organizational contexts and interactive situations. The implications of this insight in relation to leader practice could be that when leaders become aware of these pre-conditions for the leader occupation and practice, they will hopefully be able to *reframe* their tensions. By being provided with a new frame for understanding the tensions they experience as individuals, they can perhaps make better sense of the leader occupation.

The empirical analysis brings to the fore how the context of the leader development program ETP accentuates certain leader discourses, and demonstrates how identity is constructed in social interaction with the available narrative resources. This being said, the study also indicates the value of doing identity work in groups with other leaders who share similar tensions and leader identity struggles. A limitation of this study however is that the research findings later have to be translated into leader development practice.

Other critical management theory studies of leadership mostly have a normative and functionalistic orientation focused on causal relations between rather firm categories, for example between leader styles and task structure. These studies aim to generate abstract generalizations about leaders and leadership (see chapter 4). I have chosen a narrative approach for investigating leaders, because it offers an opportunity for a reflective perspective, where the focus is on critically examining discourses and positioning, and bringing to the fore potential discontinuities and contrasts (Watson, 2001a, Alvesson, 2003). Therefore, I have also constructed a research perspective and position with primarily an explorative aim, emphasizing complexity and the generation of rich empirical material, at the expense of generalizations, normative categories, and causality. Narratives are used to explain the expected and the unexpected; they are used to understand not only ourselves in ontological narratives, but also the social world we share. Narratives in conversation are actively used to perform, to negotiate, and to position ourselves in subject positions in the given cultural and societal context; this makes narratives and stories vital for enriching our understanding of such social phenomena as leader identity. Thus, narrative research and narrative analysis taps into a rich vein of material suited to explore identity, and ethical and cultural ambiguities. At the expense of traditional social science methodological considerations of representation, validation and objectivity, narrative gives rein to subjectivity by letting people's storytelling and narratives become the focal point of analysis. A further limitation of the narrative approach is therefore the reliance on the researcher's interpretations of the participant's interpretations of their life world – in the production of the empirical material as well as in the analysis and authoring of the findings (as discussed in chapter 2). This limitation makes reflexive interaction with participants and with the empirical material imperative to the research. I have previously discussed this as the researcher's ability to make the research process understandable, transparent and persuasive for the audience (in chapter 2). Ultimately, persuasiveness lies in the writing of the end product, the



dissertation; hence, the degree of eloquence of my authoring can become a limitation in relation to ascribing value to the research findings (Riessman, 1993).

In narrative studies, the researcher is understood as co-constructive. In this study, I have had a participative position in producing the empirical material. My position as a facilitator has given access to a relatively inaccessible field, a program context in which I had in-depth knowledge and where I was interactively engaged with the participants. This researcher position requires critical self-reflection and ethical considerations in relation to participants, facilitator colleagues and the consulting company; it potentially limits the research findings and the ability to see the forest for the trees in highly familiar settings. These aspects of the research are discussed in chapter 2; here, I only wish to emphasize how my position as a psychologist and facilitator/consultant may have elicited more stories of struggles and problems from the participating leaders, in spite of the nondirective and open questions asked (i.e. asking for significant events). First and foremost, I argue in this dissertation that the participative researcher position presented the opportunity to enter into a unique empirical setting designed to facilitate leaders' identity work. This researcher position made it possible to examine how executive leaders do identity work – while it is happening at a leader development program – which would probably not have been possible to the same extent outside the double-natured researcher position.

Finally, the narrative analytical framework and strategy generates complexity by attempting to cover three significant angles of the process of identity construction – the thematic, temporal and relational aspects of narrative identity construction. This potentially delimits very clear-cut conclusions and perhaps makes the findings relatively complex; however, any research has to consider a balance between empirical richness and adherence to an analytical framework, as well as balancing the complexity of findings with communication of the end result. Still, the explorative aim and interpretive narrative framework of this dissertation makes it possible to study individual experience and meaning creation, and provides insights into the processes of leader identity construction that are otherwise difficult to make sense of.

## **12. 4 Perspectives and Future Research Implications**

This research brings to the fore that more investigations of the content and processes of identity work are needed; in a future perspective, identity work could be studied in different organizational contexts: in other contexts of leader development and in public and private organizations. More studies of identity work processes could entail further examination of the paradoxical features of the leader occupation by investigating leader identity within a paradoxical understanding in order to further the conceptual specification and clarification of the five paradoxes of the leader occupation identified in this dissertation.

Methodologically, more research is still needed to examine how to keep the delicate balance of doing interpretive, situated research that contributes to and develops the research field. Future research could develop and specify narrative analytical frameworks and tools with which to investigate identity processes, as well as how to approach respondents' meaning creation analytically and how to make transparent the co-construction of the research process. This study advocates approaching leaders' development as the narrative construction of identity; therefore, studies of leaders and leader development could investigate more the discursive and narrative processes of different types of leader development programs, and could investigate empirically leaders' identity work in their everyday work life.

In addition, a further investigation of the practical application of the way in which we design and facilitate leader development programs in relation to identity work could provide an interesting focus for leadership studies and could potentially enhance the linking of narrative research with leaders' work practice. Finally, applying narrative therapeutic theories and practices in academic narrative research could give new inspirational perspectives and provide alternative ways of approaching identity processes, as well as inspire new models with which to build narrative analytical frameworks.

In conclusion, this dissertation illustrates how leader identity construction is an ongoing social narrative practice. Thus, becoming a leader is not a task to be solved or something to be settled once and for all. Narrative construction of leader identity emphasizes how leaders' manage and balance the paradox of the leader occupation in everyday leader practice through the force of narrative reconstruction in social contexts. Leaders emerge from and are embedded in social interaction and a socially situated context; therefore, no leader identity should pass unspoken, unquestioned or un-reflected, and no leader should feel completely alone or in the dark – in the making of leader identity.

*“There’s a crack, a crack in everything  
-that’s how the light gets through”*

*Leonard Cohen, Anthem*



# 13 English Summary

With the increasing globalization, new organizational structures, and rapid change the leader has been increasingly individualized and personalized. The leader has been put under pressure to reveal a leadership, in which the personality of the individual leader is increasingly important. Moreover, the individual leader has become central for creating and communicating organizational meaning, and the leaders' personal conduct, ethics and identity are taken to be symbolic of the organizational brand. Leaders are increasingly publicly evaluated based on how he "tells the story" of him-self and the organization e.g. the extent to which the leader exemplifies and *lives* the organizational brand. This is reflected in a growing demand for leader development programs with a personal orientation, and psychological oriented development focused on the individual leaders' personal challenges.

Recent theoretical developments in the intersection of critical management studies and narrative identity studies have challenged prior assumptions and approaches, with a departure in social constructivist perspectives leadership is conceived as *narrative identity construction* embedded in social practice and context. Hence, leader studies turn to investigate the emergence of leaders as processes of *identity work* in particular contexts, privileging the use of language, social interaction and critical reflexive approaches.

This dissertation explores the narrative construction of leader identity in the context of a leader development program, examining the processes and the content of identity work of leaders. Empirically five Danish executives from five different industries have been studied in a three year period, starting with a one-year long leader development program and in two following interviews. The material is analyzed within a theoretical and methodological framework inspired by a combination of social constructivist, discursive, narrative and critical management approaches to identity and leadership research. The narrative analytical framework is based on narrative theory, narrative therapy theorization, and positioning theory, analyzing the thematic, temporal and relational aspects of the five leaders' narrative accounts. Hence, the analytical strategy analyzes the narrative recourses of: problem stories, preferred stories, storylines, and the negotiation of subject positions used by the five leaders in constructing certain situated leader identities.

The dissertation contributes to critical management theory by specification the thematic content of identity work, by empirically identifying five paradoxes of the leader occupation:

- The Paradox of Care and Efficiency
- The Paradox of Autonomy and Organizing
- The Paradox of Empowerment and Monitoring
- The Paradox of Collaboration and Executing Power
- The Paradox of Nearness and Distance

The dissertation argues that these paradoxes of the leader occupation are ingrained in the leader occupation by force of the western capitalist societal organizing of life, which positions the leaders as a mediator of paradoxical circumstance. I further argue that the leader occupation as such accentuates particular tensions for the individual leader, in this view identity work are understood as the leaders' attempt to manage the paradox in interplay with the concrete organizational contexts and the idiosyncratic bibliography, thereby paradoxes of the leader occupation interacts with the individual's narrative construction of leader identity. This study contributes to narrative identity theory by building a narrative analytical framework that integrates narrative therapy theories and models for approaching narrative identity and reconstruction processes. The sequencing, and linking of narratives of experience with identity conclusions, can be analytically identified in a *Storyline Map* analytical model, illustrating how leaders' combine narratives into clusters of narratives with a distinct and significant identity constructive meaning. The dissertation argues that storylines in combination constitute the temporary narrative leader identity construct. In the dissertation I empirically unfold how the leader development context of The Executive Training Program frame leader development in humanistic psychological and existentialist discourses and empirically unfold how this interacts with the leader's identity construction processes. The dissertation argues and empirically illustrates how also identity discourses becomes narrative resources from with leaders draw vocabulary, terms and notions when constructing leader identity, and how discourses can be used to negotiate subject positions; to oppose or identify with certain positions, notions or activities.

The dissertation concludes by reflecting on the possibilities of making leader practice less of an intrinsic problem-solving task and more of a reflective practice embedded in social context. Hence, acknowledging that the leader occupation entails paradoxes that can not be solved, but only reflectively managed and continuously balanced in interaction with actual leader practice.

# 14 Danish Summary

Med den øgede forandringshastighed, globalisering, og nye organisationsstrukturer er lederen i stadig større udstrækning blevet individualiseret og personaliseret. Lederen er under press for at udøve et lederskab, hvor lederen som person træder tydeligere frem. Desuden er den individuelle leder blevet mere central for kommunikation af organisatorisk mening, og lederens personlige fremtræden, etik og identitet kan opfattes som et symbolsk udtryk for organisationens brand. I den offentlige sfære evalueres lederen baseret på om lederen kan "fortælle historien" om sig selv og om organisationen, f.eks. den udstrækning hvorved lederen eksemplificerer og *lever* organisationens brand. Denne personaliseringstendens reflekteres i en øget efterpørgsel på personligt orienterede lederudviklingsprogrammer, med fokus på psykologisk orienteret udvikling og på den individuelle leders personlige udfordringer.

Med udgangspunkt i et social konstruktivistisk perspektiv, udfordres tidligere antagelser og tilgange i skæringspunktet mellem kritisk management teori og narrativ identitets teori. Ledelse forstås som *narrativ identitets konstruktion*, indlejret i social praksis og kontekst. Derved udforskes ledelse som emmigerende identitets processer og *identitets arbejde* i forskellige kontekster med vægt på sprog, social interaktion og kritisk reflexive tilgange.

Denne afhandling udforsker hvordan ledere konstruerer identitet i narrativer i en lederudviklingsprogram kontekst, med fokus på identitets arbejdets process og indhold. Fem danske ledere fra fem forskellige erhverv og organisationer undersøges empirisk, startende med et et-årigt lederudviklings program og efterfølgende i to interviews. Det empiriske material analyseres i en teoretisk og metodisk tilgang til ledelse inspireret af social konstruktivistiske, narrative og kritisk management teorier. Den narrative analytiske ramme og strategi er baseret på narrativ teori, narrativ terapeutisk teori og på positioning teori. Analysen fokuserer på tematiske, temporale og relationelle aspekter i de fem ledes narrativer. Således vægter analysen de narrative ressourcer i problem fortællinger, foretrukne fortællinger og storylines, samt den forhandling af subjekt positioner de fem ledere anvender i deres konstruktion af situeret leder identitet.

Afhandlingen bidrager til kritisk management teori ved at specificere det tematiske indhold i identitets arbejde, ved empirisk at identificere fem paradokser i ledelse. De fem paradokser er:

- Et omsorg og effektivitet paradoks
- Et autonomi og organisering paradoks
- Et empowerment og kontrol paradoks
- Et samarbejde og magtudøvelses paradoks
- Et nærhed og distance paradoks

Denne afhandlingen fremfører at disse paradokser er indlejret i ledelse i kraft af det vestlige kapitalistiske samfunds organisering, der medvirker til at positionere lederen som en mediator af paradoksale forhold. Derudover fremføres at ledelse accenturer særlige spændinger og problemer for den individuelle leder. Set i det perspektiv kan identitets arbejde forstås som lederens forsøg på at håndtere paradokser i samspil med den konkrete organisatoriske kontekst samt lederens egen ideosynkratiske bibliografi. Derved interagerer de ledelsesmæssige paradokser med den individuelle leders narrative konstruktion af identitet. Desuden bidrager studiet til narrativ identitets teori ved at anvende en narrativ analytisk ramme, der integrerer narrative terapeutiske modeller og tilgang til identitets processer. Sekvensering og sammenkædningen af oplevelses narrativer med narrative identitets konklusioner bliver analytisk identificeret i et *Storyline Map* – en analytisk model, der illustrerer hvordan ledere sammenkobler narrativer i narrative klynger med en distinkt og væsentlig identitets mening for lederen. Afhandlingen fremhæver at disse storylines i kombination konstituerer den midlertidige narrative leder identitet. Desuden har jeg i afhandlingen empirisk udfoldet hvordan lederudviklingsprogram konteksten *The Executive Training Program* rammesætter lederudvikling i en humanistisk psykologisk og eksistentiel diskurs, som interagerer med ledernes identitets konstruktionsprocesser. Afhandlingen påpeger og illustrerer empirisk hvordan sådanne diskurser bibringer lederen narrative ressourcer hvorfra der hentes begreber og vendinger til identitets konstruktion, samt hvordan diskurser kan anvendes til at forhandle subjekt positioner: ved opponering mod eller identificering med specifikke positioner, begrebsliggørelser eller aktiviteter.

Afslutningsvis overvejes i afhandlingen muligheden for at ledelse i højere grad kan forstås som en reflektiv praksis indlejret i social kontekst, samt at ledelse accentuerer paradoksale forhold, der i den konkrete ledelsespraksis kun reflektivt kan balanceres og kontinuerligt håndteres.



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