# Project Leadership in Becoming: A Process Study of an Organizational Change Project

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## ABSTRACT ■

Drawing on the current research in general leadership, we propose that a process ontology is relevant and rewarding for project leadership studies. We argue that project leadership can be studied as the ongoing social production of direction through the construction of actors' space of action, involving continuous construction and reconstruction of (1) past project activities and events; (2) positions and areas of responsibility; (3) discarded, ongoing, and future issues; and (4) intensity, rhythm, and pace. Through an ethnographic case study of an organizational change project, we show how space of action and hence the project direction are in constant flux and becoming.

**KEYWORDS:** process ontology; process thinking; project leadership; interaction; recursivity; ethnography; organizational change projects

## INTRODUCTION ■

I n this paper, we develop and apply a process ontology to the study of project leadership. We thus contribute to the emerging stream of process-oriented studies within project research (Vaagaasar & Andersen, 2007; Koskinen, 2012; Sergi, 2012) by outlining an analytical framework for empirical inquiry and to relational and post-heroic project leadership research (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas, & Hodgson, 2006; Segercrantz, 2009; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009, 2011) by revealing and detailing the processual character of project leadership. Our research draws upon recent developments in general leadership research, in which attention is being refocused from individual leaders and their characteristics to leadership processes and practices (Knights & Willmott, 1992; Dachler & Hosking, 1995; Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010; Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2010; Larsson & Lundholm, 2010; Raelin, 2011; Denis, Langley, & Sergi, 2012; Kelly, 2013). Such a view presupposes that leadership is emerging in social interaction, and that traditional leader–follower distinctions should be problematized. What these contributions have in common is the effort to bring the "-ship" back into leadership studies (Grint, 2005) by paying attention to the interactional and social aspects of the phenomenon.

The basic reasoning behind the dominating view that 'leadership' is to be found in the qualities and the actions of individual leaders is the modernist notion of stable, distinct material entities as the building blocks of reality and hence the objects of scholarly inquiry. Such an 'ontology of being' (Chia, 1995) leads us to search for concreteness in any abstract phenomenon—a search that may well result in "misplaced concreteness" in Whitehead's terms (i.e., that we end up having "mistaken our abstractions for concrete realities") (Whitehead, 1985, p. 69, as cited in Chia, 1995). Hence, when we perform research on organizations, individuals, technologies—or indeed projects—we forget that these are categories that are applied and reapplied to the world to make it ordered, not autonomous entities themselves (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Hernes & Maitlis, 2010; Hernes, 2008; Koskinen, 2012). They exist only as reified abstractions (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007) produced to make sense of a fluid and dense world—and can therefore be discussed, challenged, and rejected. The same goes for the abstract notion of 'leadership.'

Process organization studies, in general, take the fluidity, interrelatedness, and complexity of life and work into consideration. Some of these

studies employ what we may call a *process perspective,* basically anchored in an *ontology of being*, through which the world is still seen as consisting of stable, enduring entities that have qualities that change over time (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013; Lorino & Mourey, 2013). In leadership studies, this would imply studies of how leaders develop and learn over time or of how leader–follower interaction patterns change over the course of a project. The limitation of the process perspective is that it still tends to maintain the 'misplaced concreteness' of leadership into individual leaders, and that alternative notions of the phenomenon are mobilized out of the picture. In this paper, we will instead depart from a *process ontology* and postulate that

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

Scholarly inquiry into leadership work in project settings usually reflects the developments in general leadership research. Most of this research builds on well-established theoretical schools of leadership studies such as situational, transformative, authentic, and charismatic leadership, and applying them to projects and project-based settings in order to construct theoretical links between leader characteristics and project outcomes (see, for example, the extensive overviews in Turner & Müller, 2005, 2006; Tyssen, Wald, & Spieth, 2013). Accordingly, current research tends to reproduce traditional leader-centric notions of individualism, heroism, masculinism, specific competencies, and unitary command—without reflecting upon the ensuing image of project leadership as exercised by a strong, single, heroic, omnipotent project manager, surrounded by followers not taking part in the management of

the project (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009, 2011). By making the abstract phenomenon of 'project leadership' concrete through such personae (cf. Wood, 2005), important aspects of project leadership work are ignored or even defined as irrelevant. Instead of studying and theorizing over how leadership is practiced in everyday work, researchers become preoccupied with the traits, styles, actions, and competencies of the individuals who have been formally assigned project manager responsibilities. Moreover, the dynamics and fluidity of project leadership work over time are usually overlooked in favor of approaches focusing on snapshot images of project managers' abilities and competencies, or limiting their empirical inquiry to formally defined project boundaries in time and space.

In this paper we suggest that a process ontology, as applied to project leadership studies, can enable project research to arrive at new insights into leadership work in project-based settings. While some extant contributions indeed suggest and employ more or less process-oriented views as beneficial to our understanding of projects, project management and projectification (cf. Cicmil et al., 2006; Linehan & Kavanagh, 2006; Vaagaasar & Andersen, 2007; Söderlund, Vaagaasar, & Andersen, 2008; Maaninen-Olsson & Müllern, 2009; Blomquist, Hällgren, Nilsson, & Söderholm, 2010; Koskinen, 2012; Sergi, 2012; Packendorff & Lindgren, 2014) process ontology is new to project leadership studies. Departing from a growing strand of process studies in general leadership research, in this paper we will develop a theoretical and methodological framework for process ontology studies of project leadership work and identify the possible theoretical consequences of such a framework.

The paper is organized as follows. Initially, we discuss the theoretical implications of a process ontology, as applied to project leadership, outlining an analytical framework in which the on-going construction of action space

and project direction is seen as involving constructions of project path, positions, issues, and rhythm. We then apply the framework to a process study of an organizational change project in which a U.S. management control regulation is implemented in the Swedish subsidiary of a multinational chemical firm. In the ensuing discussion, we reveal how leadership work in projects does not only involve several interacting individuals, but that the strategic and tactical situation of the project is continuously reframed (cf. also Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013), and that project leadership work tends to focus not only on plans but also on continuous redefinitions of individual responsibilities and current action priorities. Project participants thus continuously reconstruct the space of action—what is possible and not possible to do—and hence the direction that the project process takes.

## Toward Process Studies of Project Leadership Work

### Inquiring Into Project Leadership Work: Toward Process Studies

Most general definitions of leadership define the phenomenon in terms of processes and of a social, rather than an individual, matter. The following quotation is an example of the conceptualization of leadership in terms of processes of social influence, which is at the base of most leadership studies:

> "Leadership may be considered as the process (act) of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement." (Stodgill, 1950, p. 3, as quoted in Parry & Bryman, 2006, p. 447)

As previously discussed, when moving from definitions to actual empirical studies, scholars often focus their inquiry on individual leaders. The field of leadership studies has traditionally been leader-centered, in other words, focused on the individual leader and his or her traits, abilities, and actions. This was part of the modernist agenda

of management sciences during the early 20th century, when the best leaders were to be identified and chosen for their suitability and formal merits rather than for pre-modern bases such as kinship or charisma. The problem was still to determine what constituted a suitable leader, and this question gave rise to a series of different theoretical schools (cf. the overview in Parry & Bryman, 2006). Frustration with such a lack of attention to the processual nature of the phenomenon, and with the narrow notion of leadership as an individual matter, have led scholars to try to more thoroughly articulate leadership work in terms of processes. For example, Barker holds that leadership work is a continuous social process (Barker, 2001) and that studying it as a series of finite events is a habitual error based on the automatic assumption of causal relationships. In Barker's words:

> "Leadership has much more to do with action based upon perceptions of emerging structure in systems where order is periodically breaking down and reforming than it does with the imposition of structure and control relative to an a priori configuration." (p. 489)

Thus, change, complexity, and chaos are not seen as obstacles but as the forces behind evolution and renewal. Leadership work is conceptualized as "a process of unfolding" (Barker, 2001, p. 490), in which "each individual element can be seen to permeate and melt into one another without dissolving into independent parts" (Wood, 2005, p. 1103), thus stressing the interrelatedness of the world. Hence, the essence of leadership is not to be found in a social actor, but it is "a relation of almost imperceptible directions, movement and orientations, having neither beginning nor end" (p. 1115).

Several recent streams of general leadership research explicitly or implicitly adopt a process perspective (Kelly, 2013). One such stream of contributions has been gathered under the label "relational leadership" (Uhl-Bien, 2006)—joining a number of perspectives or models having a common interest in leadership as a social process of relating rather than focusing primarily on leadership effectiveness. Moreover, the idea of leadership as practice has also informed empirical studies that contribute to processual understanding taking various approaches, such as: conceptualizing leadership as socially constituted and as a negotiation process regarding interpretative schemes (Knights & Willmott, 1992); closely examining micro-level activities and their effects (Denis et al., 2010); highlighting the time dimension when accomplishing work (Holmberg & Tyrstrup, 2010); trying to perform leadership development programs promoting leaderful practice (Raelin, 2011); taking into consideration everyday actions as leadership and seeing individuals as "fields of relationships" (Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008); and analyzing leadership as stretched over leaders, followers, and the material and symbolic artifacts in the situation (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004).

Hence, leadership studies have gradually shown an increased interest in ideas of processes, practices, and performances. Scholars have shown how it is possible and mostly relevant to study leadership work as an on-going process that is constructed by several people in interaction as they perform more or less mundane and repetitive everyday tasks. Most studies, however, rely on an ontology of being in which leadership is still seen as the result of intentional action, and the notion of process mainly signifies a longitudinal research ambition (Langley, 1999; Langley et al., 2013). In this paper, therefore, we aim to add to these studies by assuming a process ontology in which actors and reified projects are granted no primacy and in which the central focus is the interactions going on at work and what they achieve.

Studying processes often means paying attention to the actual practices and to how work is performed (cf. Langley, 1999; Barley & Kunda, 2001). This means researching leadership work as a "lived" experience rather than a "reported" experience in interviews (Alvesson, 1996; Samra-Fredericks, 2003), which also allows for paying attention to the context in which the phenomenon takes place (and that the phenomenon reconstructs) and to potential contradictions and ambiguities. Ethnography-inspired approaches are thus suitable for such endeavors. Ethnography may be defined as a "written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 1) or as a method for studying people in their "natural" context and exploring the nature of a social phenomenon over time and/or space (Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). The focus on instances of work draws, therefore, from the ethnomethodologically informed perspective in ethnography (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994), which focuses on everyday accomplishments that sustain social life, although the extended observations of workdays in organizations add an interpretative dimension (Vine, Holmes, Marra, Pfeifer, & Jackson, 2008). This rather common approach in the study of organizations is rarely used in leadership studies (Carroll et al., 2008; Larsson & Lundholm, 2010).

### Studying Project Leadership Work With a Process Ontology

The process ontology implies a number of repositionings in the empirical study of project leadership work (cf. Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009). First, project leadership work should be studied as consisting of activities emerging in the social interaction of the project team, acknowledging the leadership work also done by other team members, and opening up empirical inquiry to a multitude of potentially differing views of the same processes (Crevani et al., 2010). Second, leadership work should be studied in terms of the everyday activities that constitute project leadership (Cicmil et al., 2006; Blomquist

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et al., 2010; Sergi, 2012). It proposes acknowledging mundane, collective, and ambiguous aspects of leadership, instead of the current preoccupation with heroic actions and linear relationships between intentions, interventions, and performance. Third, the focus should be on interaction processes as such rather than on what the formal organizational unit in which they unfold might be (Blomquist et al., 2010). This implies an ontological and epistemological view of projects as constantly 'becoming' through social interaction, in which scripts, standards, and formal organizational boundaries are treated as aspects of organizing rather than as given entities and facts (Crevani, 2011; Koskinen, 2012; Sergi, 2012).

A further reconsideration concerns what the empirical circumstances might be that could form the basis of a developed understanding of project leadership from a process perspective. If we are to study leadership in terms of processes, practices, and social interactions—instead of in terms of individuals, competencies, and reified organizational units—what will be the focus of our empirical fieldwork? Gronn (2002) proposes the study of "concertive actions," including spontaneous collaboration patterns; intuitive understandings that emerge between colleagues; and institutional arrangements supporting self-managed teams and other formal practices. Drath, McCauley, Palus, Van Velsor, O'Connor, and McGuire (2008) claim the need for an "integrative ontology" of leadership, in which the three basic concrete entities of traditional leadership research (leaders, followers, and shared goals) need to be replaced by an alternative "DAC ontology" in which empirical inquiry is focused on the outcomes of leadership—direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC). Crevani et al., (2010) and Lindgren, Packendorff, and Tham (2011) appreciate both these suggestions—remarking, however, that notions of "outcomes" are problematic given that leadership is analyzed

in terms of interactions and processes. According to this critique, the DAC ontology tends to focus on converging processes of leadership, thus emphasizing the common and the collective while ignoring the potentially diverging arguments, interpretations, and decisions of all involved parties. As noted by Kelly (2013), the quest for new ontological understandings of leadership is often in fact a quest for ideological reinforcements of the phenomenon as basically positive, necessary, productive, and researchable.

In this paper we thus use the concept of *direction* as a core feature of leadership processes (i.e., construction of direction in the ongoing organizing processes, Crevani, 2011), which is produced through an ongoing construction of *space of action* (i.e., construction of possibilities, potentials, opportunities, and limitations with respect to individual and collective action within the local-cultural organizational context; cf. Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). Given the fluidity of leadership work conceptualized through the lenses of a process ontology, there may be a number of aspects to be taken into consideration in order to study how project direction is continuously being produced as action-spacing takes form. Direction should not be considered as a linear feature of organizing, but rather as an organic shaping of how organizing processes are taking form and toward what result such shaping is heading. Thus, direction is accomplished by retrospectively stabilizing the meaning of what has happened, as the sensemaking literature maintains (cf. Weick, 1995; Maitlis, 2005; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013), and by recursively shaping the premises on which to continue to act (Gergen, 2010; Crevani, 2011; Koskinen, 2012). This also implies that "a project" should be studied as an aspect of a process rather than as an entity, while remaining highly aware that actors in the empirical setting may well treat it as a reified item that can be separated from the everyday stream of events and thus managed and

controlled in a rational manner (Sergi, 2012).

In this paper, we study the continuous evolvement of direction and space of action in project leadership work through four inter-related analytical dimensions: the ongoing construction of (1) project path, (2) positions, (3) issues, and (4) rhythm. Direction is linked to sustaining the potential for ongoing collective action within certain inter-subjective notions of space of action, which can be more specifically understood through analyzing project leadership work in terms of how actors construct temporal paths; their organizational interrelations "inside" and "across" understood project boundaries; their interpretation of action implications of current issues; and the temporal rhythm by which the understood specifics of the project reappear in their daily work. Such collective action may be more or less intentional, and may therefore be understood as based in a retrospective process of interactional construction of the "project path"—i.e., the more or less shared notions of how the project has evolved, its achievements, its current and provisional status, and the current interpretation of its main task (Langley, 1999; Vaagaasar & Andersen, 2007; Koskinen, 2012; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013).

What is also being continuously produced are notions of "positions" and "issues" that may be considered important aspects of the construction of the project and its direction (Crevani, 2011; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2011). By "issues" we mean temporarily stabilized meanings relating to decision-making processes, past and future events, strategic goals, and various other ongoing or planned projects—some of them inscribed in project plans, some emerging and disappearing in other ways. Most issues are intimately connected with each other and are combined and recombined with each other in the continuous organization of project processes. The construction of issues is closely linked to the construction of "positions," in other words, the evolving understanding of who
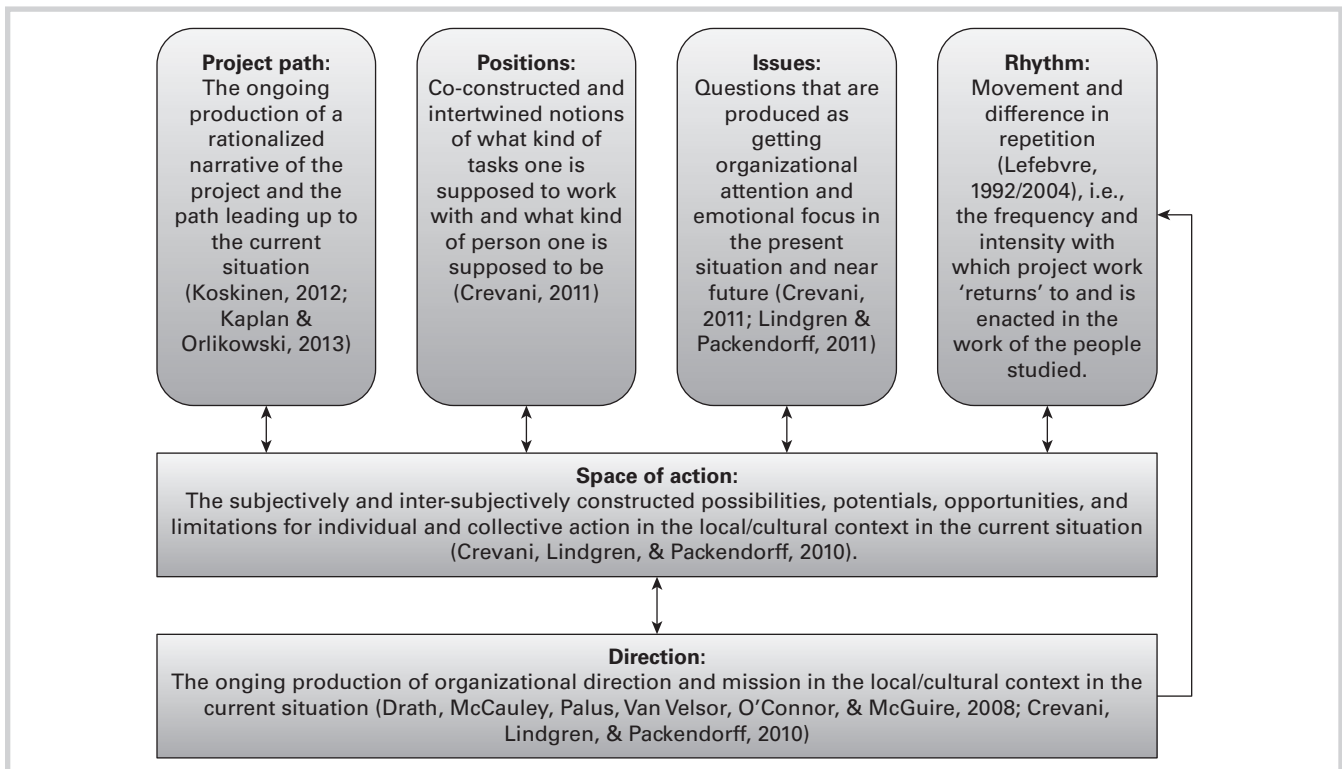
**Figure 1:** Analytical dimensions in the study of project leadership work and its relation to the construction of space of action and organizational direction.

has which formal and informal roles, who is to do what, who is responsible for what, and who should make certain decisions (Figure 1).

Processes are also enacted with/ through a certain *rhythm* (Lefebvre, 2004), which is an important dimension of the analysis of processes of becoming. Rhythm is not necessarily about identical repetition in time; rather, it allows for "beginning again," for returning to earlier or similar notions of a project differently. In the analysis of project leadership work, constructions of rhythm involve not only the formal plans and deadlines of the project and the organizational setting (Dille & Söderlund, 2011), but also varying senses of urgency or relief as the process proceeds and issues emerge and disappear.

The identified analytical dimensions are intended to be applicable to the study of project leadership work in all sorts of projects. Although the case study in

this paper is clearly focused on a typical organizational change project, usually characterized by a higher degree of organizational embeddedness and workflow ambiguity than other project types (Blomquist & Packendorff, 1998), it is also, at the same time, a showcase of all sorts of projects—as understood by practitioners as time-limited, reified, and manageable sequences of action (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas, & Hodgson 2006; Tyssen, Wald, & Spieth, 2013; Lindgren, Packendorff, & Sergi, 2014). Although our study is located in an organizational change setting, the proposed theoretical framework and analysis apply to all episodes constructed as 'projects.'

## A Process Ethnography: Leadership Work in the SOX 404 Project

This case study presents a project process in a national subsidiary (Chem-Corp Sweden) that was struggling to

redesign its systems of internal control in accordance with instructions received from the board of directors of the multinational chemical manufacturer, ChemCorp. In 2002 the U.S. Congress passed the "Sarbanes Oxley Act" (SOX), which was the governmental reaction to recent corporate accounting scandals (e.g., Enron and WorldCom). The main focus of the debate was SOX section 404, which forced U.S.-registered companies to ensure that they sustained a sufficient system of internal control. When ChemCorp management understood that the company would have to comply with the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, they initiated what was to be known as the "SOX 404 Project."

The project was led by a steering committee and a project management team at the ChemCorp headquarters. The project management team provided direction to the 15 local business-unit projects (of which ChemCorp Sweden

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

**Table 1:** Respondents referred to in the empirical material.

was involved in one). Most of the work took place at the local level; it involved operative and administrative staff supported by ChemCorp's external auditing firm, and was monitored by the internal auditing department. In short, the local work implied creating and documenting secure control systems for all sorts of transactions and data processing in the daily operations. The business units had to ensure that 70% of their business was assessed and adhered to a general schedule expressed in a series of milestones with deadlines.

The empirical basis of the study is the observations, interviews, and readings carried out by a research assistant over a four-month period in 2005 at ChemCorp Sweden, and the findings are presented here as excerpts from an underlying "thick description." The researcher worked full-time at the headquarters of ChemCorp Sweden and participated in meetings, as well as in the day-to-day operations relating to the SOX 404 Project. He documented his data through daily field notes, tran-scripts of formal and informal interviews, and the collection of emails and documents related to the implementation of the project. The project process was then 'bracketed' into seven distinct points in time, each referred to as a "Now," in which the research team could trace significant reconstructions in one or more of the four analytical dimensions. It should be noted that condensing eight months of project work into seven points in time is an analytical separation employed in order to illustrate the reshaping of space of action. In practice, the reshaping of space of action is a continuous achievement, not a number of somewhat discrete stages as in our analysis (Lorino & Mourey, 2013). The list of participants in Table 1 includes the most frequently named people.

### Space of Action in Now 1 (May–June, project initiation)

The core actors in ChemCorp Sweden started their work in May 2005, on the basis of their experience from the previous year when a "dry run" was carried out by the accounting manager and the financial manager. Thus, they understood the basic aims and methodologies of the work ahead of them, but feared that mistakes could be repeated. The financial manager clearly expressed these concerns in analyzing the project path during the past year:

> We conducted this project in several steps, beginning as early as 2004. That year, Year I, was designated the "Local Focal Point." The accounting manager and I had to do the work ourselves, so we were on our own. The project managers were not really sure what they wanted to accomplish … the premises kept changing, and the project ended up as "a whole lot of nothing," while we ended up not doing things in the manner in which we were supposed to. Also, this year everything is uncertain. It is very hard to predict where it is all going to end (financial manager, interview 2).

The project team was created and the "cycle owners"—the managers responsible for various administrative processes, such as "orders to cash," "IT controls," and "local pensions"—were assigned their various business-cycle responsibilities. A schedule was created on the basis of instructions from the headquarters, including three major phases:

- The design phase (document processes, document key risks/controls, establish action plans) was to be finished by 23 September 2005.
- The test-phase (establish test plans, perform tests) was to be finished by 10 October 2005.
- The project end, including the closing of the action plans and "sign-off" were to be no later than 15 December 2005.

At this stage, the project was formally created and team responsibilities identified. No major work was taking place, and most project participants continued with their day-to-day work. If the project was indeed discussed, it was usually in terms of how it could be sat-

isfactorily delivered with as little effort as possible. The space of action in the project process was narrow in the sense that the project's pre-history was unattractive, and most actors did not know or care about the project (Table 2).

### Space of Action in Now 2 (mid-August, start of the design phase)

It was not until after the 2005 summer holidays (mid-August) that the SOX 404 Project workload increased at Chem-Corp Sweden. Although the project had been discussed since June in various informal forums, no cycle owner had officially begun the actual work connected to the design phase, which was to be finished in about one month (23 September). Each cycle owner faced a series of detailed investigations and mappings of all administrative processes and controls within their business cycle. At first glimpse, the work connected to the design phase may not have seemed impossible to accomplish, but it soon appeared that creating narratives on activities performed in different locations and by different people was the most time-consuming. In addition, the various risks inherent in each process were to be identified and assessed. Because the cycle owners also had regular managerial responsibilities, they soon experienced growing time pressures in their daily work. The logistic and planning manager, the only cycle owner in addition to the local focal point manager who had started on the work, voiced his discomfort with the narrowed space of action experienced:

> "If there was time for this type of project you might wonder what the staff was doing at other times of the year" (logistic and planning manager, observation, 18 August).

To push the project forward, the local focal point manager announced a meeting around 9 September, stressing that cycle owners would have to have made some progress on the work by then. As the days progressed, cycle owners became more and more irri-

tated, reflecting on how the project had to be squeezed in between regular tasks, thus reducing their ability to carry out their regular work:

> "From the morning to the evening, my most important task is to develop the business and the organization. I do this as effectively and involving as few other people as possible and this implies that when something like this comes, it collides with my regular activities; it is something that demands time and must be done in evenings and on Sundays" (sales and marketing director, interview 1).

At this "Now" stage, the project participants had become surprised about the workload, constructing the development as a sharp increase in deadline pressures and significant changes in work content. Beyond stress and complaints, this also led to conflicts between departments as actors tried to redistribute the workload of upcoming central issues, including baselining and allocation of task responsibilities to others. The project leader responded to this by insisting upon the given time schedule and creating a general project meeting to increase the pace of implementation. At this stage, the space of action for the project process widened through the increased participation by core actors and the intense focus on unresolved issues. Although the project was now "present" in everyone's daily work, the project leader felt a need to make people focus even more on the project by further widening the action space.

### Space of Action in Now 3 (mid-September, changes in the project plan)

On 14 September, it was finally time for the long-awaited project meeting of all of the ChemCorp Sweden cycle owners and some other managers who were also involved. It was now evident to everyone that the company would have to implement several changes to the existing processes and activities in order to comply with the SOX require-

ments. Several changes were discussed, but the major ones concerned invoices, credit invoices, handling of price lists, customer credit limits, and customer ordering.

The day after the meeting, the sales and marketing director intervened in the project and created a new and more detailed project schedule specifying dates for when the different business cycles should be finished and also who was responsible for performing each and every walk-through. When he made a series of telephone calls to all of the managers involved no one objected to the new schedule, which entailed postponements of all major milestones:

- *5 October:* Deadline for completing the assessment of the design; sign-off on design should be possible
- *15 November:* Preliminary deadline for completing test plans
- *31 December:* Action plans (with high risks finalized)
- *31 January (2006):* Assessment of operating effectiveness finalized

In addition to pushing all the dates forward, the requirements concerning the testing seemed unclear and the managerial team gradually separated into two groups: one advocating an ambitious implementation of all project activities and the other resisting the project with reference to ambiguities and lack of motivation. Rumors were circulating that people in other Chem-Corp subsidiaries abroad were also troubled with the project. An email from a colleague in Germany confirmed this:

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

impatient. ... I think it is time that we all cooperate to channel the remaining work in this project. Someone has to stop this insanity (I don't mean the fact that we have to do it, but the way we are doing it) (manager at a German unit, in an email from 15 September 2005).

The local focal point manager also reflected on the design phase in terms of position and issue confusion:

"New things are constantly arising. They send an example, but later perhaps some project group in Holland figures out a new way to do it, and the new way is never properly communicated (local focal point manager, interview 3).

In this "Now" stage, the space of action of the project process has been significantly widened as most actors have begun to understand the full workload required. At this stage parallel processes are under way to narrow down the space of action by constructing the project as ambiguous and meaningless. Consequently, the project is now clearer to everybody, but is also increasingly a contested matter.

### Space of Action in Now 4 (October, initiating action plan work)

In the first weeks of October, the SOX 404 Project was tacitly put on hold. Several operative duties had been set aside in the previous month and managers wanted to catch up. Still, the project team had arrived at an explicit consensus that the organization would deliver on all promises made to the head office, and that the project had to be constructed as an improvement opportunity:

"It is of course my responsibility to see this as being as positive and constructive as possible; ... it will probably be confirmed that the reviews we performed have helped us identify problems and malfunctioning procedures that must now be assessed" (sales and marketing manager, interview 1).

The action plans formulated during the design phase appeared very general and more orientated toward what to accomplish rather than how to do it. More than 60 risks inherent in the control system required some degree of analysis and assessment, but there was still no coordination or communication between managers clarifying how the action plans were to be carried out. The managers also had difficulty persuading the organization to implement the changes identified in the risk assessments, particularly because different departments tried to preserve their own space of action by transferring responsibilities elsewhere:

"Today the sales representatives had a conference, and they were also forced to listen to a presentation regarding the SOX 404 Project, and the eventual changes it may signify. There was some debate, particularly over the question of how they communicate prices to the order department. They would not agree to send every change (in product prices) in written form; they considered this to be work that should be done by the order department. They were all polite, but it was clear they would oppose changes that would entail more administrative work for them; their flexibility is very important to them" (observation, 26 October).

In order to handle these emerging problems, the local focal point manager called all managers into a meeting to clarify responsibilities and identify future project milestones. The meeting was scheduled for 8–9 November, implying that most managers again excluded the project from their immediate action plans and focused instead on their regular work tasks. While there was still much discussion and reflection concerning the project, the space of action for the project was being rapidly narrowed down. Cycle owners and other managers were instead eager to distance themselves, explaining that the project had become back-breaking and emphasizing the positional clashes

between the SOX 404 Project and the local corporate culture:

"Most people are not very happy about this. It does not fit the Swedish mentality. ... We don't feel we need this. We don't need to be controlled because we already work this way. We don't feel we need the extra controls. ... Of course it might mean that we need to improve some routines, but this is 'control of control'—a bit like Orwell's *1984*" (warehouse manager, interview 8).

### Space of Action in Now 5 (November, from action plans to action)

A project meeting to structure the action plans and coordinate the efforts was held as planned on 9 November. On the day before, the local focal point manager and the SOX 404 Project assistant had produced a draft recommending a few possible solutions. Even though a few action plans (involving only one person or department) had indeed been implemented, the major action plans remained unattended to. The meeting was fraught with tension, and debate erupted over how positions were constructed and what issues needed attention:

"The different action plans were discussed. The financial manager emphasized that the organization could no longer continue to postpone important changes. He declared that this was a matter of attitude— bad attitude—and that the problems identified were important regardless of SOX. After this, the different action plans were discussed in detail, but the discussion revolved around why it had been so hard to implement the suggested solutions. The warehouse manager was clearly disturbed and could not see any practical reason for documenting various things only to satisfy SOX. ... When the sales and marketing director arrived, it was agreed that the company would probably have to hire a new person to perform certain sensitive tasks separated from other employees" (observation, 9 November).

The meeting was not considered a breakthrough by the project leader, who created neither enthusiasm nor creative solutions. Although several things were discussed and some solutions approved, the meeting did not result in any increased or improved communication between managers regarding the project. The final result was that some things were to be looked over and others investigated—the test plans that were to be delivered by 15 November had now been tacitly removed from the agenda. Again, the project's action space was widened and narrowed at the same time, through the simultaneous resolution of some matters and recruitment of additional personnel, all while several actors kept a skeptical distance from the project, preferring to focus instead on operative issues.

### Space of Action in Now 6 (November, internal audit)

Although the "action plan meeting" of 9 November was a disappointment, many other things called for the immediate attention of the project team. It was now clear that the internal auditors were to investigate the work done during the design phase and that they were to arrive on 16 November. Once this date had been communicated to everybody on the team, a period of hectic and intense work ensued. The auditors finally arrived on 21 November. They had intended to stay for one week. In addition to performing an audit of the SOX 404 Project's design phase, they had also planned to investigate some other operations connected to the sales department. Their arrival significantly accelerated the rhythm of the project and temporarily forced all cycle owners to focus all their time on SOX-related issues, but the general sense of ambiguity in the project remained.

> "Two women arrive after lunch. The financial manager and local focal point manager sat down with them, and the auditors declared they would need a few hours with each cycle owner to go through the work done

on the different business cycles. They also announced they would write a report commenting on the work done, but it was not certain how this report was to be organized. Probably, they would not be overly critical as they had just failed three other units, and their managers had now asked them to try to help, rather than just failing; actually, the auditors did not seem sure about what they were here to do" (observation, 21 November).

At a final meeting on 28 November, the auditors left a preliminary report on identified errors in ChemCorp Sweden's compliance with the SOX 404 Project. There were over 100 errors, mostly relating to inappropriate formulations and terminologies. The auditors also noted that several action plans had still not been implemented, particularly those related to the still undefined concept of "baselining." The local managers promised to get this done, and project activities again slowed down as the auditors moved on to other units abroad. At this stage, the space of action for the project process had thus been significantly widened and several core matters in the project plan had received attention. However, a process of narrowing the space of action followed soon afterward, as the team realized they would escape serious criticism.

### Space of Action in Now 7 (December, audit report and Christmas preparations)

In mid-December most managers started to prioritize the work tasks that had to be performed before the upcoming Christmas holidays. Based on the preliminary audit report, the project team decided to postpone the issues of baselining and accountability until the following year. The 12th of December was identified as a delivery date for some of the action plans related to the warehouse operations, but due to some unfortunate breakdowns in the business system server none of these deliveries was made. The warehouse managers were openly skeptical to the suggested changes: they still couldn't

see the point of documenting and filing information that had already been entered into the business system.

A draft of the final internal audit report arrived on 16 December. The details of this report were made confidential, but in general the auditors seemed most positive about the compliance attitude of ChemCorp Sweden and the widespread understanding of the need to improve. During a telephone interview, one of the internal auditors remarked on the now rather limited space of action in the Swedish subsidiary:

> "Much of the things we discovered were very simple errors. People have not understood how to use the instructions, while others have misinterpreted the risks, or have not assigned the proper control ... perhaps some further guidance could have been provided. If you give people free hands you must follow up regularly, that people are on the right track. Business unit management at the headquarters understood how to do this, but facilitating communication [between them and the national subsidiaries] is here a key issue. In general: you must educate people and then follow up that they have understood" (internal auditor, interview 10).

The SOX 404 Project was now several months late and nobody knew exactly when it could be expected to end. Space of action had now been narrowed down even more, as core actors refocused on operative issues and upcoming holidays instead and constructed most upcoming issues so they would be handled at some distance. In a final interview, the head of ChemCorp Sweden tried to present the project path as cumbersome and confusing but eventually both necessary and beneficial:

> "Normal operations run every day, and we are here to reach certain goals. It has been very hard for anyone to see how this will help the organization reach these goals. ... However, in a few years we will probably be able

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| Constructed "Now" in the Project Process | Construction of Project Path | Construction of Positions | Construction of Issues | Construction of Rhythm |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Now 1: May–June, project initiation | Talk of last year's "test run" as inconclusive and unsuccessful. Everything was uncertain, and the "test" was carried out mostly by two people (LF point and accounting manager) while the rest of the organization was not included. | Positions of certain managers and directors are being reshaped by adding responsibility and accountability for working with the SOX 404 Project in their respective business cycle. This new task is usually not prioritized. | Operative work issues are the main priority. Business cycles are new issues, still not prioritized, and have been assigned from distant upper management. The SOX 404 Project emerges as an issue, constructed as something they have to do in order to pass the audit with the least possible effort. | Slow and restrained, distant deadlines and more pressing issues to deal with in the operative activities. Project phases and delivery deadlines are set. |
| Now 2: Mid-August, starting the design phase after summer vacations | Earlier underestimations of the project workload appear as problematic. Involvement of several people in each business cycle and coordination among them could become a major issue in the near future. | A number of positions are re-shaped and headquarters are constructed as both rigid and ambiguous. Cycle owner position more ambiguous and subject to negotiation with IT department: none of them wants responsibility for the two emerging project issues: baselining and allocation of accountability. | Daily operations still attract the most attention and energy. Translation of central requirements to the local context is the main focus of attention and emotions. Baselining and allocation of accountability emerge as contested issues, but no agreement on how to work with them and the question is thus postponed. | Slow but increasing toward the end of the month. One meeting scheduled for 9 September in order to pressure the managers. Same deadlines. |
| Now 3: Mid-September, changes in the project plan | The project has become "real" and there is an increasing awareness of the substantial scope of the changes that will need to be made in order to conform with SOX requirements. | Two groups begin to shape: one that speaks of the changes as necessary, and one that considers the project to be uncertain and meaningless. | Increased attention to and discussion of the necessary changes in existing processes and activities. Amount of effort in the project still contested. Test plans emerge as an issue; unclear how and where it will be done. | Accelerated and hectic in the near future as cycle owners understand that a walkthrough has to be performed before 23 September. Slowing down in the distant future since deadlines are now again being postponed. |
| Now 4: October, initiating work with action plans | October interpreted as "dead month" as actors attend to other responsibilities. Also an emergent sense of commitment: last year no one implemented what he or she had promised; this year the action plans have to be implemented. | Boundaries between sales representatives and order department concerning who will do additional administrative work. Not only a question of actual work to be done, but also of identity: the sales work being constructed as flexible and void of administration. | People outside the project team start to become affected by changes prescribed in action plans. New procedures increasingly being constructed in terms of a stricter form of top–down control, which is not compatible with the local culture. | Very calm after the hectic rhythm of September. Same deadlines as before plus meetings on 8 and 9 November to discuss responsibilities and boundaries between positions. |
| Now 5: Early November, from action plans to action | Ironic sensemaking of the project: you will have to produce documents to control the control, etc. Some people feel increased urgency to implement the changes, whereas others see it as a meaningless effort and await conclusions of the auditing report for further guidance. | One new position is created; an external person is to be hired to perform sensitive tasks | Dreaded test-plans "disappear" as the center of attention and emotions, resulting in several postponements of deadlines. Other issues still attracting attention and emotions—action plans, baselining and segregations—are further discussed but there is no resulting agreement. | The general rhythm remains slow, with some major meetings not leading to any movement: positions and issues are reconstructed in contested terms similar to before. |

**Table 2:** *(Continues on the following page)*

| Constructed "Now" in the Project Process | Construction of Project Path | Construction of Positions | Construction of Issues | Construction of Rhythm |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Now 6: Mid-November, internal audit by headquarters | Increased discussions on how deteriorating communication between managers implies that issues are not to be resolved. There is also curiosity about the upcoming internal audit. | Two internal auditors arrive with ambiguous instructions and try to construct themselves as the link between the business units and the company, as being constructive rather than threatening. Headquarters again are constructed as being in conflict with the Swedish subsidiary. | Internal audit is the central issue and happens through a number of meetings. Baselining emerges again as an unresolved issue and requires an action plan, even though they admit that what baselining is remains unclear and cannot be specified at the moment. | Crescendo builds up to the audit week, which is full of meetings and discussions, then slowing down once more. |
| Now 7: December, audit report reception and end-of-year slowdown | End of year history-making. Widespread agreement that the project is difficult and that the changes might not be beneficial, but that the advantages may become visible in time. | With regard to this project, the same aspects of the different positions are re-established. | The audit and its outcomes are a central issue. The preliminary draft is somewhat positive; criticism is mainly on minor things. The still open issues of baselining and segregation are further postponed. | Rhythm slows as actors anticipate the holiday break and the new year. Baselining and segregations are postponed until next year. Attempts to handle action plans are postponed due to IT system failure. |

**Table 2:** The seven "Now" states in the SOX 404 Project described through the four analytical dimensions.

to look back on this and say: 'Some good came of this project; now we do things this way and it works pretty well'" (sales and marketing manager, interview 3).

## Project Leadership Work: The Becoming of Space of Action and Project Direction

Having developed and applied the framework to the ChemCorp SOX 404 Project case, in this section we turn to the consequences of using it in empirical research. Based on the case study reported above, we will first discuss how space of action and project direction are co-constructed throughout a project process. This will be followed by a discussion of the theoretical consequences.

Space of action in the project process is constructed in interaction. It is continuously reconstructed as the project proceeds and influences the direction of the further performance of the project. At each moment, the space of action that is constructed contains the premises of coming actions and talks but does not determine them completely. What is meaningful, what

is urgent, what is possible, and what is engaging—are matters that change as time passes and as project paths, positions, issues, and rhythms change. Instead of analyzing how people move from one defined stage to another in a linear process, our framework enables us to analyze how they construct and reconstruct the evolving preconditions of action throughout the project. The different spaces of action in the SOX 404 Project and their consequences for the direction of the project process are summarized in Table 3.

In each of these analytically identified spaces, we can identify certain versions of how the project path has unfolded thus far through reconstruction of the project path. We can also see positions taking shape in certain ways; we see issues channeling attention and emotions evolving, emerging, and disappearing; and we feel the rhythm of the project accelerating or slowing down. At each point, not only is the "future" renegotiated, but also the past and its meaning, the actors (their duties and identities), and the frequency and intensity with which the project "affects" and "requires the attention of"

the people involved. Therefore, rather than talking of "before," "now," and "after," we talk of several "Nows," each of which contains the consequences of all the previous "Nows" and the premises of the coming "Now" (Sergi, 2012). What takes place in, for example, "Now 3" will leave traces in the construction of "Now 4," but not in a deterministic way—what takes form in "Now 3" offers the premises of "Now 4" but these can be enacted in several different ways.

This means that the courses of action that are constructed as legitimate and meaningful change as the project progresses and its space of action is reshaped. For example, one major aspect of this in the SOX 404 Project is the changes in this project from "too unclear instruction" (implying a limited action space that is widened as additional instructions and detailed time plans are created) to "too much control" (narrowing the action space as core actors begin to create a distance from the project) and then on to "this is not our culture" (making sense of the distancing by means of cultural rather than hierarchical dimensions). Moreover, as issues emerge, positions might need to be reshaped and

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| Constructed "Now" in the Project Process | Construction of Space of Action in the Project Process | Construction of Direction in the Project Process |
|---|---|---|
| Now 1: May–June, project initiation | Project emerges with a problematic prehistory, not considered by most actors. Very limited space of action for the project process. | Business as usual, project will be handled on the side of operative work in a rational and controlled manner. |
| Now 2: Mid-August, starting the design phase after vacations | Project positions for departmental managers are created, new issues emerge, and project rhythm increases. Widened space of action; project more "present." | Still business as usual with project separated from daily operations, but emerging divergences in views of how it should be handled. |
| Now 3: Mid-September, changes in the project plan | Focus on urgent project activities within existing design; space of action wide. When the project is contested and deadlines are postponed, space of action narrows again. | Project now in focus, now more integrated with daily operations, divergences and confusion handled through deadline postponement, not through project redesign. |
| Now 4: October, initiating work with action plans | Temporary closure of space of action as project is put on hold and headquarters is blamed. Actors outside the project team are affected, which is met by some resistance. | Project is again separated from operative work for project team members, while more integrated for those previously not involved. Externalization of the project as a headquarters requirement rather than internal opportunity. |
| Now 5: Early November, from action plans to action | Some actors widen the project space to do intense work on a temporary basis; others narrow it through distancing. | General sense of "wait and see," and no clear direction as issues emerge and disappear without being resolved. |
| Now 6: Mid-November, internal audit by headquarters | Internal audit is an urgent mini-project that excludes all other actions for a week. Then narrowing action space again as the audit is constructed as in line with expectations. | Temporary effort to "survive" the audit, but no change in direction or "wait and see" attitude. Audit reinforces sense of externally required project with limited local relevance. |
| Now 7: December, audit report reception and end-of-year slowdown | Closing down space of action through end-of-year slowdown, provisional project history-making and transfer of anticipated work into distant time space (next year). | Construction of project as an inevitable but potentially rewarding experience, audit report constructed as confirmation of satisfying local performance and project being on "right track." |

**Table 3:** Space of action and project direction in project leadership work as constructed in the seven "Now" states.

boundaries become contested, giving rise to modified/strengthened issues, as in the case of baselining and allocation of accountability. Depending on the direction such structuring takes, different actions will become possible at different times. Moreover, some themes reappear in modified terms, as for example the construction of the headquarters as an "evil" initiator of the project: they are too rigid, they are not Swedish, they use a different enterprise resource planning (ERP) system and they try to "sabotage" the local subsidiary—the positioning is reinforced, while the meaning changes. These developments are not unidirectional: they do not reflect the typical trajectory of project tasks from being isolated and specified to becoming embedded and ambiguous (Vaagaasar & Andersen, 2007); rather, they are recursive and may well return to similar interpretations, again depending on what happens.

What is thus interesting to analyze is the relationship between the reconstruction of space of action and the shaping of the project's direction. In the SOX 404 Project, episodes in which the space of action narrowed were also episodes in which actors reflected and discussed the project in a "strategic" manner—aligning it to corporate strategy, reformulating its origin and *raison d'être*, maintaining the pace, and accepting differing and sometimes conflicting interpretations of current positions and issues (Langley, 1999). When project leadership work was concerned with such general matters, the project was reified as a strategic issue (Blomquist & Packendorff, 1998) that served long-term purposes. In contrast to this, episodes in which space of action widened usually coincided with intense work within the bounds of current urgencies—taking care of specific deliverables, making provisional deci-

sions, meeting specific deadlines, and strictly following guidelines and rules (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). Widening spaces of action seem to be linked to reification of the project in terms of schedules and immediate task lists, thus focusing leadership work on firefighting and other urgencies. While episodes of widening are often followed by episodes of narrowing, this is by no means a matter of the swings of a pendulum—the reconstructed paths, positions, issues, and rhythms behind each change all contain the accumulated preceding developments as well as new interpretations and expectations for the future.

Finally, it is also interesting to observe the rhythm of the project—how often and how strongly the project is enacted by the people. As the rhythm changes, so too does the "reality" of the project change and, consequently, the intensity of the issues changes. The project is, in other words, not "present"

or "recurring" to the same extent during the whole period, and this has consequences for how actions and interactions develop, which in turn makes the project more or less existing and reified.

Our analysis of the SOX 404 Project does not lead to the conclusion that every project will go through these specific phases. Rather, our analysis shows that, in order to work with projects and leadership in projects, a sensitivity to and knowledge of how space of action is constantly changing and being reshaped is needed. It is in these relational achievements that the direction of the project takes form. The project manager alone cannot influence what kind of space of action is going to be constructed in the project. Rather, the project manager and the other team members need to understand what they are relationally constructing and how. The space of action for leadership work in a project is not only constructed in terms of time and resource conflicts with other projects and operative work, it also involves converging and/or diverging notions of legitimacy, power, professionalism, and culture. A process ontology, thus, does not only imply a deeper understanding of recursiveness and issue handling in project processes, but also a widened understanding of the various aspects of leadership work that are simultaneously under construction as space of action and direction unfold. In the SOX 404 Project, issues related to the legitimacy of the project and its initiators had significant impacts on the project process, as well as how the project came to be constructed as a case of disrespect for local culture and professional traditions.

## Implications of the Study

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

From such a perspective, project leadership is seen as the ongoing social production of direction in the project through construction and reconstruction of actors' perceived space of action. We propose an analytical framework in which this ongoing "action-spacing" involves processes of continuous construction and reconstruction of (1) past project activities and events; (2) positions and areas of responsibility related to the project; (3) discarded, ongoing, and future issues to be dealt with in the project; and (4) rhythm and pace. Drawing on our case study of the SOX 404 Project, we show how the space of action and hence the direction of the project is in constant flux and coming into being, as actors incorporate all new developments in the understanding of the current situation. Accordingly, this way of analyzing project processes provides an alternative way of understanding project leadership beyond institutionalized project management notions of unitary command, linearity, formal planning, and entitative notions of projects.

Theoretically, we add to strands of project research and exploring the consequences of process perspectives by applying a process ontology to project leadership work. Identifying four analytical dimensions that are helpful to our understanding of leadership work over time, as space of action is shaped and reshaped, leads us to conceptualize the project as developing in an organic fashion rather than along a linear sequence—each "Now" is not deterministically connected to the previous one or to the following one, but rather the different "Nows" contain each other insofar as they are invoked by the actors. We can thus see how such leadership work influences what courses of action become relevant and meaningful over time, and that it involves continuous construction and reconstruction of not only temporal and spatial conditions but also more or less divergent notions of legitimacy, power, professionalism, and culture. The often under-utilized critical potential inherent in the process ontology (i.e., the possibility of revealing how power relations are continuously in the making, including who can influence how organizational arrangements are reified and what the consequences of this are) is thus also a potential for further studies of project leadership.

Practically, our analysis points to the necessity for concepts that enable us to understand what is going on and how direction is being produced when working on projects. Although project models may offer a useful tool for conceptualizing the project over time in a linear fashion, they need to be supplemented by other "tools" that the practitioner can use in order to understand how project work unfolds in practice and to articulate such an understanding (Vaagaasar & Andersen, 2007). Once articulated, it is possible to discuss the current situation and try to influence its development, in a manner similar to emergent 'agile' approaches to project management (Hodgson & Briand, 2013). As discussed, such intentional intervention does not necessarily achieve its purpose but should rather be considered as part of a process necessarily including a number of reiterations between reflection on leadership work, action and talk, consequences in terms of direction, reflection on leadership work, and so on. The role of the project manager and project team members in this process is to help each other reflect and to attend to what is being achieved in the interactions in which one is participating (Grint & Jackson, 2010).

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