

## When the boat comes in

An empirical study of leadership as emerging activities at Greenlandic fish factories

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**When the boat comes in.**

## **An empirical study of leadership as emerging activities at Greenlandic fish factories**

### **Abstract**

Based on empirical work at Greenlandic fish factories this article develops a more nuanced view on middle management activities. The empirical findings suggests that the leadership practice of middle managers invokes problematization as a collective achievement, based on experience and sensitivity. At the fish factory the middle management activities stand out as a bricolage practice happening as processual activities enacted in an interplay between many organizational actors. The processes where leadership emerges involves different perspectives that support appropriate problematization of the mundane activities as they unfold. Thus, the discussion of leadership is concerned with how middle managers emerge themselves in daily sensitivity work. This contrasts with conventional leadership research, much of which is turning leadership into an “it” assuming stable relations. The concepts of experience and sensitivity contributes to a more complex understanding of the mundane everyday leadership practice that unfold among various organizational actors.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Middle managers, Micro processes, Greenland, Fish Factory

### **Introduction**

As the field of leadership continuously evolve new theoretical and methodological perspectives on leadership activities are dawning (Fairhurst et al., 2020a; Orlikowski, 2002; Ospina et al., 2020; Tourish, 2019; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Formerly leadership as a grand, glorious, and

heroic achievement has gotten a lot of attention from researchers, practitioners, business schools and consultants. The discussion often takes its departure in leadership relying on a predictability and control, looking for more tools, techniques, and best-practices in a way which is partly disconnected from what takes place in the daily organizational life (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Alvesson et al., 2017; Stacey, 2006). Lately there has been persistent efforts to shake of these traditional perspectives and move on to more fruitful ways of engaging with leadership both as an activity and as research, and thus producing knowledge driven by curiosity and paying attention to the what the involved are making sense of (Cunliffe, 2022; Fairhurst et al., 2020a; Raelin, 2017). The “Great Man” approach seems to finally have lost its touch to the more collective, collaborative, and relational ways of thinking and enacting leadership. This article follows this recent stream of literature focusing on examining, understanding, and attempting to explain leadership as collective, collaborative, and relational processes emerging in concrete social situations (Langley & Klag, 2019; Sutherland et al., 2022; Tourish, 2019).

The aim of the article is to describe and develop understandings of how middle managers practice leadership by closely focusing on leadership activities in concrete situations. It contributes by discussing how middle managers play a critical role by paying attention to the leadership activities the middle managers emerge themselves in. With inspiration from Pfister et al (2017) and Lansu (2020) middle managers are defined as being involved with and knowledgeable about the core business activities. Middle managers can be highly ranked in the organizational hierarchy but by contrast, top managers are often members of the executive team (Lansu et al., 2020; Pfister et al., 2017)

Through an analysis of how leadership emerges in daily interactions among various organizational actors, the research makes an original contribution to a knowledge gap about middle management activities as a bricolage practice (Do Vale et al., 2021). Middle managers activities are often reduced to activities of supervision, e.g., being responsible for employees to follow and comply work standards, proper use of machines and monitoring workers during production (Olkiewicz et al., 2020; William-Carawan, 2003). How leadership is practiced by middle managers has gained less attention, despite middle managers are in a position where they can make change happen, since they are in close contact with top managers and at the same time closely involved with employees while organizing daily tasks (Blankenburg Holm et al., 2020; Henriksen et al., 2021; Lansu et al., 2020). Do Vale et al. 2021 describes how middle managers often develop bricolage practices to organize relevant activities by "making do with whatever they have at hand, recombining resources and challenging conventional processes" (Do Vale et al., 2021, p. 8). What stands out in the discussion of middle managers is, that tasks and roles vary depending on the organization, but a defining argument is, that middle managers organize work by creating connections (Brubakk & Wilkinson, 1996; Kempster & Gregory, 2017; Lansu et al., 2020; Pfister et al., 2017; Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). The issue of organizing work is important at manufacturing plants. A manufacturing plants effectiveness depends on its middle managers ability to organize work which is a different activity than follow rules and regulations, and this organizing activity based on leadership activities.

With the aim of creating understandings of how leadership emerges in an interplay among different actors in everyday organizational life, the author worked with and among middle managers at Greenlandic fish factories for two weeks. The empirical activities included an open

and explorative approach to what the middle managers do in a specific setting when they engage in their daily worklife activities. Thus, the research takes an ethnographic-based approach (Ybema et al., 2009) exploring how middle managers in everyday organizational life engage in collective, collaborative, and relational processes of leadership. In this way I respond to calls for more in-depth research on leadership (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2018; Cunliffe, 2022; Fairhurst et al., 2020a, 2020b; Ospina et al., 2020)

Based on ethnographic accounts it is described how leadership is practiced at Greenlandic fish factories by grasping the ongoing, daily interactions as an interplay between various organizational actors. Leadership in the fishing industry is a complex phenomenon that requires careful analysis to understand the dynamics involved. Empirically the article provides insights of how middle managers, at the Greenlandic fish factory, face challenges of collaboration, organizing, quality requirements and the push for streamlining the production. It illuminates how leadership emerges by narrating the subtle and complex processes of everyday organizational life.

The unique insights created from the study is used to further develop the theoretical understandings of leadership. The aim is not to develop a normative or prescriptive definition of leadership, but to create insight into how processes of leadership emerge in relational, socially constructed processes (Sutherland et al., 2022). Theoretically, this adds a more nuanced understanding of how activities of leadership organize the daily tasks by creating connections.

This article contributes by creating answers to the following question:

**How is leadership enacted by middle managers at Greenlandic fish factories?**

This article is structured into four main sections. The first outlines the research design and introduces to the empirical context and the research that underpins the article. Section two offers empirical illustrations drawn from two weeks of observations, interviews and conversations organized in relevant themes relevant for answering the research question. The next two sections discussion and conclusion goes to discuss and conclude the case and its analysis.

### **The Greenlandic frame**

The larger frame of this research is Greenland, and this is where I study “how leaders and followers interact and relate to one another” (Sutherland et al., 2022, p. 5). Greenland is at the epicenter of “grand challenges,” e.g., global warming, climate change, geopolitical issues, demand for natural resources, oceanography, biology, ecology, glaciology, and Greenland independence (Andersen, 2015; Rendtorff, 2018; Whiteman & Yumashev, 2018). The fishing industry is the backbone of the Greenland economy (Greenland, 2019a) and the economy is sensitive to changes in fish prices (Andersen, 2015; Bianco, 2019; Greenland, 2019b). Over the years, there has been a general call for strengthening the private sector and a need to “initiate a process with stronger economic development” (Andersen, 2015, p. 25). The Sermersooq Business Council argues that the lack of focus on leadership in Greenland is a challenge facing the development of local organizations. Yet there is a scarcity of research on leadership and organizing in the Arctic, and in Greenland in particular (Whiteman & Yumashev, 2018). The limited literature about organizing and leadership in Greenland often takes a cultural approach that focuses on the differences between Greenlandic and Danish organizational actors (Bakka, 1997; Kahlig, 1999; Langgaard, 1986; Lyck, 1998; Nooter, 1976; Samuelsen, 2010). In a recent

empirical study Rasmussen and Olsen (2019) explained how daily leadership practices in Greenland are closely related to society's more general discussions, and that the local community influences and creates dilemmas for organizational practices and development (Rasmussen & Olsen, 2019).

### **Leadership as processes of collective, relation and shared interactions**

In the follow section a theoretical scaffolding with a tentative understanding and positioning of leadership is developed (Fairhurst et al., 2020a). This is done to keep openness to the conceptualization of leadership, and to be critical and not get caught in the trap of producing more normative and best-practice descriptions of what is emerging in everyday organizational life. Hopefully, this way of dealing with the understanding of leadership, by “consider more than one definition of leader-ship and let them creatively play off one another as the data tell their story” (Fairhurst et al., 2020a, p. 607) makes room for new and fruitful interpretations with relevance for both academia and practice.

Following, this study steps away from understandings of leadership positioned within objectivity, realism, cognitivism, and system thinking, and takes a more collective, relational, and processual position thinking of leadership as “becoming” (Hernes, 2014; Stacey, 2016; Weick, 1995). The process perspective on leadership differs from theoretical perspectives where leaders are positioned as authority-figures looking at the system objectively from the outside, designing and implementing strategies that ensures the desired outcome. These theories are based on assumptions of stability and rationality and focuses on the distinct leader's ability to influence followers, and the use of tools and rational analysis to develop one-size fits all macro strategies, targets, and goals. In this traditional perspective, organizations are

considered well-structured, well-described and well-organized entities (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003), and emphasis is on the leader position (Clarke, 2018; Schieffer, 2006; Tourish, 2019). I acknowledge that this way of describing leadership is often articulated in management studies, in leadership courses and in some practitioners' way of articulating leadership. Nevertheless, this conventional way of describing leadership is often far away from what takes place in organisations, and the lived practice of leadership.

The intent here is not to engage in a systematic review and discussion of all leadership literature, since this has already been done by several others (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003, p. 1438). Rather, I engage with studies that highlight and recognizes the organizational context as a pluralistic setting where organizational actors e.g., leaders, managers, employees, engage in dynamic interactions (Alvesson, 2019; Alvesson & Jonsson, 2018; Clarke, 2018; Crevani, 2018; Fairhurst et al., 2020a; Hernes, 2014; Ospina et al., 2020; Schieffer, 2006; Tourish, 2019; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017, 2018; Weick, 1979). Among them, the authors propose a focus on relational aspects of leadership, which emphasize the value among various actors involved in unique organizing processes. And it stands put that that relations are key-drivers, and they emerge in "a dynamic system that is able to adapt in and evolve with a changing environment" (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017, p. 11). In this perspective, collective, social, and relational processes are intertwined, creating an awareness of how various organizational actors engage in organizing activities. This exploration of leadership is inspired by the burgeoning literature on leadership as processes of collective achievements focusing on the activities of all those who are engaged organizing process, to their interactions, and to their reflections and adjustments to their ongoing work (Fairhurst et al., 2020a; Ospina et al., 2020). Thus, leadership is



considered a collaborative endeavor tied to a collective rather than to an individual way of practicing leadership. Klik eller tryk her for at skrive tekst.. Nonetheless, it is not as such only the stream labelled collaborative leadership, which is of interest to this study, to keep the open approach, as promised in the start of this section. In this way leadership involves critical thinking and reflexivity and considering alternatives as opposed to following a straight road forward (Alvesson et al., 2017; Crevani, 2018; Hernes, 2014; Weick, 1979). The need for reflexivity appears when organizational actors experience uncertainty, tension, doubt, ambiguity, and dilemmas (Hernes, 2014; Weick, 1995). This way of thinking of leadership has been described by March and Olsen as problematization (March & Olsen, 1976).

Problematization is what happens in the emerging processes of collective, relation and shared interactions among people organizational actors.

Consequently, leadership is a collective activity that unfolds among many actors in the organizations, and leadership occurs when and where it is needed. Based on the above it is argued that a practical formulation is that *leadership activities take care of the common orientation in the organization*. This definition is valuable when describing the practices of leadership in organizations as it unfolds in relations in everyday organizational life. It relates to the interest for what leaders do in complex and uncertain conditions, and in situations that need attention and new perspectives. This is not a narrow definition but one that makes room for grasping unexpected and unrelated processes of leadership activities. In the analysis emphasis is on leadership activities which are productive in the sense that they support relevant organizing practices. Productive leadership processes tend to broaden the horizon and support better decisions.

## **Research setting and methodology**

The research is positioned within the emerging tradition of organizational ethnography (Ybema et al., 2009), generating contextual depth and substantive narratives, and “approach the complexities and contradictions of real life” (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Thus, the aim is to study organizational life as it emerges, and how members of an organization make sense of organizational life. Based on a process perspective, the study raises questions about everyday activities, often taken for granted, and contributes to a critical problematization of organizational activities (Alvesson, 2003; Hernes, 2014; Langley & Tsoukas, 2010; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011; Weick, 1995). Consequently, the knowledge developed is interpretive and contextual, and the findings offer a basis for understanding leadership activities as it takes place at a production plant and may help develop theory from empirical evidence (Becker, 2017).

### ***“Being there” at the Greenlandic fish factories***

Empirical data were developed through observations of everyday activities and interactions as they unfolded at fish factories in Maniitsoq and Nuuk, Greenland in 2020. By “being there” (Langley & Klag, 2019), and taking part of everyday activities I got the chance of grasping and acknowledging the mundane but at the same time challenging activities which takes place, when the managers must deal with some of the organizational challenges. The empirical activities are based on observations (Langley & Klag, 2019), shadowing (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007), and ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) – exploring how leaders engage in and make sense of activities (Ybema et al., 2009), and grasping “real organizational life” (Alvesson, 2019, p. 37).

The two sites were selected due to similar setups, and geographically accessible (which is not always the case in Greenland), and the company offered good access without any constraints. The main language at the factory is Greenlandic, but most of the employees speak Danish. This language barrier, for the researcher who only speaks Danish, was managed differently at the two factories. In Nuuk, most leaders and employees speak Danish, but to manage the linguistic challenges, which did occur at times, other employees functioned as interpreters. In Maniitsoq, the situation was different. Fewer people speak Danish, and since I knew this beforehand, I arranged for a graduate student from Greenland University to come along to help with translations when needed. To prepare for the task, the graduate student and I had thorough discussion about the research interests. The student also had a logbook, and at the end of each day we compared notes and discussed our experiences.

For a week at each site, I followed, shadowed, and worked beside leaders and employees at the fish factories. During the two weeks, at the factories, I took part in the workload, attended meetings, had formal and informal conversations with managers and employees, and had lunch and breaks in the canteen, joining everyday conversations. Puzzlements about daily activities that occurred when we were in the middle of filleting fish, packing fish, conducting quality control, or just drinking coffee in the canteen. Thus, conversations and interviews were based on an open structure, and questions addressed (a) the dilemmas the managers are facing, (b) how they engage and include employees' perspectives in daily tasks, (c) relations to peers, and (d) how they think about leadership. Most conversations and interviews took a reflective form, where we discussed puzzlements, I had noted, but also managers asking how I experienced unique situations. I engaged in discussion with Maintenance Managers, Quality Managers,

Production Managers, Factory Managers, Trading Managers, Shop Steward, and various factory employees. All interviews, conversations and observed meetings was turned into approximately 75 pages of electronic field notes, which also included large and small details of observations, meetings, and the informal talks. These fieldnotes include descriptions from observations but also transcripts from small conversations and interviews with leaders and employees describing how the daily work life unfolds at the fish factory. In addition, photos were taken at the factory reminding me of the various activities and the settings observed. A few of these photos are used in the article to enhance understandings. Participants are anonymized throughout the paper to protect their privacy.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The way data emerged called for thorough ethical considerations during fieldwork, writing, presenting, and publishing. Guba and Lincoln discuss how the inclusion of participants' values often "produce special and often sticky problems of confidentiality and anonymity, as well as other interpersonal difficulties" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 115). I tried to overcome these challenges while being at the factory, I checked with employees to see whether my experiences and insights resonated beyond my immediate experience. Such conversations were used to deepen reflections and qualify understandings. Thus, I followed Guba and Lincoln (1982) on how credibility considers ethical dimensions of the research and relates not only to how the researcher engages with people in the study, but also to how the researcher manages the interpretations in a respectful way (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

### ***Analytical approach***

The participative approach generated plenty of empirical data. Throughout, the research questions and inquiries were formulated by the empirical data and theoretical input, and characterized as abductive, reflexive, and interpretive research processes (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009; Mead, 1932). The analysis is guided by attempts to identify themes relevant for answering the research question by using an approach in which readers can follow the line of argument that leads to interpretations and findings (Guba and Lincoln, 1982). A challenge inherent with the rich descriptions from observations, interviews and other conversations is to grasp what is to be termed as leadership out of what takes place, and thus to focus the attention suitable for analyzing the phenomenon of study and addressing the proposed research question. The fieldnotes have been manually analyzed. Based on close readings of the fieldnotes I targeted the parts which seemed relevant for answering the research question and categorized empirically driven themes related to the practice of leadership. Some of these directly formulated by the interviewees and other stood out based on own interpretations. Without going into a detailed coding process, often missing out the broader perspective, I looked for patterns and challenges in the everyday activities. Inspired by Langley's (1999) narrative strategy the writing up of the analysis consist of extended accounts of the activities the factory managers engage in (Langley, 1999). In other words, the empirical data have been interpreted within context to gain knowledge of how processes of leadership emerge. By using this focus, I reduced the number of semi-unstructured quotes and situations in patterns to a more limited set of meaningful themes that still managed to account for the discussion of leadership (Miles et al., 2014). The purpose of this reflexive and interpretive analytical process

inspired by e.g., (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Langley, 1999; Mead, 1932) was to grasp the phenomenon of leadership at the fish factory. Critically, I have tried to make sense of the activities taking place at the fish factory to create more nuanced understandings of leadership at a manufacturing plant.

### **Analysis: Leadership as emergent activities**

In the following parts of the empirical data is presented in a raw form, to enable the reader to follow the construct of the situations. The extracts in italics represent actions and interactions as they emerged and was noted in my logbook. There are several statements and comments by the researcher which have also been transcribed. Furthermore, the situations are written up without changing the underlying processes but as a deliberate strategy to describe situations to elaborate on during the theoretical discussion. First the context is discussed setting the scene for actions and interactions. Then situations are described based on raw empirical descriptions, then follows the interpretation of the situations as a discussion, and finally proposing the conclusion to the research question: how is leadership enacted by middle managers at Greenlandic fish factories?

### ***The context: The Greenlandic fish factories***

Earlier in the text, Greenland was introduced as the larger frame for the research. In the following the scene is set for the place where the empirical activities were conducted, and thus placing leadership withing a particular workplace (Sutherland et al., 2022). The level of analysis is two sites at a large fish factory in Greenland. Fishing is Greenland's largest industry, and the general economy is reluctant on an effective fishing industry (Grønlands Økonomiske Råd,

2021). The company of study has factory facilities all along the coasts of Greenland. The factories in Nuuk and Maniitsoq, sets the empirical frame for this study, both located right at the wharf (see Figure 1 below for photo of the Maniitsoq factory). The two factories are different in terms of size: The Nuuk fish factory has between 12 and 40 employees and the factory in Maniitsoq has 20–100, and thus the production facilities in Maniitsoq are also larger and more automated. At the same time, however, the fish production processes at both factories are quite similar, and thus the way the work is organized is based on the same line of production. This meant that when I arrived in Maniitsoq, after having spent a week in Nuuk earlier on, the processes and activities were familiar, and I felt less like a stranger than I had when first arriving at the Nuuk factory. At the Nuuk factory I spent some time getting familiar with the production processes, the jargon, and even the fish.

At the wharfs, the fishers unload their boats, which come in diverse sizes, from small dinghies to mid-sized fishing boats. Fish processing is seasonal and weather dependent, meaning that sometimes there is not enough fish while at other times there are not enough employees. Fish factory workers are mostly paid by the hour and when there are no fish, there is no work. Given the seasonality of the work, the number of employees varies.

At both factories, a Factory Manager oversees the production plant. The workforce consists mainly of unskilled employees (blue-collar workers) whose workload is often standardized, simple, and monotonous. The Middle Managers, who in this study are the primary source of attention, are also unskilled, but often have many years of experience or a proven record of stability. Most Middle Managers have attended in-house training on collaboration, leadership,

and quality control. Their role at the factory is to organize the workflow based on estimated sales and the fish traded, and function as the link between Factory Manager and employees.

Activities at the factories are organized among various departments. At the Trading Department fish are traded in by local fishermen and prepared for the production line. At the Production Department fish are cut up, filleted, and frozen. And at the Packing Department fish are packed and made ready for shipment. The Quality Department is engaged in constant monitoring of quality, procedures, and hygiene across the different departments. Quality control is a major issue at the factory. A Quality Manager and assistant constantly assess the quality of the fish, factory hygiene, and monitor employees to ensure compliance with quality guidelines.

The Trading Manager is the primary contact for the fishermen, and his office is by the factory entrance. This area is in many ways the heart of the factory. It is where boats large and small come in and it is the epicenter for most information. The Trading Manager is in close contact with the fishermen who call him on their way in from shore, to report where they have been and what they have caught. Fishermen on the larger fishing boats are given a time slot for arrival and unloading. The small dinghies can approach the wharf when a time slot becomes available. Information about what is coming in is immediately recorded and shared in the internal system, accessible for the headquarter, sales and marketing. The Trading Manager has a close and important relationship with the fishermen at sea, and this relationship is critical for planning and coordinating production activities. Quality control and improvement of control procedures are a major concern at the factories. All departments organize their work around quality and control procedures. This does mean that a major part of middle manager activities



is to organize the workflow based on standard actions. This stood clearly out, when I asked the Trading Manager how I should act if I was too taken on his position (Nicolini, 2009). He explained it like this:

*To be my double, you should start the day by finding out who showed up for work. After that, you must check production papers from the previous day and make sure that all the paperwork is in order and has been shared with managers in the appropriate departments. All figures and numbers have been shared so that everyone knows which [fish] have come in and which [fish] were moved to the production area. After that, you must check emails and make sure that morning teams and evening teams are aligned and ready for their tasks. Then you must email the people involved in the tasks of the day and explain what needs to be done*

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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### ***Leadership as quality activities***

Many activities are based on standard operating procedures, which are requirements in food processing operations. These procedures set the scene for most activities and are maintained by the employees in the Quality Department. The following is an extract from my fieldnotes when shadowing (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2007) the Quality Manager:

*Quality work is a major issue at the factory. Quality is both about hygiene and how the fish are managed. In the quality manual, everything is written down according to the appropriate standards. The Quality Manager and her Assistant enforce these standards at the factory. Walking with the Quality Manager and her Assistant during their daily inspection is like walking with the quality manual in hand. No deviations from the quality procedures gets by the Quality Manager and her Assistant. They catch all kinds of deviations in the factory – from the temperature on the large freezer to employees smoking in prohibited areas or neglecting to wear a face mask. Nothing is too big or too small for the quality crew. They point out irregularities and instruct employees or Managers on how to change behavior. They explain to me that hygiene is a major issue, and that part of their job is to monitor whether employees have washed their hands properly. If they have not done so, employees can see their names on a list in the canteen. The Quality Manager describes how she leads by the rules. At times, her colleagues find her “bossy.” She says that does not bother her because the rules and regulations must be followed. Sometimes she must ask the Factory Manager for help when employees or fellow Managers repeatedly fail to comply with the quality standards.*

What stands out from the above narrative is a strong focus on the description of the processes related to production standards and hygiene. The numerous processes cannot be left unexamined. The strong focus on “doing the right thing” based on detailed descriptions is an issue that plays a significant role at the fish factories. The Middle Managers are in many ways formed by procedures, so when things go wrong, they call for more and better descriptions when activities are not in compliance.

### ***Organizing activities across departments***

Supporting collaboration across different departments plays a key role at the factories.

Productive collaboration emerges when managers have an overview of what takes place in the different departments. And things do go wrong when they do not. The following extract from the fieldnotes is an example of this:

*This afternoon I joined a quality employee in her work. We walked down to the production line and picked up a package of fish ready for distribution. We unpacked the box, and controlled the fish-weight, temperature, checked visually for icing. The quality employee was not satisfied something was out of order. It turns out that the fish delivered from the Trading Department has been weighted in wrongly and now half a day's work needs to be repackaged. The Quality Managers explained that this had to do with lack of collaboration between the Trading Department and the Production Department, since the wrong weight of fish had been delivered to the Production Department by the Trading Department. This lack of collaboration is major concern which had already been discussed among the Middle Managers previously. The immediate response to this is a call for better and more written procedures.*

This situation explains the importance of creating an overview of activities across department.

What stands out is that the employees try to support collaboration between the different departments by creating more procedures since a mistake in one place entails a chain of mistakes in the production. They need to be connected and brought into an overview. I do observe how this happens when challenges or questions appear. Then, the managers from different departments bring several people together from various departments and different work levels to reach an understanding and thus find better answers to tricky situations. This is

illustrated in the following photo, where leaders (in blue caps) and employees (in white caps) get together to solve a technical problem at the factory.

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Insert Figure 2 about here  
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The empirical descriptions emphasize how collaboration at the fish factories consists of webs of complex processes which needs to be interconnected. The reaction of wanting more and better descriptions is anchored in a traditional understanding of the organizing practice where it was believed that everything could be described (Hernes, 2014; Stacey, 2002; Weick, 1995). But the complexity of processes at the factories seems to call for something other than a constant production of more procedures. Collaboration and leadership are interrelated processes characterized by improvements and new activities. It can be about simplifying or improving processes, but it can also be about supporting the processes of connecting.

***Acting on practical relevance – not theoretical perspectives***

Internal leadership programs are offered by the company to the middle managers, stressing the importance of not just following processes, rules, and regulations. The internal leadership programs have a focus of educating the middle managers to engage in relevant quality discussions with both employees and top management.

At both factories I hear the middle managers talk about the leadership programs, and how they provide them with a more profound way of thinking of what goes on at the factory. These leadership programs make the middle managers aware of the quality of engaging employees in

decisions and informing about what takes place. The middle managers do not refer to, or reference, leadership literature, and their descriptions on how they think of leadership is not based on ideal leadership practice but is more based on what seems to work for them when they try to organize the work at the factory. This also means that the middle managers swap between diverse ways of practicing leadership (and management),

When talking about their perspectives or perceptions of leadership, the middle managers emphasized how their daily work is about having an overview across the various departments.

In that way, they can readily determine when attention is needed. For example, the Maintenance Manager described how a lot of his work is about listening. Listening to the production facility, the conveyer belts, and the speed of how people walk. He says that leadership is needed when things sound different than usual. He finds that when he senses something unusual, he tries to engage colleagues in problematizing the unexpected. He finds that although disagreements may occur when including others in decisions, which is when relevant solutions emerge. He argues “It is not just us leaders who know what is needed.”

This problematization also takes place at the cross-department middle management meetings where deviations from standards are shared. Deviations are often formulated as mistakes and challenges. These discussions at the cross-department meetings seems to create a learning environment where new understandings of unique situations occur.

What stands out is, that most middle managers are aware of, that the best answers and solutions appears when more people are included in the decisions, and particular challenges need to be solved with the employees included in the processes.

### ***Sensing when leadership is needed***

During the stay at the factories, I clearly experienced that leadership holds a lot more to it than following processes, rules, and regulations. It is also about being sensitive to your surrounds.

The middle managers are connected to and engaged with the flow at the factory. An example of this is described in the following situation:

*This morning, I teamed-up with the Production Manager. He has worked at the factory for 30 years ever since his confirmation. He explained to me that workdays at the factory are never the same. It all depends on which fish are traded in and how many. He guides me through the production facilities, from the canteen to the production line. The production work is in process, and employees are working on the production lines. Together we change into the working outfit (blue overalls, rubber apron, and boots). Halibut has been brought in this morning. When working as a middle manager you take part in the work at the production line when needed. So do we this morning. Manually, we move halibuts from a large blue container to the conveyer belt. On the conveyer belt, the halibut is automatically sorted by weight, before being moved to the Filleting Department. The next hour or so, the Production Manager and I work side-by-side placing the halibuts on the conveyer belt (see Figure 3 below). We do not talk much. But I see how he constantly checks the quality of the fish when moving them from the container to the conveyer belt. He controls the quality manually by touching, smelling, and looking at the fish. He explained that this is part of the quality work, and that the condition of the fish shows how the fishers handle them on their boats —and how fresh it is.*

*In the process of moving the halibut, he not only paid attention to the quality of the fish, but he also observed and sensed what was taking place more generally in the factory. He was*

*constantly looking up and around noticing who was doing what and how things was running. Now and then he left the conveyer belt, adjusted small things, commented on the workflow, asked for information about what was coming in, how the belt was running and paid attention to any irregularities.*

*When we finished at the conveyer belt, I asked him how he experienced the workflow at the factory, and when and how something needs his attention. He explained: “I have ears and eyes all around me.” He used his senses when working to makes sense of the workflow by paying attention to how people act, how they talk and walk in the production area. By drawing on former experiences, and seeing how things are emerging in the present, he makes sense of what is about to happen and thus, if any action and coordination is needed. Later that day, when packing cod, he pointed to his chest and stomach and said: “Leadership is about gut-feeling – I can feel what is happening in here.”*

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Insert Figure 3 about here  
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The middle managers use their senses, to determine whether things are “business as usual” or whether they need to pay attention to some irregularities. The point here is that leadership is not just about organizing workflow based on standard procedures, but rather, it is about sensing what is about to happen and realizing when better practices are needed.

### **Discussing the emergence of leadership activities**

Admittedly, the context of fish factories in Greenland is a non-usual site. However, the characteristics of this case would be instantly recognizable to people working in most production plants. The empirical study shows how the leadership practice emerges in collaboration with various organizational actors. We see how middle managers activities includes a strong focus on quality procedures but at the same time activities of leadership as bricolage organizing the workflow based on sensitivity to local situations. Even though the strong focus on quality procedures, experience and sensitivity plays a significant role in the everyday life of the middle managers. Without losing sight of the rules and regulations the middle managers pay attention to challenging situations by being in touch with employees and fellow middle managers, without micromanaging activities. The findings of this study broaden the understanding of how middle managers act based on a bricolage practice (Do Vale et al., 2021) building up their leadership practice as they go along, using the relevant actions whatever they might be. This bricolage practice (Do Vale et al., 2021) can be referred to in many ways as "wisdom of experience ", " sensible know-how", or even "contextualized knowledge".

In other words, leadership appears when needed. It emerges in in dialogue among various participants leading to (new) organizing practices and pushes a common good in the unique context. Leadership occurs across and among various levels and groups in the organization. It calls for less focus on the individual leader and more focus on the organizing practice. Thus, all organizational actors are important in the leadership process.



The study develops the point made by Weick in his Mann Gulch case, that "wise people know that they don't fully understand what is happening right now" (Weick, 1993, p. 641) but they try to make sense of challenging situations by engaging in different interactions by practicing "curiosity, openness, and complex sensing" (Weick, 1993, p. 641)

Experience and sensitivity allow the middle managers to anticipate meaning before actions happen, and to be alert and initiative-taking, and thus to shape the unfolding of the daily workflow. Experience and sensitivity frame the understanding of what is about to happen in a way, which makes the leadership craft at hand relevant and able to put to play. The middle managers pose relevant questions to encourage discussions and they are capable of sensing points of contrary and dilemmas, which then can function as steppingstones for novel actions. The middle managers activities, grounded in experience and sensitivity, filter superfluous information by sensing relevant cues (Weick, 1995), and then they creatively select and put the cues to use when organizing the workflow.

The empirical situations show how workflow is social distributed rather than enacted by an individual middle manager, and how it relies on collective interactions and sensemaking. The middle managers develop a sense for what is about to happen without this being explicitly articulated. Being able to articulate what is about to happen might be crucial in relation to coordinating the workflow, because the sensing work could be considered as meaning structures / gestures embedded in the past (experience) while, acted in the present and pointing towards the future (Mead, 1932).

Most middle managers explain that they rely on experience and sensing of what is currently going on. Experience and sensitivity are not described nor included in the quality procedures, nevertheless it enables the middle managers to determine specific ways of acting in unique situations by being highly attentive to processes of interaction and about what has happened in the past. In this way the organizational structure, e.g., processes, rules, and regulations, are not stable but exist only as meaning structures when articulated by the organizational actors (Hernes, 2014, Chapter 6).

However, collaboration among the various departments is a challenge. The middle managers also acknowledge this, and in accordance a middle manager stated that: "Collaborating with people is not easy. There are lots of misunderstandings." He went on to say that to meet the challenges of collaboration, it is important to be present, be visible, and be easygoing. By immersing himself in the daily activities, he says, "you can quickly feel the atmosphere."

### **Conclusions and implications**

The case provides a study of how leadership is practiced at two fish factories in Greenland. The empirical data gains insight to how middle management activities are based on both enacting processes, rules and regulations, and experience and sensitivity. The process perspective establishes a relevant framework for studying how leadership emerges in the daily interplay among several organizational members. In this way, the paper also responds to the call for studies of leadership as mundane activities (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). The study emphasizes how leadership is a complicated interplay between many processes and organizational actors. The reminder of the article sums up how the answer to the research question how is leadership enacted by middle managers at Greenlandic fish factories?

One of the major surprises at the factories was the focus on involving people across departments to make better decisions. It shows how leadership is founded in reflective interactions and a sensible activity constructed by the middle manager, holding progressive and collaborative beliefs based on lived experiences and context-related sensitivity. In other words, it can be argued, that middle managers facilitate sense-making across-department relationship by matching relevant competencies through efforts that occurs behind the scenes. Some of these efforts results in applied knowledge which would not have been obtained otherwise.

Relevant and productive leadership at the fish factory is best described in terms of being aware and able to adjust to different situations and acknowledge the fact of being trapped between different dilemmas represented in the contradictions that resides among following processes, rules, and regulations – and the experience and sensitivity works. Leadership is about supporting the process of interaction where challenges emerge. Thus, making decisions and adding knowledge are essential in relationships between several organizational actors.

What can be understood about leadership in more general terms is that it is productive when implemented through action networks that consist of horizontal and vertical relationships. Leadership when emerging as collective activities is based on responsive processes that emerge through local interactions, and in this understanding “organizations become territories of interaction that are focused around complex spoken and unspoken languages” (Denzin, 1969, p. 932). And the territories in which leaders immerse themselves are frameworks for interactions where “meanings and artifacts are produced and reproduced in complex nets of collective actions” (Weick, 1995, p. 172).

Unlike a more traditional view on management and leadership, it is shown how leadership at the fish factory is a more situational process of defining the situation, sensing nuances in relationships, and acting to gather the right resources at the right time. This way of thinking and practicing leadership emphasize quality and productivity by being sensitive to human relations, work processes by focusing on development and interaction. When the leadership practice is co-constructed in this way, it seems important that organizational structures should support these inter-organizational activities.

In the attempt to contribute to the discussion of leadership as a dynamic process, inspiration is drawn from the process perspective (Hernes, 2014; Stacey, 2002; Weick, 1995). The process perspective on organizing and leadership, which Hernes, Stacey, Weick, and, to a certain extent Alvesson represent, is closely related to the way Mead (Mead, 1932, 1934) articulated how practices arise in relational gestures and responses where meaning is ascribed to situations and continuously renegotiated based on reflexive awareness.

Based on the empirical findings and the theoretical perspective, it is suggested that the practice of leadership invokes problematization as a collective achievement, theorized here as experience and sensitivity. Leadership based on experience and sensitivity contributes to a more complex understanding of the mundane everyday leadership practice that unfold among various organizational actors. And thus, leaders need to develop their relational skills, such as managing the relationship-building process, being aware of implicit schemas at play in the relationship, and the ability to accept feedback and adapt one's behaviors in response to feedback.

In summary, the bricolage practice enacted by middle managers at the fish factory can be understood as a processual enacted in an interplay between many organizational actors based on experience and sensitivity. In this approach, leaders remain sensitive to changes in interactions, creating the potential for new insight and direction. The processes where leadership emerges involves different perspectives that support appropriate problematization of the mundane activities as they unfold. Thus, the discussion of leadership should be concerned with how middle managers emerge themselves in daily sensitivity work. This contrasts with conventional leadership research, much of which is turning leadership into an “it” (Alvesson, 2019) assuming stable relations.

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