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Employee perceptions of managers' leadership over time

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore if and how employees in a healthcare organisation perceive changes in their managers' leadership behaviour over time.

Design/methodology/approach – An interview study was conducted with employees whose managers had participated in a two-year leadership development programme offered by their employer, Healthcare Provision Stockholm County. Qualitative content analysis was applied, and the interview discussions focused on areas in which the majority of the informants perceived that a change had occurred over time and their answers were relatively consistent.

Findings – The majority of employees did discern changes in their managers' leadership over time, and, with very few exceptions, these changes were described as improvements.

Practical implications – The knowledge that employees perceived changes in their managers' leadership supports investments in leadership development through courses, programmes or other initiatives.

Originality/value – The present findings contribute to a deeper empirical understanding of leadership as it is practised over time in everyday contexts among employees in healthcare organisations.

Keywords Health care, Change, Leadership, Managers, Employees, Leadership development programme

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

The present study was performed within the context of a two-year leadership development programme for first-line managers in healthcare in Stockholm, Sweden. The programme consisted of theoretical seminars once monthly during one year and monthly half-day structured problem-solving seminars in small groups of 7-9 members during one year. (Lornudd *et al.*, 2014; Sandahl *et al.*, 2012). The so-called backstage groups focused on real everyday dilemmas introduced by the participating managers. The programme was based on the tradition of Balint groups (Kjeldmand, 2006) developed to suit the needs of managers. It has provided promising results in two studies of dialogue groups for physicians (Bergman *et al.*, 2007, 2009b), as well in an analysis of support groups for managers (Bergman *et al.*, 2009a; Björklund 2009; Sandahl *et al.*, 2003).

This programme was previously evaluated in a randomised waiting-list crossover design study, where the main objective was to study indirect effects of management development on employees' psychosocial work conditions and their perceptions of leadership (Lornudd *et al.*, 2014). A quantitative approach was applied and well-established questionnaires were used. Some statistically meaningful results were obtained (Lornudd *et al.*, 2014, Bergman *et al.*, 2014), but the research team concluded that a qualitative study was needed to more deeply capture the complexity of the leadership phenomenon studied. This is in line with the study of Dinh *et al.* (2014), who pointed out that measures such as questionnaires overlook the dynamic processes and the uncertainty and variability that characterise managerial work and organisational phenomenon. They further stressed that recent studies show that contexts, temporal dynamics within individuals, teams and social systems vary over time. If such aspects are not taken into account, it may lead to a false sense of certainty about how leaders affect the performance of their organisation and its members and misjudge the effects of leadership.

Leadership and time

Shamir (2011) has indicated that it is especially important to consider time when leadership is regarded as being co-produced in the relationship between the leader and the follower. He concluded:

It is only by following and describing leadership relationships as they evolve over time that we may be able to start to develop some understanding of the role of time in leadership processes and eventually develop "process theories" of leadership (Shamir, 2011, p. 314).

Several leadership models are related to time, either implicitly or explicitly and in different ways, e.g. the leader – member exchange theory, in which leadership is described as a reciprocal influence relationship between the leader and the follower that evolves over time (Gerstner and Day, 1997; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014).

Employees' perceptions of their managers' leadership depend on, among other things, their own prejudices, assumptions and expectations. These perceptions may be linked to the employees' earlier experiences in family, school and working life, which may influence their reactions (Northouse, 2004). Projections and transference are other processes that can have an impact, for instance, by affecting members of an organisation when they spend time with their leader so that they create leader prototypes that will

also influence how they view their next leader (Ritter and Lord, 2007). The leaders' ability to provide means by which followers can reduce their level of anxiety and also give them psychological safety is yet another aspect that may affect followers' assessment of the leadership (Shamir, 2007). In healthcare, it has been found that employees experience that the leadership of nurses and physicians in managerial roles can be improved over time (Wong *et al.*, 2010; Boyle and Kochinda, 2004).

What managers do and how they do it

In the work presented here, we used a theoretical model developed by Sandahl *et al.* (2010, 2003) to achieve a comprehensive operationalisation of first-line managers' leadership on the event level of analysis, i.e. "time-bounded episodes that happen in a specific place and time" (Dinh *et al.*, 2014, p. 43). The model is also used to clarify the nature of managerial leadership that is being embedded in the daily routines of managers and, in some cases, is difficult to observe. The choice of this approach was based on the argument that leadership is better understood as a subtle phenomenon that is ingrained in, rather than distinct from, everyday management (Larsson and Lundholm, 2010). The model stems from two traditions in leadership research:

- (1) The studies of what managers spend their time doing in daily work (Carlson, 1951; Mintzberg, 1973; Tengblad, 2012).
- (2) The theory of transformational leadership, especially as it has been adapted to and conceptualised to the Scandinavian context (Larsson, 2006).

The task of managing can be broadly categorised into four dimensions of *what* managers do Sandahl *et al.* (2010), (2003):

- (1) Handling challenges and problems in daily work related to the primary task of the organisation.
- (2) Dealing with development issues, transformation and change.
- (3) Coping with personnel issues.
- (4) Delegating tasks.

Similarly, the ideal transformational leadership can be described in three dimensions of *how* managers should perform their tasks (Larsson, 2006):

- (1) Be an efficient problem solver and a role model and an example in terms of basic corporate values.
- (2) Relate efficiently to members of the organisation, customers and stakeholders on a social level.
- (3) Motivate, inspire and involve employees in taking shared responsibility for work tasks.

Combining the two aspects of the manager's role described by Dinh *et al.* (2014) as the dyad and group levels of analysis (i.e. combining the "what is done" with the "how it is done") yields the lower event level of analysis, as exemplified in Table I.

We argue that there is a lack of research on leadership, as it is practised over time in everyday contexts in healthcare organisations. Hence, a more extensive empirical knowledge on this subject would have practical implications for the development of

Leader ("How?")	Be a role model	Show personal concern	Inspire
Manager ("What? ")	(Cognitive capacity and ethical judgement) ^a	(Social competence) ^a	(Motivation and drive) ^a
Managing daily work	Make decisions and solve daily problems Monitor surrounding world	Be a good representative Communicate clearly	Clarify goals Give structure and demand results
Managing change	Show moral courage Long-term thinking	Contain insecurity, build trust and be perceptive	Communicate purpose and meaning
Managing people	Set standards and give just rewards Organise for employee participation	Support, challenge and give feedback	Coach and give responsibility
Delegating	Monitor resources Create conditions enabling employees to take full responsibility	Be an efficient group member	Contribute expertise and visionary thinking

Table I.
Managerial
leadership matrix

Note: ^aPsychological dimension

healthcare organisations. The model presented here (Table I) is used as an analytical tool to gain a deeper understanding of the employee-manager relationship, as it unfolds over time and as it is perceived retrospectively from the employee perspective. The aim of this study was to explore if and how employees in a healthcare organisation perceive changes in their manager's leadership over time.

Methods

Study setting

An interview study was conducted with employees of Healthcare Provision Stockholm County (SLSO), which includes nine healthcare organisations that serve a population of 1.6 million people in Stockholm, Sweden. All the employees selected for the study had managers who had participated in a two-year leadership development programme offered by SLSO to all 589 of its managers.

The development programme consisted of one year of backstage groups and one year of seminars. In the backstage groups, ten managers and one group leader met once a month in three-hour sessions on a total of ten occasions. In these sessions, the managers discussed problems occurring in their daily work, and it was the responsibility of the group leader to observe, set the structure of and encourage the discussions. Each session started with identification of a dilemma to work on. This was followed by a so-called "reflective team" when the group discussed how they understood the problem. The group then formulated possible hypotheses on how the problem might be understood. Some hypotheses were falsified and some confirmed. The group suggested some actions to solve the problem and the "problem-owner" finally chose one solution or discovered another alternative during the process. The session ended with a reflection on learnings from the session continued with meta-learning on the process of learning. Professional group leaders were responsible for the backstage groups; the researchers were not involved in the programme.

As for the seminars, each one started with a 45-minute lecture covering various aspects of the leadership role. The themes of each seminar were as follows:

- to be a manager, an emotional challenge;
- feelings in working life;
- the meaning of work;
- group dynamics;
- leadership;
- feelings and ethics;
- to be professional in the role of manager; and
- to develop sense and sensitivity in the role of manager.

The lecture was followed by a 20- to 30-min small group discussion, and the seminar ended with conclusions and action points in the whole seminar group.

Selection of managers whose subordinates were interviewed

A total of 204 managers participated in the leadership programme starting in either 2010 or 2011. Managers were selected for inclusion in the present study by randomisation based on alphabetical order of their last names. Altogether, we contacted 38 managers; 5 declined to participate, 10 never returned our request and some had quit their job or were on sick leave. Eventually nine managers agreed to participate.

Characteristics of the managers and their workplaces

All nine managers had first-line positions in a structured organisation with multiple levels of management and in which major policy decisions were made at the top level. All nine were women, and all but one were nurses by profession. At the time of the interview, they had worked as managers in their units for an average of five years (range 3-13 years), and they had attended the leadership programme for two years during that period. The majority had been employees in the same group they now were managers of. The following types of workplaces were represented in the study: primary care (3), psychiatric care (3), dependence disorder care (1), rehabilitation and functional assistance (1) and a research department (1). The units varied greatly in size, and the average number of employees was 22 (range 4-65).

Data gathering procedures

Our research group contacted the managers by e-mail and/or telephone to ask permission to interview 3-5 of their subordinates as part of an evaluation of the leadership programme the managers had recently completed. If they agreed to our request, we asked to attend a staff meeting so that we could describe our study to the employees and invite them to take part in individual interviews. We stressed that participation was voluntary and that no personal or department names would be revealed. All employees were welcome to participate regardless of gender, profession or years of experience, and the only selection criterion was that they had worked at the same unit for a minimum of two years so that they could reflect on changes in their managers' leadership over time (even before start of the leadership programme).

We visited six of the nine workplaces to attend staff meetings at which we scheduled our return to hold interviews a few weeks later. At three of the workplaces, it was

difficult to arrange our attendance at a staff meeting; hence, the managers gave us permission to contact the employees via e-mail to schedule the interviews.

From June 2012 to May 2013, we interviewed 27 employees. The interviewees were guaranteed that their answers would be stored, handled and analysed with confidentiality by the research group and that the results would be presented in a manner that ensured anonymity. On average, three (range one to five) employees per manager were interviewed. One of the authors (SU) conducted all the interviews, each of which lasted approximately one hour. The interviewees were asked to give their permission to digitally record the interviews and all but one agreed, and two additional interviews were not recorded for other reasons. Thus, the researcher took handwritten notes in a total of three interviews. The recordings of the remaining 24 interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Characteristics of the interviewees

Of the 27 employees who were interviewed, 22 were women and five were men. They had been employed at their respective workplaces for an average of ten years (range 2-19 years) at the time of the interview, and they had the following occupations: nurse, assistant nurse, psychologist, administrator, physician, physical therapist, occupational therapist, researcher, social worker and dietician.

The interview guide

To capture leadership and leadership development over time, we chose to focus the interviews on the manager's role and behaviour in areas in which crucial aspects of leadership would likely be manifested. As a theoretical framework for designing the interview guide, we used the leadership matrix developed by Sandahl *et al.* (2003, 2010). Through discussions, we arrived at questions concerning 15 main areas: decision-making, problem-solving, supervising work meetings, outward representation, clarity, goal-related work, organisation/structure, demands/expectations, recognising and rewarding, participation, support, handling conflicts, handling criticism, responsibility and providing motivation/inspiration. For each area, we asked interviewees about the current situation and then requested that they think back two years and consider whether there had been any changes in their manager's leadership over the two-year period. The interview guide was semi-structured (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), including 20 set questions and follow-up questions that delved further into the given topics.

Data analysis

We used qualitative content analysis (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004) to analyse the transcribed interviews. To begin with, one of the authors (SU) read all the transcripts and marked all passages that concerned the employees' perceptions of their managers at present and over time. These passages were then coded to capture the interviewees' ideas and thematic concepts of the research. Authors KP and DB read five of the interview transcripts, and through discussions, all authors discussed the coded passages into relevant categories. The material was initially divided into 28 categories, which then were merged into 18 categories. To determine if and how employees perceived changes in their managers' leadership behaviour, we chose five of the 18 categories in which the majority of the interviewees had perceived a change over time and were relatively consistent in their responses. These five categories were as follows:

confidence in the leadership role, decision-making, handling conflicts, being supportive and supervising work meetings. Changes in leadership were also noted for the remaining 13 categories, but those differences were smaller, more scattered or less consistent among the interviewees and, hence, will not be considered in detail in this paper. These 13 categories covered the following: general well-being, context, involvement, taking responsibility, being outwardly representative, effects on employees, demands and expectations, providing motivation/inspiration, goal-related work, daily problem-solving, structure/organisation, clarity, recognising and rewarding. We used the QSR Nvivo software for data coding and categorisation.

Direct quotes from the interviewees are presented in the section headed *Findings* to illustrate the perceptions of these individuals and to render the categories more vivid and understandable. The quotes came from both male and female employees with different professions and workplaces, and they concern all nine of the included in the study. The managers were assigned a letter from A to I and the interviewees a number from 1 to 27, so that each quotation could be designated to indicate the manager and respondent in question.

Findings

The majority of the interviewed employees perceived changes in their managers' leadership over time, and, with very few exceptions, these changes were described as improvements. Some managers were regarded as having changed more than others. Employees with the same manager were fairly consistent in how they perceived the leadership, and the general picture of each manager was easily recognizable in most cases.

Five major categories were created based on the interviews: showing confidence in the leadership role, decision-making, handling conflicts, being supportive and supervising work meetings.

Showing confidence in the leadership role

A prominent theme throughout the interviews was the employees' perception that their managers had become more confident in their leadership role over time, and, thus, this aspect was identified as a main category. The informants often referred characteristics or behaviours that had become either more or less evident over time:

- *More*: Secure, self-confident, experienced, decisive, knowledgeable, stable, mature, independent, available, trusts in herself and others, calm, relaxed, open for dialogue, fun, daring, attentive and professional.
- *Less*: Worried, emotional, controlling, apologetic, vulnerable, distressed and fragile.

These characteristics or behaviours were often related to specific situations, such as the ability to accept and contain criticism directed towards oneself. The majority of the interviewees noted an improvement in this area, with statements often indicating that the managers seemed less vulnerable, less easily offended or defensive and somewhat more self-confident, mature and stable in the leadership role. Others described their managers as being better listeners and more able to adequately reflect on criticism. Many managers were also described as previously having been particularly vulnerable to criticism:

I think she gets offended less often now. I think she can listen and accept criticism [...] and it has a lot to do with this overall sense of confidence in the leadership role (C:7).

The interviewees also referred to a general feeling of increased confidence that was noticeable in how the manager was perceived by others:

What I perceive as the primary change is precisely this personal way she has of being exactly who she is. She is more [...] I see her as being a more confident person today compared to how she was from the beginning [...] It also takes a while before you grow into the role (E:12).

The subcategories outlined below represent areas in which, considered in relation to change, confidence in the leadership role seemed to be manifested most clearly, and the interviewed employees were also most consistent in their answers. The presentation of the results follow the structure of the interview guide, starting with the informants' perceptions of the current situation followed by their views on development/change over time.

Decision-making

The majority of the interviewees described their managers' current decision-making capacity as good or fairly good, although some thought there was room for improvement. The criticism expressed most often indicated that a manager was "too democratic", was afraid of making decisions (especially difficult ones) and did not – or assumed she did not – have the authority to make decisions. Nonetheless, all managers were described as having improved their decision-making capacity over time, except one who was already perceived as highly competent in this respect. The nature of this improvement seemed to depend on how the employees experienced their managers from the beginning. The interviewees related that, for some of the managers, the challenge had been to be more clear and decisive and to stand by their decisions and not be afraid to make them:

I get the feeling that she is more confident in making decisions and that she stands by them more than she used to (C:7).

For others, it was more a matter of slowing down the decision-making process and, when appropriate, allowing the employees to be more active in making decisions. Some of the interviewees interpreted this as the managers showing increased trust in both themselves and their subordinates:

She used to be faster and more, what can I say, a little more impulsive. Nowadays, I think she takes it easier [...] takes more and more time for reflection (G:18).

In both cases, the employees associated the change and improvement with the managers having increased confidence in their leadership role.

Handling conflicts

In the interviews, handling conflicts emerged as being a particularly challenging and complex task for the managers, and, at the same time, important for the employees.

Several informants perceived their managers as either having been or still being uncomfortable in conflict situations:

She genuinely wants everybody to be happy, and that's impossible. (B:6)

However, conflict management skills were usually described as depending largely on the situation and the issues at hand, e.g. issues related to the actual work and tasks seemed to be easier to handle compared to interpersonal issues and problems related to a specific employee. While some managers were described as having tried to avoid conflicts altogether, others were seen as having intervened too quickly and emotionally, which often created more rather than less anxiety in the work group. A few of the managers were regarded as having good conflict management skills both at present and earlier:

She's not afraid to step in when necessary, so to speak [...] she's very straightforward and clear (F:15).

Many of the interviewed employees felt that their managers' skills in handling conflicts had improved over time:

Experience has made her wise, so she has become better at handling these problems (G:17).

Statements were frequently referred to the perception of increased self-confidence of the managers, which was manifested in different ways. Such improvement could be described as a manager acting faster and more decisively so that a conflict did not expand, or, conversely, that a manager acted less impulsively and waited for the right moment to step in.

Being supportive

The majority of the interviewees described their managers as generally caring, empathetic and available for the employees. These qualities are illustrated by frequent comments such as "the door (to her office) is always open (to the employees)". Moreover, many referred to such supportive actions as being personal characteristics rather than management skills: "that's how she is" or "she's always been like that".

Most of the managers were perceived as having been supportive from the beginning. However, several informants also described a positive development over time in terms of their managers' openness, availability and communication, which were viewed as important parts of supportive leadership:

Well, she has always been available somehow, but then I haven't dared [...] or wanted to go to her as often as I want to now. I feel more confident with her now (H:23).

Several informants interpreted these changes in terms of their managers' increased confidence in the leadership role. Some emphasised the time dimension, indicating that managers and employees had to get to know each other to facilitate communication. They also mentioned that having more extensive personal knowledge of individual employees made it easier for a manager to be supportive in a way that suited the employees themselves:

She has probably listened to me more carefully, but that might also be because she knows me and I know her (G:20).

Supervising work meetings

Being in charge of work meetings emerged as another area in which the managers' leadership – and any changes in that role – became apparent to the employees. Most managers were described as being more confident and comfortable in the meeting

situation at the time the interviews were held compared to the way they were in the past, as illustrated by the following examples:

- *The manager was more structured and clear:* “She supervises the meetings without any problems, and then she is more structured when she does it” (A:2).
- *The manager was more open for dialogue:* “She has allowed time for discussions and feedback in an entirely different way” (G:21).
- *The manager used more humour:* “She has learnt to use a little more humour lately compared to in the beginning. She was more serious then [...], if you're insecure you might be more reserved, and if you feel more confident you can open up to others” (E:12).
- *The manager took the lead when needed:* “Now it's more like she's getting hold of the baton” (I:25).

The interviewees interpreted the changes in similar ways. Some described their managers as having increased knowledge of their organisation and their responsibilities and employees, which affected the way that they approached, and appeared at, staff meetings. Other interviewees referred to their managers as having increased experience in more general terms. Again, the common theme was the sense of greater confidence in the leadership role, such as in the areas described above.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore if and how employees in a healthcare organisation perceive changes in their manager's leadership over time. We performed the research within the context of a two-year leadership development programme for first-line managers.

Our results show that the majority of the interviewed employees had perceived changes in their managers' leadership, and, with very few exceptions, these were described as improvements. Some managers were regarded as having changed more than others, and employees with the same manager were fairly consistent in how they perceived the leadership. It also appears that positive changes in the leadership role were often associated with increased flexibility. The main finding is that the employees had perceptions of the managers showing increased confidence in the leadership role and seeming to be more able to switch between different appropriate behaviours and strategies depending on the situation at hand. This suggests that the managers had adopted a flexible leadership approach (Dinh and Lord, 2012). For the individual managers, the development seemed to depend on the strengths and weaknesses they had had to begin with. A change in behaviour was often connected with greater flexibility in relation to the opposite behaviour, as exemplified by the following:

- Daring to lead vs allowing employees to participate.
- Maintaining structure vs being responsive to the situation.
- Intervening vs taking a step back.

These conclusions agree with a report by Shamir (2011) implying that leader behaviours are likely to change over time, but that this may unfold gradually. New or inexperienced leaders may increase their transformational behaviour (Avolio and Bass, 1995; Larsson, 2006) when they become more experienced or more established, but also that

experienced leaders may change their behaviour, for example, as they develop trust in their followers (Shamir, 2011).

When analysing how leadership evolves over time, one of the most influential factors to consider is the time dimension itself. The nine managers included in our study had held their managerial positions for 3-13 years (mean five years) but were, nonetheless, regarded as relatively new by the employees, because most of the employees had worked in the respective departments longer than the managers themselves. This alone might explain some of the perceptions the employees had regarding changes in the managers' behaviour. Another significant aspect related to time is that the employees might have been referring to when the manager was new and not solely considering the previous two years as we requested. Many of the employees we interviewed were rather sceptical towards the managers when those superiors were new in their positions. Hence, the employees' perceptions of improvements in the managers might have been related to the leadership development programme that these managers had participated in, especially for those managers who were relatively new in their position. In the programme, the managers were able to discuss daily issues related to their role as managers and the seminars covered theories on core aspects of leadership. It seems likely that this together with time passing effected their managers' leadership. In a quantitative study of the same intervention, it was found that the managers themselves reported an improvement in assessments of leadership over time. However, such a change was not noticed by the employees when a 360-degree instrument was used (Lornudd *et al.*, 2014). Although the time dimension is important for improving leadership, the length of time in a supervising position cannot be directly correlated with the performance of the leader (Day *et al.*, 2014).

Many of the interviewees described that when the managers and employees got to know each other better over time, it led to a stronger sense of security (Shamir, 2011). This was expressed in relation to both the managers' leadership role and the relationship between the managers and their work groups with respect to aspects such as openness, expectations, decision-making and the need for control. Furthermore, some of the employees had different expectations regarding what a manager should or should not do and what kind of management they preferred or needed. The managers, in turn, may act in slightly dissimilar ways towards different employees depending on factors such as the tasks, experiences and personality of those individuals, as suggested in flexible leadership theories (Dinh and Lord, 2012). From this perspective, leadership becomes a matter of a reciprocal process between the manager and the employee (Shamir, 2011). The manager and the follower(s) are affected by, for example, each other's behaviours and feelings over time, which can result in either improvement or deterioration of the relationship (Gerstner and Day, 1997). This also means that certain leadership actions and interventions may lead to desirable outcomes during one phase of the relationship but not during another (Shamir, 2011). This implies that leadership development is a process that occurs over time and in which the identities of followers and leaders are linked, mutually reinforcing and shifting within different contexts (Collinson, 2005). Thus, leadership will depend not only on the characteristics and behaviour of the manager, but will also be extensively determined by how the manager's and employees' mutual knowledge and understanding of each other can evolve over time. In addition, according to Bluedorn and Jaussi (2008), the length of the relationship between the leader and the follower may have qualitative effects on the outcome of the association.

Changes over time were most prominent in the areas that were most practical in nature, or entailed most employee participation, although smaller improvements were reported in other areas as well. The changes observed are clearly connected with the four dimensions of *what* managers do (Larsson, 2006, Sandahl *et al.*, 2010, 2003). Interestingly, the majority of the interviewees in our study did not see any changes in how their managers motivated subordinates, which is one of the three important dimensions of the transformational leadership theory (Larsson, 2006). The employees' descriptions of their managers' leadership agreed with the first two dimensions of transformational leadership, "How to be a role model" and "How to show personal concern", whereas very few descriptions corresponded to the third dimension, "How to inspire" (Table I). These findings are quite surprising given that transformational leadership theory is one of the dominating theories today. By using a theoretical model that combines two traditions in leadership research (Carlson, 1951; Larsson, 2006; Mintzberg, 1973; Tengblad, 2012), we were able to shed light on how employees perceive changes in their managers' leadership over time.

Finally, although not investigated in any detail in our study, several descriptions given in the interviews indicated how the managers' way of leading and behaviour – and specifically any changes in those aspects – affected both the employees and their work environment. The described changes in leadership were perceived as having a positive influence in terms of, for example, improvement in the work atmosphere and communication, less stress and frustration and fewer conflicts, and, perhaps, most notably, by making it more fun and inspiring to work. Only a few of the participating employees felt that their managers had little impact on the psychosocial work environment. However, in general, it seems that what managers do or not do affects the way that their subordinates perceive their psychosocial work environment, which agrees with previous research results (Nyberg, 2009, Johansson *et al.*, 2011).

Conclusions

From our results, it was evident that the interviewed employees perceived changes in how the leadership was performed daily in the workplace over time. They especially experienced their managers as being more confident in the leadership role and more able to switch between different appropriate behaviours and strategies depending on the situation at hand.

We cannot conclude whether the perceived changes are due to time passing by or/and the leadership development programme – or other aspects of influence, but it is likely that both time and the development program had effects on the leadership. Despite this uncertainty, the fact that employees perceive and are able to report changes in leadership over time is an important contribution to the leadership field of research. Future research – both intervention studies and studies that generate theories and models – should consider these development aspects. We specifically suggest that the leadership models developed by Sandahl *et al.* (2003, 2010) and Larsson (2006) used in this study should be further developed to include a developmental perspective.

Only few employee descriptions of leadership corresponded to the third dimension, "How to inspire" of the transformational leadership model (Larsson, 2006). We therefore encourage further research to elucidate employees' perceptions regarding if, how and when they are inspired by their leaders, and how those aspects are related to the employee-manager relationship and to time.

Finally, as leadership is important in organisations and is likely to change with time and with developmental interventions, organisations should continue striving to develop manager's leadership and to continuously evaluate leadership to improve.

Limitations

When interpreting the current results, it is necessary to realize that the employees' perceptions of development/changes in leadership do not provide a comprehensive picture of either the starting point or the current situation for specific managers, nor do they demonstrate that they are satisfied with the leadership that is provided. However, most of the employees we interviewed seemed to believe that the improvements had had a positive effect on their workplaces and that the leadership was "heading in the right direction". Also, there is the issue of self-selection bias considering that the informants participated voluntarily. However, the informants were randomly selected, and they differed with regard to profession, gender, number of years in the same workplace and the nature of their work tasks. Nevertheless, general themes and patterns were identified. We also asked the informants to compare the leadership before and after the managers attended a two-year leadership programme, which can entail risk of recall bias, and it might have been difficult to distinguish between exactly two years back in time from earlier. Thus, even though the employees described a clear change over time, in some cases, this may have occurred over a period of more or less than two years. Another potential limitation is a selection bias of the managers, who voluntarily participated in the leadership programme. The managers who chose not to participate had a slightly higher mean age and a lower percentage of women than those participating in the programme. We cannot rule out the possibility that the participating managers in some sense differed from those that chose not to participate.

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