Making Sense of Leadership in Norway: The View from Management Consultants

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Abstract *The current article addresses how management consultants come to believe that some leaders will do well in the future. The findings from a study of Norwegian management consultants show that the way these professionals arrive at their beliefs depends on their seeing, liking, and trusting. The article suggests that what management consultants come to believe is important, because their beliefs and understanding may affect how leaders define their roles and identities, how we come to trust leaders, and how we legitimize leadership. Thus, management consultants are important sensemakers in the discussion about leadership. However, their sensemaking was path dependent, and they did not critically inquire into their own beliefs, thinking, and understanding.*

Keywords *change; leadership; learning; management consultants; sensemaking*

Introduction

Much of the discussion about leadership is evaluative – where judgments are based on leaders' reputation for having done well plus expectations that some leaders will succeed or contribute constructively to organizational performance in the future (March & Weil, 2005). The discussion reflects subjective judgments made by many groups of observers and evaluation setters, and this article focuses on one important group, namely, management consultants. From this point of departure, the article addresses the question: how do management consultants come to believe that individuals who occupy leadership roles will do well, and how might this sensemaking affect leadership?

In the discussion about leadership, understanding how management consultants come to believe what they believe is important because it may involve improving our understanding of leadership as it is and might be. First, a leader's definition of their own leadership role can be seen as a self-definition developed through the definitions of others (Rao, 1994), and a leader's identity (sense of self) can be seen as a relational self (Aron & Aron, 2000; Ashforth & Sluss, 2006; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Thus, a role definition and a sense of self might be outcomes of feedback processes in which management consultants, as professional experts (sensemakers and sensegivers) communicate what they see, like, and trust. Second,

management consultants may have an impact on how organizations maintain illusions of efficacy in their leaders. A belief in a leader's effectiveness may arise from a feeling that the leader is capable of getting things moving, and from a feeling that the leaders make a difference (March & Weil, 2005). However, in a world in which effectiveness can be problematic, expectations and consequences might be seen as social constructs that are outcomes of what management consultants, as professional experts (sensemakers and sensegivers), see and like (Weick, 1995). Third, leadership depends on trust (Davis et al., 2000), and trust can be achieved by developing confidence in the leader's competence and capability – based on their reputation of having done well and on expectations about doing well in the future (Adler, 2001; Gambetta, 1988; Kramer & Tyler, 1996; Weick, 1995). Therefore, understanding how management consultants as professional experts (sensemakers and sensegivers) come to trust leaders is important for understanding how trust in leadership is formed.

I take a position in this article that management consultants' beliefs, regarding expectations that some leaders will contribute constructively to organizational performance in the future, are built on a *foundation of knowledge* and girded by a *view of leadership*. From this position, the article first discusses: (a) what management consultants' views of leadership might be, and (b) how management consultants might develop a knowledge base on the basis of which expectations and meanings about why some leaders will succeed in the future are constructed. Based on findings from the current study, the article then examines how a selected group of management consultants (within the Norwegian cultural context) approached the assessment of leaders. In the concluding discussion, the article elaborates and proposes some ideas about how management consultants' beliefs may have effects on leaders' definitions of own roles and identities and the development of trust in leaders. The article represents an introduction, a sketch of ideas that might be relevant to understanding how management consultants' sensemaking impacts leadership.

What might be management consultants' view of leadership?

The literature about organization and leadership is filled with many models emphasizing different perspectives and leadership frameworks. From this diversity, the article selects three broad views of leadership (March & Weil, 2005). The first suggests that leadership has an instrumental role, the second claims that leadership is organized around a leader's involvement in the identity s(he) has decided to enact, and the last view suggests that leadership has a symbolic role. Related to these views, this article focuses on two fundamental aspects: (1) what is the motivation for leadership action in organizations? (2) What is the conception of the relationship between leadership action and organizational outcomes?

The dominant view understands and justifies leadership in instrumental terms. Leadership is the 'visible hand' that affects organizational outcomes, or leadership contributes significantly to superior organizational performance. Such an instrumental role is implicit in most of the common technologies of organizing (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Clegg & Hardy, 1996; Galbraith, 1973; March & Simon, 1958; Mintzberg, 1979; Scott & Davis, 2007; Thompson, 1967; Williamson, 1990), and it is echoed in most of the central themes in discussions of leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Fayol, 1949; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Hambrick & Mason, 1984;

Kotter, 1996; Mintzberg, 1973, 1979; Schein, 1992; Selznick, 1957; Stewart, 1982; Yukl, 2002).

The instrumental perspective sees leadership as a key part of the ways in which organizations are coordinated and controlled to optimize performance. Leadership action is seen as intentional, driven by an evaluation of future consequences for the objectives of the organization (March, 1994) or for the objectives of the individual leader (Ferraro et al., 2005). Leaders act intentionally rational; they choose from among alternatives by calculating and comparing their expected returns. From this view, leaders are assumed to act and discipline themselves through incentives and expectations of positive consequences; action is motivated by hopes of favourable consequences and costs are paid because benefits are anticipated. Embracing this conception, this article assumes that management consultants focus on organizational outcomes and evaluate leaders in terms of whether their actions contribute significantly to organizational performance.

Despite the primary position of the rational, instrumental framework in leadership theory, its ideological and intellectual dominance has been open to challenge by alternative views. Challengers often share the ideological 'project' of discovering a new source of authority and control within the processes and structures of modern organizations, but look at different bases and motivations for leadership action. One central challenger understands leadership as fulfilment of an identity (March, 1994). Leaders act in accordance with their identities and such commitment creates willingness to act without regard for the consequences – even in the face of disappointment. That is, leaders act and discipline themselves through a sense of who they are – related to what is essential in a leadership role or related to the definition of a proper leader (Albert, 1998). From this standpoint, the identity and the obligations associated with it are seen as a basis and motivation for action that has an impact on the aims pursued by both individual leaders and the organization (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002).

The idea about leadership as fulfilment of an identity claims that leaders are committed to, and act in accordance with, duties and obligations. On the one hand, duties and obligations may reside in institutional claims, which are available to the leaders about central, enduring and distinctive organizational values and norms (Selznick, 1957; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Such commitment provides a sense of self, or provides a coherent guide as to how the leaders should behave. On the other hand, duties and obligations may reside in learning-based, collectively shared beliefs and understandings about what the organization is and should be (Fiol, 1991; Gioia et al., 2000; Weick, 1995).

Leadership, as fulfilment of an identity, suggests that leadership is organized around the leaders' involvement in the identities they have decided to enact. This commitment is not unconditional, however. It is based on the expectations that the leadership will affect the organization in positive ways. Within such a conception, this article assumes that management consultants focus on leaders' commitment to rules associated with identities and evaluate leaders in terms of whether they follow the rules or whether rules of appropriateness are translated into actions that impact organizational outcomes.

The instrumental perspective claims that leaders should be evaluated in terms of their contribution to organizational performance. However, organizational outcomes

as the evaluative bases of leadership action might be problematic. Organizational objectives are often ambiguous, inconsistent, and changing; outcomes depend on the actions of many agents, and leaders' power and ability to achieve organizational goals might be ambiguous and uncertain (Cyert & March, 1963; Liberson & O'Connor, 1972; Meindl, 1995; Meindl et al., 1985). Thus, the relationship between leadership and organizational outcomes is complex, and it is often very difficult to determine whether an organization's performance is driven by the excellence of its leadership or by general economic and organizational conditions that bear little relation to managerial competence and discretion (Bok, 1993; Hrebiniak & Joyce, 1985). Consequently, leaders (and those dependent on them) may become sensitive to the symbols of the leadership position in order to create meanings and feelings (associated with the romance of leadership) that reassure us of the significance of leaders (Alvesson, 1990; Bolman & Deal, 1997; Feldman & March, 1981; Morgan, 1997; Pfeffer, 1981; Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Trice & Beyer, 1984; Vaughn, 1995).

On the one hand, leaders might intentionally be engaged in organizing the symbolic importance of leadership in order to capture attention, to frame experience by providing plausible interpretations of experiences, to show that they can make a difference, to foster beliefs in their own importance, and to exaggerate their control over their success (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Feldman & March, 1981; Morgan, 1997; Pfeffer, 1981). Thus, leaders are sensemakers and sensegivers who create meaning and feeling about the importance of leadership regarding decision making, control, and outcomes. On the other hand, observable leadership activities and practices can be outcomes of the pleasures or satisfaction leaders gain from acting as leaders, rather than outcomes of procedures and dramas associated with leaders as sensemakers and sensegivers (Bakke, 2005). The satisfaction might be associated with the joy of commitment, the excitement of making decisions, giving orders, and having influence, the exhilaration of risk, danger, and conflict, the joy of calling meetings, managing crises, using power, and solving conflicts (March & Weil, 2005). These satisfactions are, to a substantial extent, independent of outcomes. Thus, leaders might be enthusiastic players who are driven less by calculation than by the simple joy of leading. Leaders are the kind of people who enjoy making decisions, having influence, instituting action, and so on. In this way, leaders develop positive reasons for acting and organizing, or they develop a tight relationship between individual well-being and leadership behaviour.

Leaders as sensemakers and sensegivers are associated with an instrumental motivation for action, but leaders as enthusiastic players are associated with joy and pleasure as a basis and motivation for leadership action. In order to contrast three broad views of motivation, this article focuses on the pleasures of the leadership process and assumes that management consultants evaluate leaders in term of whether they act as enthusiastic players.

Summing up, the literature views generate three approaches to the assessment of leaders:

- the consequences of their action;
- their identity;
- their integral enjoyment of leading.

The first approach assumes that leadership action is driven by expectations of great consequences. Leaders use their discretionary power to further their own or the organization's interests. The second approach assumes that leaders act because this action fulfils identities. Leaders are committed to obligations and responsibilities and use their discretional power accordingly. The third approach suggests that leaders are driven by the pleasures that they gain from their actions. The first two views suggest that leadership action has an impact on organizational outcomes, but the last view does not explicitly emphasize the relationship between action and outcomes.

How might management consultants develop a foundation of knowledge?

Expectations about who will do well are typically not self-evident. The future is open-ended and often quite obscure, and estimating outcomes is confounded by inadequacies of information and biases introduced by desires and the limitation of experience (Weick, 1969), that is, expectations have to be understood – related to processes in which outcomes are often associated with uncertainty. There is also uncertainty about who is, or might be, responsible for outcomes. As a result, expectations about doing well reflect subjective judgments made by many agents in situations where not everything is known, where what is desired might be ambiguous, and where causal structures might be uncertain.

This article takes as its position that the development of a foundation of knowledge on which management consultants may form their expectations about leaders depends on learning from experience (Huber, 1991; Levitt & March, 1988), which again depends on *seeing*, *liking*, and *trusting* (March & Olsen, 1988). Seeing includes observations of how leaders act, react, and how leaders' acting affects outcomes. That is, learning refers to observed improvement in outcomes (*outcome experience*), or refers to observed improvement of acting and interacting that may drive outcomes (*process experience*). Liking includes affective sentiments, values, and tastes related to practices and associated with leadership fashions and trends (Abrahamson, 1996; Alvesson, 1990; Barley & Kunda, 1992; Ferraro et al., 2005). Trust is commonly portrayed as a belief in the reliability, truth and ability of another person to do what (s)he is expected to do – based on observations and experience related to rules, norms, action, and speech (Kramer & Tyler, 1996; Luhmann, 1979; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). To engage trustingly is often more than just belief and experienced-based knowledge; it is emotionally located and morally loaded (Fineman, 2003), and the bonds of trust might be united by feelings of liking, confidence, and commitment. Thus, the foundation of trust is constructed on a cognitive base (good rational reasons) and a complementary emotional base (liking). The issue of trust arises when decisions need to be made in situations involving uncertainty, an unavoidable element of risk, and potential doubt regarding outcomes and causal structures (Gambetta, 1988; Kramer & Tyler, 1996).

Methods

The research setting

The research was based on a study of how *internal management consultants* in six Norwegian firms, which had from 1000 to 20,000 employees, came to believe that some leaders would do well in the future (Espedal, 1990, 1997).

Data collection

The data collection was as follows: First, I selected six firms based on the following criteria: (a) all of them had a formal human resource management (HRM) policy, which clearly stated that leadership behaviours should be governed by norms of both *rationality* and *progress*. The norms of managerial rationality were social expectations that leaders should use management techniques and practices that were the most efficient means to important ends. The norms of managerial progress were social expectations that, over time, leaders should use new and improved techniques and practices; (b) these norms constituted training and development programmes in which the firms used professional, internal management consultants. Second, within the six organizations I selected 18 management consultants (three consultants from each organization) who had the ability to form and to use judgments about leadership and leaders informed by experience, information, and analyses. The criteria for the selection of these key informants were: (1) each of them had a central role in the organization with responsibility for training and development of leaders; (2) each of them worked as management consultants in the organization's various training and development programs; (3) all of them were highly skilled professional experts (all of them had Master's degrees and lengthy experience); (4) all of them were participants in discussions about leadership in the media; and(5) all of them were members of an information and contact network that shared experiences and spread the benefits of leadership practices across organizations. Thus, the sources of empirical evidence I relied upon to analyse the research question are from semi-structured (tape-recorded: 2–3 hours) interviews conducted with a selected group of central agents in discussions about leadership. In the interviews with these agents, the focus was on the following issues:

1. *The management consultants' views of leadership*: their conceptions of: (a) the basis for leaders' motivation and action in organizations; and (b) the relationship between leadership action and organizational outcome. The study was based on the assumption that management consultants' thinking about leadership development would echo a view of leadership. Thus, the interviews started with focusing on the consultants' conceptions of socially approved vocabularies that legitimized the organization's leadership development practice and its consequences when one or both were called into question. The consultants were asked to describe: (a) leadership development practices; and (b) their view of leadership development as organizational action related to leadership, strategy, and outcomes. This led then, to focus on the consultants' views of leadership.

2. *The consultants' premises for evaluation and expectations*: observations of leaders. First, each consultant was asked to select five leaders (this should be

done before the interview). The criteria for selection were: (a) these should be leaders that the consultant believed would do well or would contribute constructively to organizational performance; (b) these should be leaders that the consultant had observed within two contexts: in a leadership development setting and in the formal organizational setting. Second, the consultants were asked to describe five observations (related to each leader) that became premises for their evaluation and expectations. The premises for evaluation and expectations could be based on both process experience and outcome experience. Process experience was defined as observations of leader behaviours or observations of how a leader acts and reacts: (a) in a leadership development setting; and (b) in the formal organizational context. Outcome experience was defined as observations of how a leader contributes to organizational outcomes through actions that stem from: (a) calculation of consequences; (b) fulfilment of a leadership identity; and (c) pleasures of the process. Third, the consultants were asked to describe the context in which they observed what became a premise. The context could be a formal organizational setting or a leadership development setting. Fourth, the consultants were asked to describe: (a) the selected leaders' reputation; and (b) to what extent the organization had routines for monitoring leaders' impact on organizational performance.

3. The management consultants were asked to reflect on their beliefs and own thinking regarding assessment of leaders and appreciation of leadership.

Data and interpretation

The study produced data that illustrated: (a) how management consultants described leadership development practices; (b) the consultants' views of leadership; and (c) the consultants' observations that became premises for their evaluation and expectations. From the distribution of practices, views, and premises, I selected conceptual categories in terms of two types of leadership development practices that were confirmed by quotations from at least six management consultants (these came from at least two organizations). These constructs could be subsumed under two types of leadership views. I selected conceptual categories of types of observations that were confirmed by quotations from at least six consultants (these came from at least two organizations). In this way, I constructed six types of observations (see Table 1). The aim was to reduce the data to a more manageable size, to the discovery of generalizations that subsumed the details, to 'lift' the data to a conceptual level, to elaborate categories, and to develop confidence in the reliability of these constructs (Lee, 1999). Positive feedback on the categories reinforced confidence in the reliability of the constructs.

Findings

How did the management consultants describe leadership development practices?

The management consultants' presented arguments that reflected two visions of how we might think about leadership development and how we might think about

leadership. In four of the firms, the management consultants were inclined to see leadership development as a key element in a designed optimization process. They communicated a rational, calculative approach aimed at creating an 'optimal fit' between management capabilities and the firm's business strategy, that is, management development should be aligned to strategic priorities. The calculative approach was based on two arguments. The first type was: leadership development as *improvement of organizational performance* – Leadership is a key part of the ways in which the firm is coordinated and controlled to optimize performance, and management development is a key element in this strategic approach. Leaders are evaluated in terms of their contribution to organizational outcomes, and management development is primarily about building the capability of leaders in order to achieve our strategic objectives. Thus, the firm's overall strategy would determine the nature of management competence, and development strategies were tools available for the top management in seeking organizational efficiency (Mabey & Gooderham, 2005). The second type of argument was management development as *improvement of integration*. This was an idea embedded in a notion that a common organizational identity and a shared pattern of beliefs and norms would give direction for action and reduce communication and coordination problems in the firm: leadership development is a key element of the ways to avoid the problems of diversity through socialization, inspiration, and commitment to mould multiple talents and backgrounds into a common culture. The integration emphasis was characterized by efforts to create and communicate a culture of partnership among leaders. One important device for achieving such integration was represented by the top leadership's attempts to formulate a corporate vision, which was communicated in the form of a mission, goals, and leadership demands. That is, the integration argument emphasized the role of the top leadership as a communicative mediator between visions and reality.

In two of the firms, the management consultants were inclined to see leadership development as a path-dependent, destination-free evolution. This vision was associated with leadership as fulfilment of an identity. Leadership development was seen as an arena where leaders' 'self-identity as a proper leader' could be formed by two interwoven processes: an individual learning process where the leader *chooses* a self-selected type of management role, and a socialization process where organizational obligations, responsibilities, and commitment are socially learned (how leaders defined themselves and their roles were outcomes of feedback processes). Thus, development of a leadership identity captured both self-reflection and socialization. It was not seen as an individual right to seek and define his/her own egocentric path, but as an individual trying to discern and execute a 'self-identity' that was defined by an individual/social/historical process. Leaders should learn to act as proper leaders in their local organizational context, and it was assumed that if leaders develop themselves personally and professionally, there will inevitably be corporate gain from the ingenuity, innovativeness, and creativity that is being tapped. Appropriate leadership was associated with 'self-management' and was seen as evolving through time in a way that was sensitive to a variety of local (in time and space) individual and organizational needs and conditions. The consultants' aim was to stimulate development associated with diversity, variety, self-direction, and participation. They assumed that the consequences of this approach were good for efficiency and for both local and organizational adaptation to new and changing

demands. Thus, they committed to and stated a vision of leadership development 'as stimulating and nurturing leadership diversity as a source of organizational efficiency and adaptation'. Within this perspective, the management consultants did see the benefits of leadership development as outcomes of an emergent process rather than outcomes of a planned or designed process. This approach was far from unconditional and inconsequential, however. It was based on the expectation that the organizations would come out right in the long run. Thus, the consultants did believe that there was a positive relationship between leadership action and organizational outcomes.

The management consultants' views of leadership

The management consultants in four of the firms looked at leadership development from a calculative perspective that was clearly linked to the instrumental view of leadership. The management consultants in two of the firms looked at leadership development as an emergent development process that was associated with a view that saw leadership as the fulfilment of identities. As a conclusion, the consultants had different conceptions of the basis for leaders' motivation and action in organizations, but they believed that there was a positive relationship between leadership action and organizational outcomes.

How did the management consultants develop a foundation of knowledge?

The management consultants were asked: to select leaders who were expected to succeed, to describe observations that became the basis for their expectations, and to describe the contexts in which they observed what became premises. Table 1 illustrates:

1. The constructed types of observations.
2. The number of consultants that made subjective statements that could be subsumed under a category.
3. The contexts in which the consultants observed what became premises (management development settings are marked as 'A' and organizational settings are marked as 'B').
4. Types of premises for evaluation and expectations (process experience is marked as 'a' and outcome experience is marked as 'b').
5. Types of leadership views (the instrumental view is marked as 'I' and leadership as fulfillment of an identity is marked as 'II').

Table 1 shows seven main findings. First, the findings illustrate that the premises for how the consultants came to believe that a leader would succeed were based on *process experience* rather than on *outcome experience*, that is, they focused on norms and aspects associated with *acting*, *interacting*, and trade-offs between *unity and diversity* rather than on results of rational calculation aimed at efficient leadership action. For the most part, the consultants' process experience was related to management development settings.

   The quest for *action* depicts leaders as 'persons who take initiative and who encourage initiative'. The quest for *interaction* depicts leaders as active participants

Table 1 *Categorized observations that became premises for evaluation and meanings*

Types of observations	Number of consultants	Contexts		Premises for expectations		Views of leadership	
		A	B	a	b	I	II
Driven by joy of acting							
– Playful enthusiasm	(16)	x		x		x	x
– Sense of humour	(16)	x		x		x	x
– Positive and creative contributor	(16)	x		x		x	x
– Excitement of influence	(12)	x		x		x	x
Leadership behaviours							
– Willingness to take initiative (action)	(16)	x	x	x		x	x
– Capable of getting things done (action)	(16)	x	x	x		x	x
– Willingness to create processes premised on communication, cooperation, and trust	(15)	x	x	x		x	x
– Willingness to coordinate by the flow of information so that people know what is going on	(15)	x	x	x		x	x
– Encourage unity and a shared culture as well as encourage local diversity and participation	(14)	x	x	x		x	x
– Efforts to create and communicate a culture of partnership	(14)	x	x	x		x	x
Vision and reality							
– Willingness to live in the world of vision as well as in the world of pragmatic action	(10)	x		x		x	x
Identification							
– Leaders take pride in their work	(8)	x		x		x	x
Symbolic aspects							
– Leaders learn the language of leadership, a language filled with vision, ideas, and power	(8)	x		x		x	x
– They learned to develop the face of leaders as an artist	(7)	x		x		x	x
Learning							
– Exchange and combination of experience	(9)	x	x	x		x	x
– Thoughtful reflection	(6)	x		x		x	x

in teams premised on commitment to cooperation as a norm, that is, the consultants assumed that participation and communication would foster trust, motivation, and identification, which again would influence productivity. The quest for trade-offs between *unity and diversity* depicts leaders who managed to balance two visions of leadership: 'a vision of leadership as forging a unity of harmonious purpose and commitment' and 'a vision of leadership as stimulating diversity as a source of organizational innovation and social strength' (March & Weil, 2005: 3). Thus, the management consultants looked at leadership potential from a social partnership approach rather than from a calculative approach (Sparrow & Hiltorp, 1994).

Second, the consultants committed to different leadership views, but the findings show that they had similar conceptions of issues related to vision, identification, and symbolic aspects. The consultants claimed that an organization will work well if: (a) leaders have the talent to see events and situations as compressing simultaneous multiple 'realities'; (b) leaders take pride in their work and in the organization; and (c) leaders learn the language of leadership. Regarding *vision*, the consultants claimed that 'without vision it is difficult for a leader to know the direction in which to apply his or her influence, and without creativity and inspiration it will be difficult to form this vision or to communicate its mobilizing force to others'. Concerning *identification*, the consultants argued that leaders have to develop a culture of cooperation supported by norms that encouraged efficacy and a sense of group coherence. Regarding *symbolic aspects*, the consultants claimed that leadership has a symbolic role that is an important element in our interpretation of events and experience. That is, the symbolic role is an important element in the language of leadership, and 'an efficient leader has to understand and to learn this language'.

Thus, the management consultants intended to create processes associated with playfulness, enthusiasm, imagination, and the ability to refuse to accept the constraints of reality – in which leaders became inspired to see themselves as a creative, visionary, and powerful agent who affects organizational performance.

Third, the findings indicate that leaders who were expect to succeed were defined in terms of purposes or roles they were expected to fulfill rather than in terms of their impact on organizational outcomes. Within such a conception, the consultants did not split apart factual and evaluative statements. For example, concepts such as learning, initiating, influencing and so on were not defined independently of the concept of a *good* leader: 'A good leader is a person who can learn, take initiative, influence, etc.'.

Fourth, consultants that looked at leadership as fulfilment of identities used learning as a premise or evaluation of leaders to a higher degree than consultants that looked at leadership from an instrumental perspective did. The findings show the consultants that looked at leadership as fulfilment of an identity focused on leaders' willingness to learn. All of them emphasized: (a) learning from exchange and combination of experience and (b) thoughtful reflection. None of the consultants that had an instrumental view on leadership emphasized thoughtful reflection. Thus, to form leadership identity might be characterized as a self-reflective learning process. A leader has to learn 'What is my identity and what rules shall I follow in order to channel and focus leadership effort?' (March & Olsen, 1995: 30–2).

Fifth, the findings illustrate that each consultant used the same types of observations as premises for evaluation of leaders to a high degree. Sixth, the findings show

that the consultants from the six firms used common and similar types of observations as premises for their judgments to a high degree. Their premises resulted from both the act of observation and the emerging consensus within a community of observers as they made sense of what they had observed.

Finally, in contrast to their espoused views, the management consultants emphasized joy rather than consequences and commitment, as a *motivating force*, that is, they focused on pleasures the leaders gained from acting and interacting rather than on consequences of their action and on fulfilment of an identity.

The management consultants selected leaders who were expected to do well, and they were asked to describe: (a) these leaders' reputations; and (b) routines for monitoring leaders' impact on organizational performance. The findings show that leaders who were expected to do well were leaders who had done well in the past (92% of the selected leaders had a good or a very good reputation). That is, by virtue of the leaders' past successes the management consultants seemed to feel some control regarding expectations about the future, or they understood leadership backwards and made expectations about leaders' acting forward. The findings also show that none of the six organizations had formal organizational routines that emphasized use of the following: individual performance appraisals, monitoring of how leader action and practices had an impact on organizational outcomes, monitoring of how leaders acted in accordance with rules and norms, and monitoring of how and to what extent leadership development had an impact on leadership. That is, the organizations did not have routines that produced evidence which could verify an instrumental approach to the assessment of leaders. The importance of leadership was taken for granted, and leaders who had attended leadership development programmes were expected to perform better than others, and better than before: 'A good, proper, and efficient leader makes a difference in organizations and leadership development makes a good leader better'.

The management consultants were asked to reflect on their beliefs and own thinking regarding assessment of leaders and appreciation of leadership. The findings show that the management consultants presented more arguments for beliefs and thinking than they critically examined beliefs and thinking (Argyris, 1991; Burgoyne, 2002).

Concluding discussion

The findings show that the consultants looked at leadership as a theory and as a reality. As a reality, they assessed individual leaders. They created meanings derived from process and outcome observations, but also from tacit sources such as the 'feel' that a competent consultant had or the intuition a competent consultant had. As a theory, they had leadership views, or cognitive categories and propositions that expressed a relationship between concepts that enabled them to generalize across contexts. In a way, leadership views were decoupled from action (Brunsson, 1989). Action (evaluation) was related to the present and to hopes in organizational contexts that were associated with uncertainty and ambiguity, and leadership views were related to visions and the future. The very long-term future was clear and related to theoretical leadership views; the very short-term future was already there, and the things in between were more or less obscure. Thus, the consultants' views of

leadership were a kind of normative, retrospective explanation for the relationship between observations and leadership (Weick, 1995). The observations came first and then they found rational reasons when consequences were called into question.

As a conclusion, what the management consultants, as professional experts, came to believe was affected by *seeing*, *liking*, and *trusting* in a process where they looked: back at the past, at the present, and ahead into the future (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Strauss, 1993). By looking back and at the present, they were able to look ahead, identifying what were worthwhile leadership behaviours (practices) to carry into the future. By looking around (within their network), they sought support for subjective interpretations (Wenger, 2000). In other words, what they came to believe was shaped by their ability to link past, present, and future, or evaluation sprang from process experience, which revealed tendencies that were linked to expectations about the future. Thus, foresight might be an activity that: (a) springs from knowledge of past experience that reveals current tendencies; and (b) is quick enough to link process or outcome experience to expectations in a continuous manner (Dewey, 1998).

In the following, the concluding discussion represents a sketch of ideas about how management consultants tried to make sense of ongoing events and processes, and how they attributed meanings and provided explanations.

Seeing

Leadership and organizations are complex and dynamic and to understand leadership, management consultants might be faced with a need to learn about the potential of complex processes and systems, so they can recognize and understand important aspects of what they observe. The findings illustrate that the consultants relied to some extent on passive observations, related to formal organizational settings, but for the most part they relied on more experimental observations, related to management development settings. However, in both settings they moved towards shared types of observations, and they also moved towards shared interpretations of these types of observations. They seemed to have gained confidence from the fact that several shared the same observation and the same interpretation, and they tended to treat agreement as equivalent to validity. Thus, the findings suggest that the consultants enacted or shaped the complex world they faced. As a group, they adapted to common beliefs and norms associated with fashions, trends, and travelling ideas (Abrahamson, 1996; Powell & DiMaggo, 1991). Pressures for accruing and maintaining legitimacy in relation to the environment led to uniform norms and beliefs that affected what they saw and how they interpreted what they saw. Thus, they gained a common sense of the leadership behaviours and practices that were a kind of socialization at the macro level of organizations.

Trusting and liking

The management consultants were aware of the complex and ambiguous causal structure around leadership in organizations. However, they *believed* that leaders contributed to improving organizational performance. Faced with uncertainty and ambiguity, they tried to create meaning about why one leader is better than another,

and why one leader will do well and another will not succeed. In this sensemaking process, they became especially sensitive to aspects of leader behaviours that express or signal satisfaction of the process. The 'clever', 'positive', 'engaged', 'active', 'creative', 'charismatic', 'risk-taking' participant in leadership development settings came to be seen as the prototype of a 'good leader' who would do well. That is, a leader who acted according to what the consultants defined as appropriate norms was trusted, and a leader who was trustworthy was expected to do well or succeed. The management consultants developed trust in leaders who acted in ways they liked and who followed norms that were seen as appropriate. The observations point out the enabling effects of trust, whereby trust creates or enhances conditions, such as positive interpretations of another's behaviour, that are conductive to obtaining organizational outcomes such as cooperation and higher performance. From this perspective, they tended to treat a complex process phenomenon as a distinct integral 'something' that the good and trustworthy leader had acquired and could use. For example, the term 'learning' became a qualifier for the leader who had shown a capacity for learning, that is, a leader who showed himself/herself willing and able to learn was trusted and expected to do well. The reframing lent itself to a kind of thinking that created a dichotomy between successful leaders who learn and those who do not. That is, trust reduced the complexity in the situation and became an alternative to rational prediction of the future.

Implications: How management consultants' sensemaking may affect leadership

Numagami (1998: 10) pointed out that

> if practitioners and researchers are able to predict the future course of events, it may not be because they know any invariant laws but because they have good understanding of what the agents involved would expect in a specific situation and excellent skills in synthesizing the actions, and/or because they are powerful enough to redefine the original situation into a game structure that has a dominant equilibrium. That is, for a person to predict the future course of events, he or she should at least have either knowledge or power.

With such an understanding, the management consultants were important agents who had the ability to remember the past, imagine the future, and respond to present circumstances. They had knowledge, but they also had power in terms of abilities to affect how leaders understood themselves and defined their roles. They were observers and evaluation setters (sensemakers), but at the same time they were important, professional advice givers (sensegivers) in organizations in which norms of both *rationality* and *progress* were expected to govern leadership behaviours. These norms created the need of a flow of knowledge about ideas, techniques, and practices that the leaders believed were rational, at the forefront of leadership progress, and that they could adopt in order to appear to conform with these norms (Abrahamson, 1996). Thus, management consultants were sensemakers and sensegivers: (a) within organizations in which the leadership culture represented a pressure to be efficient and adaptive; and (b) within processes in which the leaders' learning and development could be seen as responsive to feedback from competent advice

givers (experts) in their immediate neighbourhood. Through feedback processes, based on what the consultants would see, like, and expect, the consultants could 'move' and 'direct' leaders, or update and affect leaders' understanding, beliefs, aspirations, tastes, and liking.

In the pursuit of understanding why some leaders would succeed or contribute constructively to organizational performance in the future, the management consultants tried to detect, rather than trying to predict the future. In this effort they learned from the *anticipated consequences* of process experience, and they treated anticipations as though they were outcomes, so that positive expectations seemed to have the same learning effects as successful outcome experience: 'Based on my sensemaking, I have a feeling that a leader will do well, and I have experienced that I can rely on my sense'. Thus, process experience became a surrogate for outcome experience in ways that justified the consultants' espoused, instrumental understanding of leadership. The consultants communicated their understanding within the organizations and within a network. In these ways, their understanding could affect how leaders justified leadership – from an instrumental perspective. What leaders would come to 'see' and think as positive consequences of their acting, were social constructs that were outcomes from professional experts' subjective appreciation of leadership and evaluation of leaders.

Leadership is dependent upon trust, and important sources of trust in leadership are the reputation for having done well and expectations about doing well. This article makes the argument that the management consultants play an important role in developing trust in leadership. The findings show that they developed trust in leaders who were driven by the joy of acting, who were action oriented, who managed to balance diversity and unity, variety and integration, and who were open, reliable, and team oriented. The consultants developed belief in leaders' competence and capabilities, but they were also professionals who communicated statements about who was expected to do well. In this way, they were experts (sensemakers and sensegivers) who formed and communicated meanings that influenced how other actors came to trust leaders (other agents would come to believe what the management consultant, as the expert, believed). Thus, what management consultants communicated in the discussion about leadership and leaders would form and legitimate leaders' reputation and reduce other agents' risk and doubt in their interactions with leaders.

Finally, this study has several limitations in regard to addressing the broad proposition that was the article's point of departure. The formation of expectations about leaders who would do well can be seen as social constructs negotiated among many groups of observers and evaluation setters. However, this study has only focused on key informants from one group, and it has not addressed how expectations might change over time.

A second limitation concerns the management consultants' institutional context. As members of a national culture, management consultants are likely to have acquired a set of values, beliefs, and assumptions that represent, in a sense, their notions of what good leadership is and should be (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Thus, institutional determinants, such as the national embeddedness of organizations, networks and groups of observers and evaluation setters, seem to have a strong effect on values, beliefs, and norms. These values, beliefs, and norms may again have a

considerable effect on leadership practices in organizations (Gooderham et al., 1999, 2006). There might be a high degree of shared notions of what good leadership is and should be within a cultural context, but there also might be a considerable difference between cultural contexts (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

This article is based on data from a sample of management consultants who operated within the Norwegian cultural context. In this culture, the social partnership aligns approach to leadership, or aligns with claims that emphasize that leaders have to make cooperative relationships the norm in their organizations (Gooderham et al., 1999; Sparrow & Hiltorp, 1994). In line with this approach, the findings show that the management consultants emphasized leadership behaviours associated with leadership cooperation as a norm. The consultants' understanding was path dependent, and I am well aware that there are other cultures that emphasize approaches to leadership that are associated with individualism and competiveness (Ferraro et al., 2005; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). However, we can see changes. As a consequence of the global economy, Norwegian leaders are increasingly operating in cultures and contexts which value competitiveness and individualism. Therefore, management consultants' ability to develop cooperative relationships in organizations might become significantly countered.

At the cross-national level we must expect variations in leadership practices insofar as dissimilar cultural and political structures exist. From this view, our findings highlight the need to incorporate country-specific, institutional and cultural factors in studies of leadership.

A third limitation derives from the fact that the study does not focus on how management consultants handle trade-offs between diversity and unity (March & Weil, 2005). The dominant vision of leadership is associated with clear objectives, well-conceived plans, and a common culture. This vision clashes, however, with an alternative vision of leadership as stimulating and nurturing diversity as a source of organizational and social strength.

A fourth limitation derives from the fact that the study does not focus on the commercial relationship between leaders and consultants. Leaders often make (or at least ratify) the decision to employ consultants and to evaluate their subsequent effectivesness – this may impact on consultants' perceptions of leaders – the views of consultants may not always be neutral. Thus, the commercial (and sometimes asymmetrical) relationship between leaders and consultants may create dilemmas. One dilemma is related to *demystification* versus *mystification*. One the one hand, management consultants seek to develop a relationship based on openness, trust, facts, and rationality in order to demystify leadership. On the other hand, management consultants might intentionally be engaged in organizing symbolic activities that foster others' beliefs in their competencies and importance. As a result, management consultants mystify leadership and leadership development in order to get power. In line with this description, the findings show that the consultants' shift from talking about leadership as a view to talking about observations of leadership practices represented a shift from framing leadership in terms of organizational efficiency and effectiveness to framing it more as a spiritual quest. Another dilemma is related to *safety seeking* versus *risk taking*. On the one hand, management consultants might be risk takers who challenges leaders' beliefs and norms in order to make changes. On the other hand, they might avoid risk taking and become safety seekers in order

to succeed: The 'bottom line' of management consultancy is a reputation for having done well, a judgment made by leaders.

A fifth limitation concerns understanding how professionals come to believe what they believe. The management consultants were members of an expert system (Giddens, 1990). Such systems develop their own esoteric language, distinctive values, and particular practices that can neither be fully articulated (Polanyi, 1962), nor completely appreciated by those who do not practice them (MacIntyre, 1985). The practices of, for example, making evaluations of leaders cannot adequately be made sense of other than by those who have been engaged in the practices. By engaging in the discussions about leadership, the management consultants generated tacit knowledge that provided an unarticulated background that was a necessary prerequisite for their understanding and evaluation. That is, there is bound to be a knowledge gap separating those participating in an expert system from those observing it. Thus, the complex account that has been told is based on limited empirical data, and this limitation invites the usual caution in interpreting the generality of the result.

My aim in this article was to stimulate debate about how management consultants' beliefs and understanding affect leadership. I do not claim that I have put together a model that is coherent enough to explain this process. However, I do believe that the study reveals ideas that are relevant to understanding how central agents in the discussion about leadership come to believe that some leaders would succeed, and to understanding how their sensemaking may affect leadership. The management consultants justified leadership by what they expected from leaders. They learned from anticipations of consequences, and they treated anticipations as thought they were outcomes. As a conclusion, the management consultants were important sensemakers and sensegivers in the discussion about leadership. However, their understanding was path dependent, and they did not critically inquire into their own beliefs, thinking, and understanding (Argyris, 1991; Burgoyne, 2002). They emphasized telling and asking but not self-questioning.

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