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# Positive Leadership Development and Leadership Types in Finnish Leaders' Narratives

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## Abstract

This study focused on Finnish leaders who participated in a training program called "Positive Leadership Training". The purpose of this study was to enhance the general understanding regarding the emergence of positive leadership in leaders, as they themselves described. A narrative research approach was chosen, and the data were collected from leaders' diaries (N = 12) that they maintained and updated during the training program. The analysis of narratives and narrative analysis were conducted. The analysis of the narratives was divided into four categories, each representing the way leaders described the emergence and development of their positive leadership. While some leaders described strong empowerment, others seemed to be searching for their own identities as positive leaders. Furthermore, leaders also described positive leadership in terms of action, and deliberation and courage were the core categories in their leadership narratives. The narrative analysis revealed the following four leadership types: humane thinker, enthusiastic developer, courageous experimentalist, and identity worker, typifying the variations between empowered and emerging leadership narratives and between prudence and the active execution of leadership. The results highlighted the role of authenticity in leadership development and the benefits of positive leadership training for leaders with different backgrounds.

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## Introduction

Whilst the realm of work is undergoing global changes, ensuring holistic well-being at workplaces has become increasingly important (Kowalski & Lorretto, 2017). As organisations pursue their goals enthusiastically for the well-being of their employees (Kowalski & Lorretto, 2017), a holistic perspective on well-being has become the new paradigm for leadership (Daraba et al., 2021; Hannah et al., 2014). The theories of positive leadership mention this kind of paradigm (of leading through promoting well-being) at work, in which human perspectives are placed at the core (Blanch et al., 2016; Dinh et al., 2014; Syväjärvi & Vakkala, 2012). Thus, the main objective of positive leadership is to promote the well-being of individual workers and work communities (Blanch et al., 2016; Cameron & Plews, 2012; Salmi et al., 2014).

Research on positive and active workers at work and their connection with productivity has focused on concepts such as work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2002), thriving at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005), and enthusiasm (Kunter

et al., 2011). For example, work engagement has been proven to correlate with well-being, positive attitudes toward change, and organisational efficiency, quality, and productivity (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010; Çankır & Şahin, 2018; Sarwar et al., 2020). Among the mechanisms that promote work engagement, positive leadership has been observed to be connected with work engagement through resources, basic psychological needs, and psychological safety at work (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021).

Whilst positive leadership and people management are considered crucial for personnel well-being and change management (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), leaders' own well-being should be paid attention to as well. Pressure for productivity increases the demand for leadership (Huhtala et al., 2011). At the same time, well-being and work engagement among leaders seem to be decreasing fatigue, the trend of which has been increasing among leaders in education (OAJ, 2023), the public sector (Summanen, 2019), and private enterprises (EVOLV, 2020) in Finland. Because of fatigue, leaders have increasingly been considering resigning (Segal, 2021). In addition, challenges in leaders' well-being reflect critical areas of people management, such as positive interaction and empathy (Arghode et al., 2022).

The increasing demands on and threats to leaders' well-being call for research on how to develop effective leadership practices and training programs. Recent research highlights, for example, authenticity and importance of leadership identity to well-being and suggests that these should be supported by leadership training programs (Fonsen et al., 2022; Koskiniemi, 2022). What remains less studied is leaders' experiences of the emergence of their leadership identity or their perceptions of the connection between their leadership attitudes and well-being (Kaluza et al., 2020; Summanen, 2019; Weiss et al., 2018). In this study, how leaders describe their leadership experiences is investigated. The study focused on Finnish leaders who participated in a positive leadership training program. The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of the emergence and development of positive leadership in leaders, as described in their own words.

## **Theoretical Background**

Leadership is a complex phenomenon that means leading a group's activities to achieve certain desired goals (Bryman, 2013). In past decades, leadership has been described through trait theories, leadership style theories, and situational leadership theories, and it has been defined in terms of people leadership and management (Northouse, 2010). Today's leadership studies emphasise the significance of learning and development in becoming a leader (Northouse, 2010; Youssef & Luthans, 2012), where leadership is viewed as a social construct (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Leadership can also be viewed as identity building that happens during constant interactions that occur within the leader's environment (Ibarra et al., 2014).

This research leans on 21st-century leadership theories, especially positive leadership (Blanch et al., 2016; Dinh et al., 2014), which can be viewed in two ways. On the one hand, positive leadership represents a family of theories comprising modes of humane, empathetic leadership; such as authentic, transformational, ethical, spiritual, or servant leadership theories (Blanch et al., 2015; Cable & Kay, 2012; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021; Ilies et al., 2005; Karima, 2023; Kiersch & Gullekson, 2021). The core elements combining these theories are interaction,

ethical, and moral action (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021) as well as authenticity - a root concept for other positive leadership forms (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). On the other hand, positive leadership has been defined as the application of positive psychological research to leadership practices (Cameron, 2012), as represented by several studies (e.g., Cameron, 2012; Dahlvig, 2018; Hannah et al., 2009; Kelloway et al., 2013; Wenström, 2020; Youssef & Luthans, 2012). According to the aforementioned studies, positive leadership is characterised by a focus on acknowledging human strengths, enhancing positive interaction, building a positive atmosphere at work (Cameron, 2012, Wenström, 2020), and increasing the leader's self-reflection and cognisance (Hannah et al., 2009). This viewpoint emphasises the promotion of well-being in individuals and communities as one of the main goals of leadership (Blanch et al., 2016; Cameron & Plews, 2012; Salmi et al., 2014).

This research defines positive leadership as a humane model that occurs through interaction at the levels of thought and action through the leader's values and conception of a human being (Karima, 2023; Syväjärvi & Vakkala, 2012; Wenström, 2020). In fact, one core area of positive leadership seems to be authenticity (Gardner et al., 2011; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008). In this study, authenticity refers to the prerequisites of adopting positive leadership attitudes, which means that for developing into or as a positive leader, one has to reflect on one's leadership style, experiences, and perceptions, and accept the leadership role as a part of one's identity (Karima, 2023; Syväjärvi et al., 2014; Uusiautti et al., 2012).

According to Ilies et al. (2005), the following four core elements form authentic leadership: (1) self-awareness, (2) unbiased processing, (3) authentic behaviour and acting, and (4) authentic relational orientation. Self-awareness denotes a leader's profound understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, personality, values, motives, feelings, and thinking styles, and how they affect and manifest the same through specific actions and interactions (Ilies et al., 2005). Self-awareness and acting in a manner true to oneself represent the most important features of an authentic leader (Avolio et al., 2013; May et al., 2003). Unbiased processing forms the basis of leadership integrity and character (Ilies et al., 2005). When leaders are able to solicit and receive feedback as well as listen to other's opinions on their actions as leaders, they have all the potential to develop as great leaders. Thus, unbiased processing requires attitudes of growth and learning in leaders (Ilies et al., 2005; Uusiautti et al., 2012).

Authentic behaviour means that leaders possess social sensitivity regarding the ways to express themselves in various situations and understanding the impact their actions can have on other people (Ilies et al., 2005; Kernis, 2003). However, leaders also differ in how openly they express their thoughts and how much they monitor and control their actions in social situations (Ilies et al., 2005). Authentic action is not the same for every leader, and it typifies the leader's signature strengths (Uusiautti, 2013). The fourth element of authentic leadership, authentic relational orientation, refers to openness, trust, and transparency in leadership actions (Ilies et al., 2005). Authentic leaders create a trusting environment by showing trust and being trustworthy (Mishra & Mishra, 2012). Ilies et al. (2005) emphasised the meaning of unconditional trust built on open interaction; they also emphasised that values are expressed explicitly and transparently within the work community. Hence, authenticity is seen as the key to building trust at the organisational level. The perspective taken in this study is that by learning how to become more self-aware and authentic, leaders can adopt positive leadership attitudes. However, little is known about how

positive leadership training actually supports a leader's development or how leaders narrate their growth as positive leaders (Uusiautti et al., 2012).

The following research questions were set for this research:

- (1) How do the leaders who participated in the training programme describe the emergence of positive leadership in themselves?
- (2) What kinds of leadership narratives can be identified from the leaders' descriptions?

## **Method**

### **Data and Participants**

The study adopted a narrative approach (Polkinghorne, 1995), in which the participants' narratives formed the basis for knowing and constructing information (Heikkinen et al., 2012). The purpose was to hear the leaders' voices (Creswell, 2014) and to be attentive to their experiences as well as their reflections and construction of meanings (Polkinghorne, 1995).

The narrative data were obtained from leaders who participated in the positive leadership training program (an in-service training program) called "Positive Leadership Training" in the form of learning and reflection diaries (N = 12). The diaries were written during the year-long training provided over the period 2021–2023. The training was delivered in two separate groups and consisted of 12–14 monthly online sessions including lectures, discussions, small group work and reflective practices, as well as thematic supervision. The length of diaries varied between 11–26 pages, being 20 pages long on average. Thus, the participants were 12 leaders from 54 participants who had taken part in the training across Finland.

All 12 leaders who were willing to provide their diaries for research purposes were women aged between 25 and 64. Five had served as leaders for less than five years, three had served for less than 15 years, and one had served for over 15 years. Three of them had no previous managerial experience. However, they were currently working in some form of leadership role, either as an expert or as a project manager. The participants were mainly from the public sector (n = 10). One participant was working in the private sector, and one was working in the third sector. Most of them held at least one higher education degree.

### **Analysis**

The analysis started with reading the diaries and coding them with the codes Leader1 - Leader12, which followed two types of narrative research analysis: those based on narratives and narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995). The analysis began by searching for content for the first research question; namely, the ways in which the leaders described the emergence of positive leadership in practice. This analysis of narratives represented category–content–oriented analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998), as it proceeded by finding similar categories from the narratives that represented the leaders' descriptions of how their positive leadership attitudes emerged and developed. Four categories were found, each illustrating the level of positive leadership in the leader's identity construction and

actions as a leader.

The analysis used to answer the second research question represented narrative analysis. This followed the holistic, content-oriented perspective of leaders' narratives (Lieblich et al., 1998). First, each leader's narrative was analysed as a whole, and then similar narratives were grouped. The idea was to find similar leadership narrative types. The types were compared with the findings from the analysis of the narratives. It was noted that each participant's narrative contained features of various types; however, the analysis aimed to find those that resembled each other the most. Eventually, each participant's narrative was included in just one of the following leadership-type narratives: humane thinker, enthusiastic developer, courageous experimentalist, and identity worker - representing the dimensions of positive leadership discovered in the analysis of narratives.

### **Trustworthiness and Ethics**

The participants were selected from the positive leadership training programme because the focus was on their experiences and narratives of how positive leadership emerged during the training (Keller et al., 2016). The group of participants was diverse in terms of their leadership experiences and work positions, which helped obtain a variety of viewpoints (Shenton, 2004). Although the fact that all the leaders who participated in this research were women may have skewed the data, gender was not at the core of this analysis. The original group of leaders participating in the training also included men; however, the majority of the participants were women.

This is a narrative study, and in examining its reliability, five principles drawn up by Heikkinen et al. (2012) were used: reflexivity, historical continuity, dialectics, evocativeness, workability, and ethics. The first, reflexivity, refers to how the researchers are able to identify their prejudices and assumptions of the phenomenon and participants of the research. Authors 1 and 2 were closely connected to the training program; however, while analysing the narratives, it was considered merely an advantage, as they knew the context well and could understand the experiences and issues pointed out in the diaries. In terms of historical continuity, leadership was considered a research phenomenon, a continuum that does not emerge suddenly but develops within social constructs (Heikkinen et al., 2012) and personally (Karima, 2023). In this study, the specific viewpoint was taken from a positive leadership perspective.

Based on the principle of dialectics (Heikkinen et al., 2012), bringing forward the polyphony of voices and experiences from the leaders' narratives that illustrated the versatility of reality was the focus. The leaders' narratives included not only strengths and resources but also adversities and difficulties. All of these varying elements of positive leadership were included in the findings and leadership-type narratives to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Furthermore, dialectics was ensured with the researcher triangulation, as Authors 1, 2, and 3 participated in the analysis and writing in the various phases. Eventually, the categories that emerged from the analysis of narratives and the leadership types that emerged from the narrative analysis were created in a dialogical work within the researcher group (Silverman, 2000).

The principle of evocativeness (Heikkinen et al., 2012) was addressed by ensuring that the memories, emotions,

and associations highlighted by the participants were included in the results. The purpose of the research was to increase the understanding of the emergence and development of positive leadership in leaders, as described by themselves. Thus, the purpose was to describe their narratives as truthfully and authentically as possible.

Finally, workability and ethics as principles of trustworthiness (Heikkinen et al., 2012) focus on anonymity and confidentiality. In addition, the leaders' narratives were reported in a sensitive and respectful manner. The diaries were part of the training. The leaders provided the diaries voluntarily, and they were assured of the anonymous use of diaries for research purposes only.

The diary data was natural research data, as they were produced without the research. Thus, the contents of the diaries were assumed to be even more open and authentic than they would have been if the leaders had known that they were also writing the diaries for research purposes. However, the data also had some limitations, because the diaries were written during positive leadership training and thus the writing could have included some performative elements: the leaders were asked to write about their observations as based on positive leadership theory; they were also more likely to act according to the theory (Hannah et al., 2014). In sum, the purpose of the diaries was to illustrate how the leaders described their development during the training (Roberts, 2008).

## **Results**

### **Elements of Positive Leadership in Leaders' Narratives**

The analysis of the narratives resulted in four categories representing the ways in which the leaders described the emergence and development of their positive leadership. Whilst some cited strong empowerment, others stated that they were still in the midst of developing their identities as positive leaders. Furthermore, leaders described positive leadership through action, and deliberation and courage were the core categories in their leadership narratives.

#### *Empowered Leadership*

The first category describing the emergence and development of leaders' positive leadership was empowered leadership. The leaders with empowered leadership felt that the positive leadership training program had given them a concept and structure for using their leadership skills, and they felt that positive leadership was empowering, inspiring, and authentic. Communication and encounters were crucial in enabling empowerment in communication. Leaders' narratives involved experiences of meaning and meaningfulness, autonomy related to leadership roles, and understanding change as a phenomenon.

*"Now it is easy to think that positive leadership means leadership of meaningfulness. The experience of meaningfulness is established in communication. It comes from being heard and seen—to feel appreciated—with humane needs being fulfilled." Leader1*

*"I have personally felt how flourishing can contribute to work satisfaction, work engagement, and work performance, and strengthen health and well-being. This is the foundation for the effectiveness of the*

*organisation.*” Leader2

Leaders with empowered leadership described the focus on and prioritisation of strengths as the central part of their leadership. The empowered leaders had firsthand experience of how empowering it was to work in accordance with their strengths and the feeling of flourishing and being enthusiastic about their work. These positive experiences in the past gave these leaders the determination to try to enable the flourishing of team members as well.

The empowered leaders felt that the work they did was meaningful in itself, without position and titles, but also that the work done was meaningful.

*“I am not a kind of person who prioritises going ahead in the organisation or shifting from one workplace to another to feel that I am ‘developing’. Meaningful work, being able to feel fulfilment in my work, a feeling of belonging, and the feeling of competence are more important to me.”* Leader1

The leadership considered empowering was described in the leaders’ narratives, for example, as successful facilitation of difficult situations or conflicts in the work community, feeling empowered by contacts and communication with team members, or succeeding to enable empowerment of team members by the leaders’ supportive communication.

*“I want people to see conflicts as possibilities and provide them with more tools to facilitate conflicts. Every conflict solved within the work community has brought something good to the organisation that we wouldn’t have had without it.”* Leader2

### *Emerging Leadership*

The second category describing the emergence and development of the leaders’ positive leadership was emerging leadership. The leaders with emerging leadership described their pursuit of positive leadership not only as a journey to deeper self-awareness and self-knowledge but also as one of self-doubt and insecurity, even though these leaders were highly competent with immense work experience. Therefore, the emphasis of these leaders’ narratives was on psychological safety and building trust in their work communities.

*“For me, building trust, personally, is complex, after all the maltreatment I have been through in the past. Trust is a two-way street, and I am standing at the other end of the street. Using my character strengths, I think I have possibilities to succeed in building new relations of trust.”* Leader4

In the leaders’ narratives, the leaders also described, to some extent, difficulties in past workplaces or positions, such as fatigue; however, in these cases, fatigue was considered an opportunity to withdraw from work for a while, rest, and reflect on the situation and the leader’s resources; then, after a while, go on to develop skills and competencies.



*“The difference between work engagement and workaholism and the definition of pedagogical well-being hit me pretty strongly as an insight [.....] After years of struggling, I had to give in [.....] because of burnout [.....]. I was away on study leave 2.5 years, [.....] so I did a bachelor’s and a master’s degree [.....] Now, we can work on our power zone, and we work, plan, and develop together.”* Leader6

The leaders with emerging leadership noted some degree of insecurity in their narratives regarding questioning their competencies or roles as leaders, or being insecure about their social role as leaders. For example, this involved pondering questions such as: Am I being liked as a leader by the members of my team? Am I liked as a person by the members of my team? The questions also involved pondering their own role in the work community, such as: Should I be working in this particular position or perhaps another position? According to their narratives in terms of the theoretical framework involved, the leaders with emerging leadership were the ones who benefited the most from the leadership training, and they acknowledged that they found the research-based approach especially useful in the work they did as leaders.

*“I have grown from a negative leader to an emerging (more) positive leader during the past year. At the moment, I am leading myself, but I don’t know anything more difficult than leading one’s own personal change. The learning process is holistic: it has positively affected both me and my environment. I’ve found new dimensions in myself. Even now, I’m wondering: Can this be me—this present and considerate person? This year has not felt like training; it’s been a privilege. We need more positive leaders to make working life more humane and considerate. We need more professionals who identify their strengths and challenges and use their competences.... Thank you for this opportunity. It changed my life.”* Leader5

### *Prudent Leadership*

The third category, deliberation and courage in positive leadership, emphasised a prudent approach. Prudent leaders described personal leadership at the thinking level. Leaders showing prudent leadership described positivity as a reflective process of self-discovery in which leading in a positive manner is recognised through the level of thinking, feelings, values, and concept of being human. These leaders were sensitive when implementing new operational models and procedures in the work community.

*“The beginning of the leadership training was a relief, because I felt that I had got confirmation on the operational models I used, and I gradually found more tools to learn how to deal with the challenges in the work community. I identified the gap between a positive organisation and my work community and decided to proceed slowly instead of trying to change things at once.”* Leader9

The leaders emphasising prudent leadership described it not only as a reflective process of self-discovery but also as appreciation and respect for the people in their work community. In the narratives they provided, these leaders reflected humanity and leadership as parallel phenomena.

*“Perhaps the most important thing is to reflect upon the kind of human being I want to be and the kind*

*of leader I want to be regardless of its measurement, or whether I will be rewarded for it.”* Leader1

The leaders focused on prudent leadership also described self-compassion as a development tool for their leadership and as a way to tackle failures in their work. The leaders were also able to be deliberate, patient, and compassionate in their leadership for implementing changes in the work community.

*“At the beginning of positive leadership, a lot of negative things appeared that had to be dealt with, and the atmosphere can really sink. That’s normal. The good way of doing things always takes longer and is more complex than the more direct way of doing things.”* Leader1

### *Executive Leadership*

The fourth category, positive leadership through action, took the form of executive leadership. Executive leaders highlighted being a leader through action, testing, and experimenting. They focused on implementing new, positive leadership tools in their working communities, in a courageous and open-minded manner. In addition, they worked to establish an open dialogue in the working community in order to ensure that even delicate and difficult aspects could be frankly discussed within the working community.

*“The worst thing would be to try to fake a smile and hide one’s true feelings while working. I’ve noticed that even if the situation is difficult and out of control, our discussions on what kinds of feelings are emerging from the situation have been helpful for all members of the team.”* Leader12

Executive leadership was also described in the leaders’ narratives as a collection of abilities to tackle challenges at work and meet their own development needs, that is, being able to recognise and identify their own negative patterns of thinking and behaviour, together with understanding the importance of improving one’s psychological flexibility. The leaders noted, for instance, that in some situations, their character strengths could turn out to be weaknesses because of a lack of balance and focus in using them or learning new socio-emotional skills.

*“Becoming increasingly aware of one’s patterns of thinking and reacting requires the courage to examine emotional experiences that lie behind such patterns. It isn’t at all easy to understand these feelings and where they come from.”* Leader7

### **Leadership Types**

The findings introduced in the previous section made it possible to distinguish between two dimensions of how the leaders described their positive leadership. Their descriptions varied between empowered and emerging qualities of being a leader, but also as manifested in practice as prudence and active execution. The categories concerned formed a typology for leadership types when representing the meta-narratives formed from the data (see Figure 1). After the figure, we present the meta-narratives in accordance with the tradition of narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995).

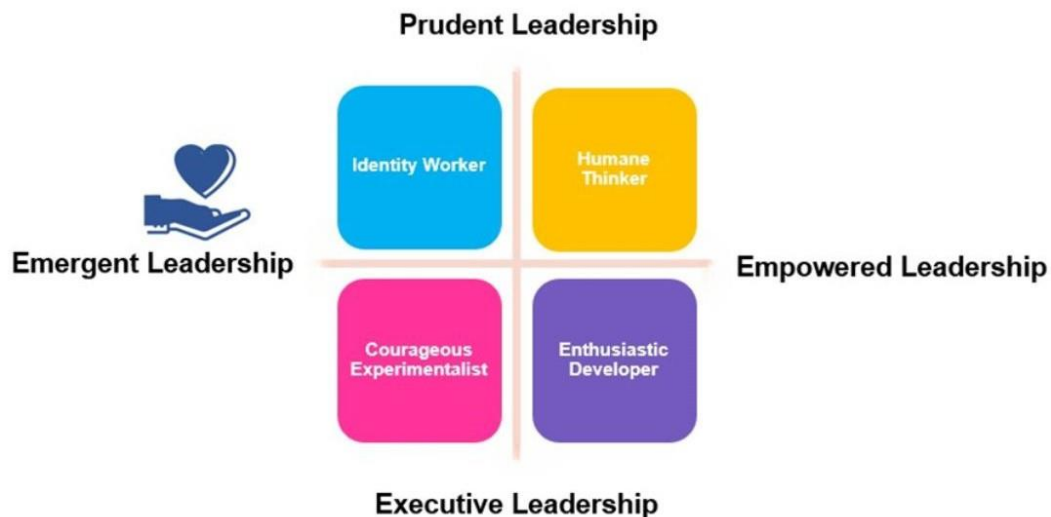


Figure 1. Typology of Leadership Types and Dimensions in This Research

*Humane Thinkers (Prudent, Empowered)*

The humane thinker sees interest in humanity as a core value, regarding humane thinking and humanity as the leading idea in thinking and acting, and as a mission in management and leadership. The humane thinker is considered prudent, conscious as a communicator, and supportive. Work is regarded as meaningful and experienced as empowering. The humane thinker understands the complex nature of leadership and management; therefore, they deliberately implement changes and novelties in the workplace as long-term goals and understands that building up trust at a workplace is demanding and requires consistent leadership and management.

It is crucial for the humane thinker to reach an understanding within the team at work and to create a safe, positive emotional climate. The humane thinker is aware that creating a secure, positive emotional climate requires perseverance as a leader; authentic, proactive, and foreseeable actions and behaviour to communicate emotions in an authentic way; genuine behaviour and acting; and an authentic relational orientation.

The humane thinker has an immense amount of knowledge as a professional as well as a long journey of leadership experience in the past. Over the course of many years, the humane thinker has been deeply concerned with self-reflection in light of the concept of being human, and is concerned with ethical issues in management and, therefore, prudence in leadership. The humane thinker has a high level of self-awareness and self-acceptance, knowing that enough is enough. The humane thinker is authentic, and work is based on and rooted in strengths and enthusiasm. The humane thinker understands that well-being is the most important aspect of positive leadership. Leadership and the manner of leading are examined in a multidimensional manner, and the humane thinker is aware of the complex nature of management and leadership as a whole.

The humane thinker model emphasises that positive leadership theory has provided a related framework for being a leader and has thereby confirmed what they understand as excellent leadership: it has provided its structure, a theoretical background to refer to, and a concrete concept on how to define and approach versatile work health

issues and phenomena.

*Enthusiastic Developer (Executive, Empowered)*

The enthusiastic developer has a goal-driven approach and supports well-being and effectiveness at work. The enthusiastic developer deliberately chooses working tasks and roles that provide the opportunity to utilise their strengths as much as possible. The enthusiastic developer has given up a prior leadership role and engaged in a specialist role or deliberately chose the specialist role they have or another kind of leadership role or work task. The enthusiastic developer is goal-oriented and fair as a leader and highly committed to the work they do; therefore, they constantly educate themselves by attending training, upgrading skills, and sharing knowledge within the team and organisation. The enthusiastic developer has excellent dialogical abilities and knows how to activate, motivate, and support individuals as well as groups. An enthusiastic developer can be inspired, enthuse others, and have a clear view of what it means to be a leader. Positive leadership-based coaching has supported them in embracing and implementing new practices at work and continuing to develop as both a leader and human being.

The enthusiastic developer knows their responsibility and role in implementing an authentic relational orientation at work. They have a high level of self-awareness and self-acceptance, an understanding of their own role in building trust, and a view of workplace conflicts as opportunities for growth in the workplace. The enthusiastic developer prioritises communication that supports emotional intelligence, motivation, and work engagement, and is conscious of personal ways of thinking and reacting. The enthusiastic developer emphasises building trust, dialogical structures, empathy, compassion, and appreciative communication in daily contacts with team members at work. Furthermore, the enthusiastic developer understands the concept of empathy as a broader concept of also being firm and determined when necessary. The enthusiastic developer is inspired by positive leadership and the identification of strengths. They have first-hand experience in flourishing at work, optimal work health, and an understanding of how to support individuals and the team's well-being at work through positive leadership.

The enthusiastic developer puts a lot of effort into creating positive practices at work, for instance, using various kinds of facilitating methods, and they know how to engage team members to attain the organisation's goals and realise its vision. The enthusiastic developer also has an understanding about the benefits of positive leadership and applies theory in a goal-oriented way.

*Courageous Experimentalist (Executive, Emergent)*

The courageous experimentalist is an experienced professional with immense life and work experience. They are concerned with psychological safety in the workplace and make a huge effort to create emotional well-being and a safe space at work, and create an open dialogue with the working team. The courageous experimentalist wants to make a difference and consciously build a safe emotional climate for team members, because in some of their previous workplaces, these aspects were neglected. The courageous experimentalist is especially aware of the strengths and weaknesses which they have to work on.

The courageous experimentalist regularly brings many new perspectives and ideas to the workplace and asks the team to test them and try them out. They acknowledge not only their own strengths but also the shortcomings in themselves and the challenges experienced at the workplace. Courageous experimentalists actively analyse their own behaviour, emotions, reactions, defence mechanisms, temperament, and way of thinking. They have some negative experiences from previous work tasks in terms of adversity, insecurity as a leader, and loneliness, either in current or previous jobs and/or work tasks, and they are aware of the negative influences of, e.g. loneliness in their well-being.

In the present work role, the courageous experimentalist uses these previous negative work experiences as resources and is determined to make a positive impact through their working role—to act in a more reflective manner in their team than previous leaders did, and to be a better leader than those previously in the position. For courageous experimentalists, performance and hard work are priorities in terms of their own work tasks. They are on some occasions aware of their own insecurity and occasionally reflect on whether they are popular or liked at work by team members as a person. For this reason, courageous experimentalists work on their self-esteem and are aware of the need for improvement in terms of self-esteem and self-acceptance. A positive leadership training programme provides them with tools for working on their self-awareness and self-acceptance.

#### *Identity Worker (Prudent, Emergent)*

Identity workers as leaders pay attention to their own and team members' well-being, strengths, resources, and work performance. The identity worker has a high level of self-awareness; however, self-acceptance is a work in progress. The identity worker is cautious in implementing new strategies and ideas and lets changes take their due time. The identity worker works on trust issues and takes care of boundaries because of past occasional negative experiences at work.

The identity workers are authentic, sincere, and honest in reflecting the past as leaders, and they have developed empathy as a leadership skill and character strength. They have experienced some adversity and/or fatigue or burnout in previous workplaces and/or work tasks; therefore, they emphasise the well-being of working team members. Having recovered from fatigue, burnout, or adversity, the identity workers work as leaders or specialists in the organisation.

The identity worker as leader recognises the importance of giving team members a positive experience of their leadership—the kind the leader would have appreciated from their own supervisors at previous workplaces. The identity worker sees the burnout/adversity as an enabler, a possibility for positive change in life, a break from work life and to study for a new diploma or profession, or a change to an entirely new field of work or other job. The identity worker has seen the positive leadership coaching programme as a rather life-changing experience.

#### *Summary of Leadership Types*

All of the aforementioned types of leaders had the experience in common of finding positive leadership training

a meaningful process to develop and understand leadership at the levels of thought and action. However, identity workers seemed to benefit the most. Regardless of how the training itself served the leaders, all leader types were equally important, research-wise, because they represented the multiformity of positive leadership development. All of the leaders described empathy as one of the most important elements in interaction, with this element having been brought up in all of their narratives. Empathy was described in various ways – as socio-emotional skills, consideration, appreciation, caring, humaneness; and also, as supportive interaction, emotional intelligence, compassion, and a friendly, fair attitude and mode of interaction.

## **Discussion**

The results indicate that leaders who participated in the positive leadership training program were at different stages in their development as positive leaders. While some had adopted the idea of positive leadership in their leader identity, others were still in the process of finding it. Some were courageously implementing positive leadership strategies in their daily activities, whilst others were more deliberate and wanted to contemplate their actions thoroughly. The types of positive leaders were illustrated in a typology of four meta-narratives that provided profound information about the leaders' paths toward positive leadership. What appeared common to the leaders was learning about the significance of authenticity. A positive leader is aware of the strengths, limitations, and goals of development (Avolio et al., 2013).

Leadership training has proven to increase the participants' abilities to identify and name their own strengths and examine these strengths in a realistic manner from a self-acceptance and leadership development perspective. This observation is significant, because various studies state that leaders desire more support in identifying their strengths (Fonsen et al., 2022; see also McKie, 2017).

Authenticity requires that leaders become aware of their overall strengths; i.e. identify character strengths, temperament, skills, interests, values, and resources (Cable & Kay, 2012; Wenström, 2020). Identifying and using strengths are related to well-being and work engagement (Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018). At the level of thought and reflection, the participants emphasised the ethical and moral dimensions of positive leadership and consciousness of their own conception of what it is to be human and related values. The result is consistent with the meta-analysis by Decuyper and Schaufeli (2021) and research on authentic leadership. Authentic leaders are deeply conscious of their own ways of thinking and acting, and take values and moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths into consideration (Avolio et al., 2004). At the level of action, positive leadership manifested itself in the leaders' narratives as active self-development and development of their work through a strong commitment to their work as leaders, and as improvement in the effectiveness of their organisations' processes. The theoretical framework of positive leadership and the understanding of the meaning of leadership gained as a result of the training made the participants more confident and goal-oriented toward implementing leadership practices.

As positive leadership practices, the participants described various positive practices such as meetings and planning that enhance interaction and work, aiming at identifying strengths. Through positive practices, the leaders facilitated change in bigger and smaller issues, though some were more courageous and enthusiastic about

developing new practices and testing new things. Furthermore, at the level of action and in accordance with previous research, interaction was the core element of positive leadership (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021; Syväjärvi & Vakkala, 2012). The findings of this research highlight empathy as the pivotal element of interaction in positive leadership. For instance, empathy was described in various ways in the results as a caring, supportive, compassionate, and friendly attitude and mode of interaction. This finding highlighted the significance of authentic relational orientation in positive leadership. An authentic, positive leader act as an example and creates, through the leader's own interaction, an interactional culture in the work community in which all can be seen and accepted for who they are (Hannah et al., 2009; Wenström et al., 2019).

Without interaction, other positive leadership elements – such as identifying strengths or building a positive atmosphere – are not fulfilled (Wenström, 2020). In this research, the leaders highlighted the importance of interaction and the opportunity to develop through their own strengths and reflection and, for example, through dialogue in which everyone is heard. Furthermore, positive leadership development was enhanced by appreciating and caring, and safe interaction was fulfilled with empathy.

Research indicates that positive leadership also appears to be identity work, and as a result, individuals reflect on their strengths and experiences according to the responses they have received from their environment (Ibarra et al., 2014). It is also remarkable that many of the participants in the leadership training had a background of adversity and difficult experiences from working life in the past. For these leaders, the elements in training in positive leadership were meaningful, as the training provided them with the opportunity to re-examine their narratives, shift their perspectives, and gain deeper insights into and comprehension of the underlying factors of adversity in the past work community.

One of the greatest insights the participants in the leadership training gained were the experience and comprehension of authenticity and self-acceptance. A positive leader can have many kinds of sufficient and appropriate strengths, regardless of what expectations and roles past experiences or general work-life views have had to offer them. It has been established that all leaders benefit from increased self-awareness and self-consciousness (Hannah et al., 2014).

Empowerment appeared to be meaningful, especially for leaders with emerging leadership who brought up concrete experiences. The results indicated that the meaningfulness of one's personal work and the framework of positive leadership enhanced certainty and the structure of positive leadership; this "backrest" appeared to be a strengthening factor for leadership well-being. The participants in the leadership training also described their experiences of fatigue at work. However, these past experiences of fatigue that the participants had overcome, turned out to be resources and learning experiences that manifested as deeper insights into people's and leaders' well-being.

The experiences through which the participants described positive leadership as meaningful, especially via the meaning of authenticity, confirmed that conceptions of leadership and leadership training that highlight authenticity also strengthen leaders' well-being and perhaps even prevent fatigue at work. Authenticity can serve

as a personal resource that supports people in meeting the demands of work, protects people from developing burnout, and enhances both work engagement and well-being (Metin et al., 2016; Van den Bosch & Taris, 2014).

The leaders with empowered leadership and emerging leadership had some dissimilarities in terms of self-consciousness, self-awareness, and self-acceptance. These factors are considered the most important factors in authenticity, and they are preconditions for authentic orientation and relations (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). From this perspective, leadership training with content that enhances self-awareness, and self-consciousness is a justified premise for the development of an empowered leadership identity (see also Koskiniemi, 2022). Authenticity is not inflexible or something that demands the same action in every situation, but expedient action which is made possible when one is deeply conscious of one's strengths and development aims and is aware of how these presents themselves in interaction (Cable & Kay, 2012). A positive leader also leads by example (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021), i.e. by identifying and taking charge of one's emotions (Ibarra et al., 2014).

## **Conclusion**

When evaluating the credibility of qualitative research, it is important to give attention to criteria that fit with the research approach—in this case, narrative research (Heikkinen et al., 2012). In this research, validity as a quality of craftsmanship was ensured by researcher triangulation (Kvale, 1996). The authors theorised and questioned the analysis through several reflective iterations. Communicative validity refers to how well the findings can be discussed in the light of previous theories and findings. In this research, notions of authenticity were especially important for communicative validity. Third, pragmatic validity refers to the applicability of the findings and how well the empirical execution of the research has been described. A limitation of this research may be that all participants were women. However, their leadership experiences and perceptions of their development in positive leadership appear to be multidimensional and universal. The purpose of this research was not to analyse gender-specific experiences of leadership development.

The novelty of this research lies in its purpose to better understand positive leadership development, as the leadership approach is somewhat new (Wenström, 2020). The aim was to hear the leaders' voices and understand how they perceived their development. Positive leadership appeared through the collaboration of mind, action, and empathetic interaction. Authenticity emerged as the core theme, especially in the way it developed through reflection (Ilies et al., 2005). The narrative approach provided a useful way of describing authenticity as a coherent and congruent process through self-narratives (Sheldon, 2013). As people tend to reflect on their actions and experiences by means of their self-conceptions, narratives help create coherence (Boucher, 2011; Harter, 2002). Congruence requires strong self-awareness of one's own feelings and needs so that leaders are able to express themselves and act as themselves in a purposeful manner in various situations and roles (Deci & Ryan, 1980).

From the perspective of leadership, authenticity can be experienced as challenging and even contradictory, because it is often considered a role impacted by various demands and expectations (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Ariza-Montes et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2013). Nevertheless, authenticity has been proven to be intrinsically connected with leaders' well-being and sense of belonging (Bettencourt & Sheldon, 2001; Sheldon et al., 1997).



The main finding of Ilies et al. (2005) is that authentic leadership delivers well-being not only to the leaders themselves but also to their followers.

Authenticity requires reflection, which means leaders' ability to critically analyse their own thoughts and actions. Recent research has highlighted the importance of reflection in leadership (Kiersch & Gullekson, 2021), and it has been viewed as the prerequisite to the emergence of all core elements of positive leadership – an authentic approach, ethical and moral aspects, and interaction (Cable & Kay, 2012; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Ilies et al., 2005; Kiersch & Gullekson, 2021). Our research showed that reflection skills can be practised in a meaningful manner, aided by diaries during the positive leadership training programme.

The findings from this research can be widely applied to positive leadership training and coaching (see also Koskiniemi, 2022). In addition to these types of training programs provided by an outsider, support for leadership inside the organisation appeared important in this research (Bushfield, 2012). Support from one's own supervisor (Aura et al., 2016) and organisational culture seemed to enhance leaders' authentic leadership behaviours and sense of well-being (see also Meyer, 2016). Some leaders in this study reported that the positive leadership approach was not shared within the organisation, or it was just emerging. It would therefore be important to perceive the development of positive leadership as involving all levels of the organisation (Hannah et al., 2009; Wenström, 2020).

As this research focused on leaders who participated in specific positive leadership training, it was encouraging to notice that individual leaders found the training and group supportive of their positive leadership development. This was in line with earlier findings, as the training can provide experiences, practices, and new models for leadership development (Bushfield, 2012). It was noteworthy that the positive leadership training programme offered support for leaders with various backgrounds and phases of leadership development. The core elements of positive leadership evidently helped support reflection on one's own path, find one's personal strengths, and learn ways to use positive leadership attitudes with a view to improving not only one's own but also the entire work community's essential well-being.

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