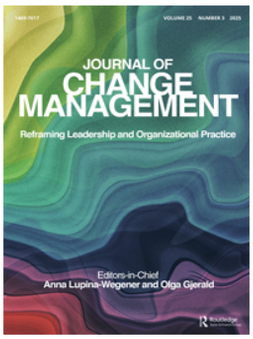

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Strengthening Shared Social Identity Leadership for Organisational Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

In the past two decades, scholars have increasingly studied the concepts of social identity leadership and shared leadership, but there is very little research combining these approaches. Given the potential that shared leadership could strengthen identity leadership, this study aimed to explore how organisational identity might be collectively actualised in a self-managing organisation, where decision-making authority was radically decentralised. The multisource data included five interviews with vertical leaders and HR, three focus groups with employees, four recordings of monthly company review meetings, and a culture booklet, analysed applying theory-informed thematic analysis. The findings suggest that vertical leaders' identity leadership is critical in facilitating successful shared identity leadership. Additionally, the results provide new evidence of peer-leader roles that are important particularly in fostering employee identification. Peer-leaders' identity entrepreneurship and advancement during socialisation created an opportunity to form an authentic and better aligned team. Additionally, their shared impresarioship with vertical leaders integrated the identity into organisational practices and policies. The results indicate that shared identity leadership may critically strengthen its effectiveness. Future research should explore whether the results apply more widely. The findings suggest that team leaders should work with employees to integrate organisational identity across their practices, and policies.

KEYWORDS

Social identity leadership; shared leadership; identification; socialisation; self-managing organisation; leadership

MAD Statement

Our study explored how more effective social identity leadership might be achieved if vertical leaders collaborated with employees in identity actualisation. Our results suggest that shared identity leadership has a great potential to enhance the achievement of identity-reflecting outcomes such as in this case, organisational growth and innovation, and also employee identification. The first two seemed to result particularly from the vertical leaders' active identity leadership, which created an organisational environment

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fostering shared decision-making and supportive of employee-led innovations. Instead, the peer-leaders' identity leadership was instrumental in promoting identification and setting shared expectations for work; thus, promoting productive collaboration.

Introduction

Social identity leadership theory (Haslam et al., 2020; Hogg, 2001) posits that leaders are more effective, i.e. better able to mobilise employees to achieve organisational goals when they represent, advance, define and embed a shared identity for members. Leaders thus make the organisational membership meaningful for employees, which induces them to think, feel and act in line with the shared social identity (Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), thereby *freely* promoting organisational goals (Turner, 2005). Indeed, research has shown that when employees find organisational membership personally meaningful, i.e. identify in their team and organisation, they perform better and experience greater wellbeing (e.g. Greco et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2015).

Due to the increasingly complex and fast-changing organisational environment challenging traditional leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003), research has increasingly focused on collective forms of leadership (e.g. Fairhurst et al., 2020; Raelin, 2022; Svensson & von Knorring, 2025), which are characterised by distributed influence and leadership roles among team members (Zhu et al., 2018). Despite the growing practical and scholarly interest in shared leadership within organisations, only two organisational studies have so far explored *shared identity leadership*, which involves not only vertical leaders in hierarchical positions but also employees engaging in identity leadership (cf. Fransen et al., 2020a). Fransen and colleagues (2020b) reported of an intervention where employees were appointed to formal identity leadership roles. Smith and colleagues (2018) presented an ethnographic study of emerging informal peer-leaders who advanced identity in an interorganisational R&D team.

Studies on shared identity leadership in team sports (e.g. Fransen et al., 2020a) indicate that it may also have great potential to strengthen identity leadership in organisational contexts. For example, Fransen and colleagues' (2020a) findings suggest that informal peers' identity leadership may be even more relevant for team performance than that of the vertical leader and the formal peer-leader. Additionally, their results propose that the vertical leader may be particularly important in fostering team well-being (Fransen et al., 2020a). These results mirror organisational research findings on shared leadership, which also highlight positive effects on performance, team cohesion and trust (Zhu et al., 2018).

Despite the significant potential, shared identity leadership at work is a little explored topic. For example, it is unclear if the appointed peer-leader positions in Fransen and colleagues' (2020b) intervention are the most critical in promoting shared identity leadership in organisations, as they were originally identified in team sports (Fransen et al., 2014). Given the complexity of organisational settings, it seems plausible that there may be other, perhaps even more important identity peer-leader positions. Moreover, effective formats for practicing shared identity leadership remains unknown; for instance, whether peer-leaders work together to enact identity leadership, rotate, or adopt distinct identity

leadership roles (cf. Zhu et al., 2018). This is important to understand as it seems likely that different peer-leadership formats and degrees of role formality may yield dissimilar outcomes. Additionally, while the vertical leader's empowerment and collective identity are known to facilitate shared leadership (Venus et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2018), it is unclear what kind of vertical *identity* leadership might nurture shared identity leadership.

Furthermore, in organisational studies, earlier research on shared identity leadership has focused on the *team level* (Fransen et al., 2020b; Smith et al., 2018). Hence, it remains unknown if peer-leaders might also adopt organisational-level positions that could actualise identity leadership. It seems likely that such roles would also necessitate changes in work design and organisational practices and indeed, scholars have called for studies on organisational-level structural factors that might promote peer-leadership (Zhu et al., 2018). Steffens and colleagues (2017) suggested that research should specifically address how work design, organisational practices and policies might promote identity.

To address these gaps, this study aimed to contribute to shared identity leadership theorising in two ways. First, the study aimed to broaden the approach with more refined insights into the most critical peer-leader roles and formats contributing to identity leadership, and also on the quality of the vertical identity leadership fostering shared identity leadership. Second, this is a pioneer study on shared identity leadership on the organisational level, and we aimed to extend the approach by revealing organisational-level structural factors, such as practices, policies, and work design that facilitate shared identity leadership. Thus, the study contributes to a more comprehensive theorising of shared identity leadership with a more profound understanding of how it unfolds in organisational contexts. With this refined insight we also aimed to facilitate more effective implementations of shared identity leadership in practice.

Since the 1990s, research has established organisational forms where shared leadership is reportedly common (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). In these so-called self-managing organisations, the authority to make decisions is formally distributed across the team, and the traditional supervisory reporting lines are replaced by peer-based structures (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Vaara and colleagues (2021) proposed that these organisations might rely on effective identity leadership to achieve success. Given the small number of vertical leaders (Martela, 2022), it seems plausible that they would rely on effective identity leadership to mobilise employees. Additionally, given the absence of supervisory structures, and the prevalence of shared leadership in these organisations, it is also highly likely that employees would contribute to identity leadership within them. Furthermore, the structural resources reported to support shared leadership in self-managing organisations (Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Martela, 2022; Vaara et al., 2021) might also aid shared identity leadership. As self-managing organisations seemed to offer a research environment where shared identity leadership may have emerged organically, this study set out to explore the topic in such an organisation. Our additional contribution to the identity leadership literature lies in the novel insights this pioneering study in a self-managing organisation offers for wider identity leadership development.

Leading Social Identities in Organisations

The social identity leadership approach was initially proposed by Hogg (2001) on the premise of social identity research (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1987). The approach

views leadership as a process of social influence, whereby leaders influence group members' perceptions of 'us' as a social group (Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), i.e. the group's social identity. In organisational settings, social identity may refer to shared perceptions of a team, unit or the entire organisation. This section describes the four identity leadership dimensions through which leaders mobilise members to promote identity aligning topics (Haslam et al., 2020).

Research has focused particularly on the first dimension (Steffens et al., 2014b) i.e. the influence of *prototypical* leaders, who represent the core identity and embody its central and defining qualities, which distinguish the group from relevant others. Two meta-analyses have confirmed that prototypical members have greater influence over identity, and in guiding members' actions and promoting their identification (Barreto & Hogg, 2017; Steffens et al., 2021). Additionally, research has found prototypicality to promote team support and thus effective organisational transformations (Bachmann et al., 2024).

Haslam and colleagues (2020) have also shown that leaders are more effective when they are perceived to *advance* the identity, i.e. promote identity-relevant goals and the interests of the group. The scholars demonstrated that leaders achieve this mainly by fostering fair decision-making processes and outcomes, and also by treating employees fairly (see e.g. Blader & Tyler, 2009). However, research also indicates that the nature of identity advancement varies with the identity content and the context at hand (Jetten et al., 1996; Smith et al., 2018). Thus, identity advancing leaders need to offer members the things they value in the group (Haslam et al., 2020).

Research into social and political movements (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996b, 1996a) originally demonstrated that leaders are active identity *entrepreneurs*, i.e. they define the central and distinctive organisational values, goals, and properties in their rhetoric, storytelling, and behaviour (Haslam et al., 2020; Slater et al., 2016). This is to promote a sense of a shared in-group as otherwise mobilisation is likely to fail, and also to form the basis of their social influence (Steffens et al., 2014b).

Finally, the fourth identity leadership dimension argues that leaders' identity '*impresarioship*' naturalises the identity by embedding it in the group structures and its physical reality, which allows the members to live out the group's values (Haslam et al., 2020). Experimental and ethnographic evidence shows that such group structures may guide the group's actions towards achieving their goals and gaining wider impact in the social context (Reicher & Haslam, 2006; Slater et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2018).

Existing research has demonstrated that identity leadership is associated with important organisational outcomes. Specifically, prototypicality is associated with organisational commitment and creative employee performance (Hirst et al., 2009; Steffens et al., 2021). Advancement and entrepreneurship are linked to employee wellbeing outcomes (Steffens et al., 2018b; Steffens et al., 2014a), and entrepreneurship has been associated with objective organisational performance (Fladerer et al., 2021) and also politicians' electoral success (Bachmann & Gleibs, 2024).

To summarise, the identity leadership approach is supported by sound evidence (Haslam et al., 2020), but some aspects still remain to be studied. Important especially for practitioners, it is unclear how identity leadership may be implemented in organisational policies, structures, and work design (Steffens et al., 2017a). Furthermore, shared identity leadership at work has so far been scarcely researched. Smith and colleagues' (2018) ethnographic study showed how different informal leaders emerged in

an interorganisational R&D team according to their ability advance the identity as the context varied. Fransen and colleagues' (2020b) intervention study focused on formal shared identity leadership, as they appointed four employees to formal task, motivational, social, and external peer-leader positions. The names of these roles reflected their respective responsibilities, which included ensuring task completion, fostering team cohesion, promoting team motivation and representing the team to external stakeholders.

To summarise; it is known that both informal and formal identity peer-leaders may exist in specific settings, and that shared identity leadership may be implemented either by rotating peer-leadership, as in the ethnographic study, or by adopting distinct roles as in the intervention study. However, it remains unclear if the two peer-leadership formalisations and different formats may coexist in the same setting, and what impact this might have. Furthermore, considering the 15 leadership roles that both the vertical leader and team members might assume in organisations (Morgeson et al., 2010), it is unclear if the peer-leader positions induced in the intervention include the most critical roles for identity leadership. Additionally, both earlier studies (Fransen et al., 2020b; Smith et al., 2018) focused on team level, whereas the wider organisational research on shared leadership has also noted the possibility of organisational-level factors promoting shared leadership (Zhu et al., 2018). Moreover, the two studies provided little insight into how vertical identity leadership may nurture shared identity leadership. The shared leadership literature (Venus et al., 2012) suggests this may involve establishing and advancing a collectivistic identity, however, to the best of our knowledge, this proposal has not been empirically studied. Finally, scholars have also yet to discover how identity may be led in self-managing organisations.

Self-managing Organisations

Organisational scholars have researched self-management at the organisational level since the 1990s under various labels, including 'networked' (e.g. Miles & Snow, 1995), 'agile' (e.g. Rigby et al., 2016) and 'post-bureaucratic' (e.g. Heckscher, 1994). The literature also describes organisational models which reflect self-managing principles, such as holacracy (Ackermann et al., 2021) and teal (Laloux, 2014). Lee and Edmondson's (2017) review established that the consistent factor across so-called self-managing organisations was the formal and systematic, radical decentralisation of decision-making authority. Their findings suggested that in self-managing organisations, the hierarchical reporting structures are removed, and instead, non-managerial employees make decisions on work design, work and resource allocation, and also monitor work. Thus, the organisational hierarchy is flat, and instead of managerial control, organisations rely on employees' intrinsic motivation to achieve the necessary results (Puranam et al., 2014). According to Lee and Edmondson's (2017) review, some have replaced the formal supervisory roles with peer-based structures for e.g. goal setting, co-ordination and performance management.

Lee and Edmondson (2017) note that authority distribution is formalised e.g. in handbooks or in specific decision-making principles, which set clear decision-making boundaries applying to all members, including vertical leaders. Together with transparent information sharing and ICT systems, the principles constitute organisational-level resources that enable employees to make decisions on their own or together in

designated structures (Martela, 2022; Puranam et al., 2014; Vaara et al., 2021). Beyond decisions, the distributed people-related functions may include, e.g. fostering motivation, wellbeing, training and development, conflict resolution and also compensation and promotions (Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Martela, 2022; Smite et al., 2019). According to Martela (2022), the leadership teams in self-managing organisations tend to focus on strategic decisions and overall organisational development.

Vaara and colleagues (2021) suggested that one of the success factors behind growing self-managing organisations was the active promotion and development of their respective original identities. Indeed, the operating principles of self-managing organisations and effective identity leadership seem to have much in common. The vertical leaders may be perceived as highly influential fellow group members, because due to the minimised hierarchy and transparent information sharing (Bingley et al., 2022), there is likely a strong perception of a shared group comprising leaders and employees. This is also indicated by reports suggesting that employees in self-managing organisations may openly oppose vertical leaders' initiatives (Martela et al., 2023). Due to the flat organisational structure, there are fewer competing foci of identification, and the organisational-level identity is likely to be strongly salient. Additionally, the employees' broad decision-making rights and their enactment of shared leadership, enabled by organisational-level structural resources such as decision-principles and ICT-systems, may have a strong potential to advance justice perceptions, i.e. to promote identity building. Research on shared leadership in self-managing organisations indicates that peer-leaders may assume responsibilities ranging from compensation and promotion decisions to training and development, well-being, conflict resolution and onboarding (Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Martela, 2022; Smite et al., 2019; Tilley & Kates, 2024). Furthermore, this literature suggests that in addition to distinctive peer-leader roles, employees may also enact shared leadership as a team (Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Martela, 2022).

To summarise, it appears that self-managing organisations provide a research setting in which effective vertical identity leadership likely prevails, while strong, varied shared identity leadership may also exist. Despite the opportunity to refine the theoretical concept of shared identity leadership, it appears that the topic has not yet received much scholarly attention. Therefore, to explore shared identity leadership, this study set out to study the approach in a self-managing organisation.

Data and Methods

A qualitative case study design was chosen as the method given the new research context and the aim to explore how organisational identity could be led collectively (Eisenhardt, 1989). Additionally, to contribute to shared identity leadership theorising, we sought to find an ideal, extreme case organisation (Pratt, 2009). The selection was based on the organisation's perceived identity leadership effectiveness in public sources such as company homepages and news articles featuring the organisation. Specifically, the company was chosen due to its success in the Great Place to Work study investigating concepts like experienced fairness, pride and cohesiveness (Great Place To Work Institute, 2023), which are also associated with the key outcome of identity leadership, namely organisational identification (Haslam et al., 2020). Additionally, the company had been featured in the news media due to their self-managing principles.

The case organisation was a large Finnish ICT consultancy established some 15 years prior to data collection and operating at several locations. When launching the company, its founders sought to build it to foster a human-centric culture instead of the hierarchies and ill-being previously faced. The first author obtained access to the organisation by contacting their HR Director, who approved the study on 30 November 2017. The study adhered to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. The participants were adult volunteers, and the research focused on the *positive* aspects of identity leadership.

Given the new research context and the aims, and to secure sound evidence, triangulation was used in data collection (Eisenhardt, 1989). This was appropriate as previous studies indicate that identity is defined in communications and may also be embedded in the environment via symbolic means (Greenaway et al., 2016; Haslam et al., 2020; Slater et al., 2016; Worchel et al., 1998). Additionally, studies have shown that there may be differing perceptions between different office locations (Scott, 1997), as well as leaders and HR versus employees (see e.g. Yaniv & Farkas, 2005). The data sources are presented in Table 1. The primary data includes five semi-structured interviews with leadership team members (n = 3) and one HR Manager, a convenience sample of three focus groups with employees (n = 14) in three offices, three public and one internal recording of the company monthly review meetings covering key organisational events, and a culture booklet given to newcomers. To strengthen the findings, supportive data were gathered through exploratory observation of the three offices. This included the recording images of items and situations which seemed relevant to the identity. Additionally, to ensure more elaborate descriptions of the lived organisational life and to observe the pre-socialisation experience of job candidates, supportive public data were collected.

The discussion guides for the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were developed on the basis of the literature, the background data (see Table 1), and the orientation interview the first author conducted with the HR Director. The key topics raised in all interviews and focus groups were the informants' perceptions of organisational-level identity, its integration into the workplace, as well as who influenced that identity and how. Sample questions included, 'What do you think is central to or makes you different as members of this (company)', 'Who do you think influences what it means and how?' and also 'How is it visible here?'. Additionally, the guide was adapted to capture the specific information accessible to each informant. For example, leadership team members were asked to describe the leadership style practised in the organisation, whereas the socialisation practices were addressed with the HR Manager. On the other hand, employee-informants were asked what made the organisational membership valuable to them personally. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and conducted face-to-face by the first author, who also transcribed the interviews verbatim. Names were anonymised upon transcription by using professions as pseudonyms.

Given that the organisational identity would pervade the results, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen as the analysis method. A theory-informed approach was selected because of the new, self-managing research context, and the aim to add new insights on shared identity leadership at work. The first author analysed the primary and supportive data in Atlas.ti. In the following, the analysis process is described in three phases which, although overlapping and iterative, are presented separately for the sake of clarity.

Table 1. Data sources.

	Source	Purpose	Volume	Timing
Primary data	Semi-structured expert interviews	Organisational and leaders' perspective	4 interviews with 3 leadership team members, and 1 with a HR Manager. 51 mins – 2 h 48 mins in length, 4 h 40 mins in total.	03/2018–08/2018
	Semi-structured focus groups	Employees' perspective	3 focus groups in 3 offices, 4–5 participants in each, total n = 14. 1 h 3 mins – 1 h 9 mins in length, in total 3 h 19 mins	08/2018
	Recorded company monthly review meetings	Leadership in action, identity definitions at organisational events	1 internal (1 h 4 mins) and 3 public townhalls (19 mins – 34 mins), in total 1 h 24 min	11/2016–05/2018
	Culture Booklet	Organisational stories, identity definitions during initial socialisation	44 pages	2015 –
Supportive data	Office observations	Snapshot of identity embedded in the working environment; lived organisational experience.	49 images	08/2018
	Instagram feed	Strengthened understanding of the lived experience and pre-socialisation experience.	312 Instagram posts in the Instagram profile of the organisation	6/2015–8/2018
	Employees' blogs		14 blogs written by employees, published on the organisation's homepages	1/2014–8/2018
	Experts' blogs		2 blogs written by HR Managers, 3 by leaders, published on the organisation's homepages	1/2014–8/2018
Background data	Organisation's internal qualitative culture survey	Understanding the practices relevant to research questions, and their origins	111 pages	2016
	Public culture booklet	Understanding how the organisation had conceptualised their culture	39 pages (source: Slide share)	2017
	Public blogs and articles by leaders and members	Strengthened understanding of organisational practices and origins.	6 by employees, 5 by leaders, 1 by HR Manager, (source: homepages, LinkedIn)	2017–2018
	Financial reports and presentations	Understanding the research context	188 pages (source: homepages, homepages of a financial institution)	2017
	News articles		6 articles, published in Finnish media	2017–2018

The first phase of analysis focused on understanding the identity conveyed and the factors that seemed to render it meaningful to the informants. The data were initially read through carefully; noting down topics that appeared to reflect identity meanings and how those were actualised in the organisation. During this round, coding ideas were recorded and in closing, a preliminary set of data-induced semantic codes was developed and assigned tentative definitions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These initial codes captured the preliminary ideas of the identity concepts as well as the inductive factors which seemed to facilitate or reflect them in organisational life. Next, a broad set of initial theory-driven codes was formed and defined according to the identity leadership research literature. Considering the data, these deductive codes captured each identity leadership dimension practiced separately for the leadership team members and the employees.

The second analysis phase involved several coding rounds, during which the coding was continuously reviewed and amended to refine code definitions, to merge similar codes and split distinctive ones. This recursive process was guided by background notes on the conception of the organisational practices and symbols. Additionally, to ensure consistent coding, separate notes were kept on the refined definitions, and on the recurring topics found in the data, such as the organisational symbols. To illustrate, code 'Open interaction' was created when the codes for the leadership team members' interaction with employees, in person and via ICT systems, and on work-related and leisure topics were merged. Instead, the code for leadership team members' 'Shared Leadership Structures' was divided into one capturing the formal structures they initiated, contrasting with 'Invites to contribute', covering their emergent invitations to organisational discussion, decision-making and action.

Through iterative analysis, the inductive codes reflecting identity meanings were gradually developed to a more conceptual level and structured into sub-concepts with supportive constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These supportive constructs were then linked to the shared identity leadership theoretical codes (Eisenhardt, 1989). For example, the tentative identity concept of 'Individual intelligence' evolved into 'Professional growth mindset', which integrated three lower-level concepts entitled 'Top expertise', 'Continuous development' and 'Self-management' (see Figure 1). The related resource of 'professional clubs' was categorised as one particular form of the employees' shared identity leadership, which was linked with the identity leadership dimension of impresarioship. Employees' shared identity leadership was considered formal if it was part of an established shared leadership structure, whereas roles emerging through employees' initiatives without any pre-set responsibility were categorised as informal (cf. Zhu et al., 2018). This continued until saturation was reached, and further amendments to the coding added no further value.

In the third analysis phase, the consistency of the coding was reviewed by reading through the quotations under each code, ensuring the data assigned to each code formed a coherent topic and that the linked codes coalesced into a consistent concept (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was then further refined by comparing the code co-occurrences and coding across data sources (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gibbs, 2007). In the former step, quotes with the strongest code co-occurrences were reviewed, resulting in a more profound understanding of how shared identity leadership in itself, and the leadership team members' leadership style made the organisational identity meaningful

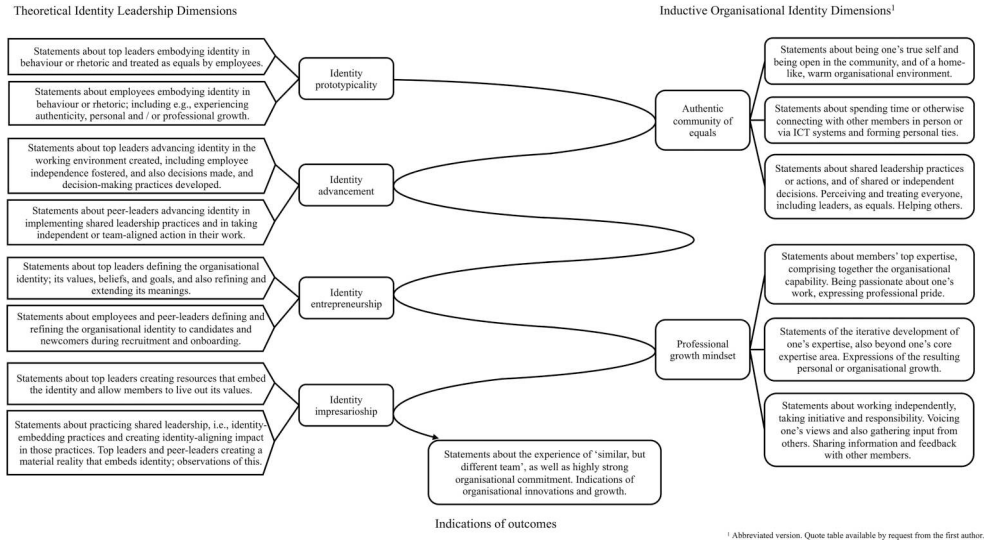

Figure 1. Data structure.

and integrated part of the members' organisational life. Comparing the coding across informant groups helped to verify the insights gained, as it did not reveal any meaningful differences between informant groups. Thus, the data provided largely a coherent account of the shared identity leadership practised in the organisation. The summary of the data structure presented in Figure 1 illustrates how the organisational identity dimensions were reflected in the shared identity leadership practised in the organisation and how they together seemed to produce important outcomes reflecting the organisational identity. In the following, the leadership team members are referred to as 'top leaders', given the perceived lack of hierarchy and to make distinction from the peer-leadership witnessed.

Results

The results are structured into identity leadership dimensions, independently detailing the top leaders', employees' and their shared contribution to each. Illustrative quotes are presented in Table 2, separately highlighting the organisational and employees' perspectives and supportive evidence. Throughout the results section, the quotes provided have been modified and shortened to ensure anonymity, and in the interests of reader-friendliness.

Leader Prototypicality – Identity Embodiment

The employee-informants seemed to find the leadership team members highly prototypical, which was predictable as the team included company founders and some of its first employees. The exchange in group 3 illustrated this: '(leader) partied with us until 3 am! They're just like one of us'. (Designer 4) – '(unlike elsewhere,) I feel it's genuine here'. (Designer 2). In fact, as the conversation excerpt suggests, all three data sources

Table 2. Shared social identity leadership from the organisational and the employees' perspective, and supportive evidence.

	Description	Organisational Perspective	Employees' Perspective	Supportive Public Evidence
Prototypicality: identity embodiment				
Top leaders	The top leaders embodying the identity in behaviour or rhetoric, and being treated as equals by employees.	'(In the culture study) we have said what we are and want to be like. I am determined to continue to be like this in the future as well'. (Leader, public monthly review) 'I'm challenged a lot about the decisions made, if they are in line with our values'. (Leader 1)	Informants laughing and one mumbling 'What leaders', when discussion topic on leadership is introduced. (Group 3) 'I've picked on (a leader) on (enterprise social media) very directly about their communication style'. (Software Developer 8)	'When asking the recruiters about their views of their leaders, they looked at each other confused as the concept of "leaders" was alien here'. (Senior Service Architect, blog)
Employees	The employees embodying identity in behaviour or rhetoric.	'Being human to one another has been a part of (the company) since the beginning'. (Leader 2) 'Key to (our growth) has been our people. – we grow and develop through those people'. (Leader 2)	'It was pretty hard to tell this team (that I'm leaving). The spirit is so close-knit, and it's easy to be oneself here'. (Software Architect) 'I joined the company because the people here are really curious to learn new technologies'.(Systems Specialist)	'I'm grateful that I've been able to come to work always as myself, just (first name)'. (Software Designer, blog) 'People here are driven by continuous development. – seeking the next steps in their own competence development'.(Software Developer, blog)
Advancement: promoting the identity				
Top Leaders	The top leaders advancing identity in the working environment created, including employee independence fostered, and also decisions made and decision-making practices developed.	'Interaction is very rich here; people discuss a lot and communicate really boldly'. (Leader 1) 'People here have considerable autonomy, they really get to decide themselves what and how they work on'. (Leader 3) 'We see this company as a wide platform where people can develop in the direction they desire'. (Leader 2) 'We have a lot of extra-roles, where one can gain a wider influence in the community'. (Leader 3) 'At some point, individual employees got interested in doing (new form of consulting) and got into (some clients)'. (Leader 2)	'We have even pretty rough conversations on different topics (in enterprise social media)'.(Software Developer 9) 'I was encouraged to do this off-the-record sales case, where I met the clients on my own'.(Software Architect) 'You get to develop interesting aspects beyond your professional role'. (Service Manager) 'New business has been pioneered by employees'. (Designer 3)	'Here you can disagree without feeling excluded in the wider social context'. (Software Developer, blog) 'The freedom of this job enables you to work in your own way'. (Senior Service Architect, promotional video) 'I've got to develop here from a basic UI Designer into a Concept Designer, Service Designer, and finally, a Consultant. At the same time, my other responsibilities have grown'. (Lead Consultant, career story) Text reads: '(A person) wanted to work for the company in (a town without an office), so they kicked off a new branch'. (Instagram post, company profile)

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

	Description	Organisational Perspective	Employees' Perspective	Supportive Public Evidence
		'(Explaining organisational change) we will be a great place to work, even better considering (the new opportunities the change) offers to you'. (Leader to employees, public monthly review)	'(I prefer) private clients as they give you more freedom'. (Systems Specialist)	
		'We have to find our own way and avoid creating business units despite growth'. (Leader, internal monthly review)	'We don't have those only clawing their way up the ladder'. (Designer 3) – 'Our team might be full of "nice people" because of the flat hierarchy; as everyone is on the same level'. (Assistant)	'Leadership (here) is based on – having a shared playground, where we act as a network. – everyone takes ownership of contributing to a pleasant, cosy work-place'. (Senior Service Architect, blog)
Advancement: promoting the identity				
Top Leaders (continued)		'Our way to lead is to share our perspectives and then, invite the troops to join (the conversation)'. (Leader 3)	'Leaders may float some ideas, and then, what is realised is shaped … ' (Designer 3) – 'Yes, by everyone.' (Service Manager)	'Here everyone gets to share their views and influence what is done'. (Continuous Services Lead, blog)
		'If I got an idea, I'd post it on an internal channel and ask who's interested in joining the development'. (Leader 2)	'If you want to have influence (here), you will get it. – I'm working in the onboarding and work enjoyment teams. – and I feel I do'. (Software Developer 7)	'Most members will be a part of the new unit that will look after our recruitment, work enjoyment, culture and professional growth'. (Leader, blog)
Peer-leaders	Peer-leaders advance the identity in implementing shared leadership practices, and in taking independent or team-aligned action in their work.	'I carry out the interview with a colleague representing the role. We evaluate how the person might embody the cultural traits, which are broad terms that fit many. The hiring decision is the shared view of those who have met the person, (–) and depends on their entire package'. (HR Manager)	'We all somehow share a similar spirit. Maybe because everyone is interviewed by four members'.(Service Manager)	'The first interview was mostly about ensuring (there's a) cultural fit'. (Senior Service Architect, blog)
			'Many of my colleagues are my friends'.(Software Developer 7)	'When temporarily working in an office in (another town), it was great to notice the same upbeat culture (as at home) despite the distance.' (Software Architect, blog)
		'We find out the challenges the newcomers have faced and go through them in onboarding via facilitated checkpoints (for each theme).' (–) In closing, I asked them to vote on the most important solutions to recall.' (HR Manager)	'Company has set up structures for people to feel included, like (the onboarding team). For newcomers we (host) this Culture Day.'(Designer 4)	Image shows a flip chart with the question 'How can I ensure that I have time for myself?'. (Instagram post, company profile)
		'(A conference) is being organised as one employee messaged (a leader and HR Manager) about the idea of organising one.' (Leader 2)	'There had been a (company) beer, and we decided we need our own here, then we brewed one.'(Software Developer 9)	Image shows a team with beer bottles, and the text reads: 'Cheers! (Company's) own beer (name) from (town) office is publicly available in two (other cities). (Instagram post, company profile)

Entrepreneurship: defining the identity				
Top Leaders	The top leaders defining the organisational identity; its values, beliefs, and goals, as well as refining and extending its meanings.	'We've had (the same) values since – the founders (started the company).'(Leader 2)	'The founders have set the company values, and then they have soared and strengthened (in the company).' (Assistant)	
		'Our cultural building blocks have been discussed and presented frequently, and this is yet a new perspective – .' (presents the cultural cornerstones) (Leader, public monthly review)	'Self-leadership (is about) freedom to do things, which comes along with responsibility. – Everyone gets to decide for themselves.'(Software Developer 9)	Video starts with the text: 'What are the typical (company members') qualities?' – 'Being curious and resourceful, self-leading.' (Employee 1, public promotional video)
		'Having the courage to initiate is (part of) self-leadership, but it's more about being the master of one's own development, – self-leadership of our business.' (Leader, public monthly review)		
		'When planning events, we could consider, if we already have a similar event tradition and prioritise.' (Leader, internal monthly review)	'We made our own beer and when the bill came, hah, (leader) asked "where are we going to budget this?" And then we learned that you need to inform them beforehand about larger upcoming bills.' (Software Developer 9)	'Leaders analyse the business, discuss their observations and correct course when needed.' (Senior Service Architect, blog)
		'We find new business areas because we pay attention to new technologies –, what our clients need.' (Leader, public monthly review)		
Entrepreneurship: defining the identity				
Employees and Peer-Leaders	Employees and peer-leaders defining and refining the organisational identity to candidates and newcomers during recruitment and onboarding.	'(In interviews) we present our values – and also in the interview today, I said that the first value is the most important, but the second one needs to be kept in check for the first one to be realised.' (HR Manager)	'I think self-leadership was discussed from the start. Or maybe I also discussed it with my friends who were already working here.' (Software Developer 5)	'What stuck with me from my interview was the industrious but cheerful spirit.' (Continuous Services Lead, blog)
		'The cultural cornerstones are discussed with newcomers, – rather than memorising, it's more important that they are internalised.' (Leader 2)	'When new people come in, I tell them that no permissions are needed here to do things.' (System Specialist)	Image shows a flipchart with question 'Why should I take time to improve myself and participate in shared activities?', and two employees writing on post-it notes. (Instagram post, company profile)
		'A newcomer survey showed that 27/29 were very familiar with our values. – the values have been well induced in onboarding.' (Leader 1)	'(Unlike elsewhere), it feels like home in other offices.' (Software Developer 8)	'It's no problem to disagree with these nice people.' (Software Developer, blog)
			' –there's a lot of variation in the people here.' (Software Developer 9)	

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

	Description	Organisational Perspective	Employees' Perspective	Supportive Public Evidence
Impresarioship: identity embedded in the organisation				
Top Leaders	The top leaders creating resources that embed the identity and allow members to live out its values.	'Decisions need to be justified through the values.' (Leader 1) 'Anyone can start a club – open to all members. With a budget of – 500 euros / year.' (Leader 1) 'We share data on, for example, our financial, and project situation –. And trust people to decide rationally based on that data.' (Leader 3)	'(Principle) means that we focus on working and leave out all (unnecessary controlling).' (Software Developer 9) 'Earlier no-one saw what projects are coming in and on-going but, a tool was developed for that.' (Software Developer 9)	'(Principle) means that we just do things and trust ourselves.' (Business Manager, promotional video) 'We have a lot of measurement, collection and use of information.' (Leader, promotional video)
		'We can discuss with the entire personnel in (enterprise social media) and – settle things fast.' (Leader, public monthly review)	'(Leader's) presence in (enterprise social media) is excellent.' (Designer 2) 'In the other offices it's nice to meet the people you have (met) in (enterprise social media).' (Systems Specialist)	Image shows a chat-bot depicting a prototype icon as Santa Claus. The text reads: 'Come and solve X-mas surprises with us.' (Instagram post, company profile)
Together	Practicing shared leadership, i.e. identity embedding practices and creating identity-aligning impact in those practices. Top leaders and peer-leaders creating a material reality that embeds identity; and observations of this.	'(In the work enjoyment team) we contemplated hard new possibilities, like the benefits launched yearly.' (Leader, public monthly review) '(We have a) practice of giving each other positive feedback, like, from clients, but also colleagues for helping out and such.' (Leader 2) 'Let's say a member is a stamp collector, and they find another collector (here), they can then start a stamp club together and ask others to join it.' (HR Manager)	'(Leaders) don't define (the summer party) in any way but they get the invitation like everyone else.'(Service Manager) 'Give positive feedback, in (enterprise social media), in person, with wine, chocolate, the lot. Surely your colleague did excellent work.' (Culture booklet) 'One member drew up a team for Tough Viking competition.' (Culture booklet)	'The work enjoyment team also plans and implements longer-term goals that support the company's values.'(Senior Service Architect, blog) 'What made my work cool wasn't purchasing wine and chocolate but that these were used in employees' praising other.' (Summer Trainee, blog) 'We noticed several people in the office in cycling gear and got the idea to start a club together.'(Employee, blog)
		'The "squad" brand is about people's pride to be a part of this community. – and it shows everywhere here' (Leader 1) '"Algie Algrim" is also a chat-bot on (enterprise social media). And in stickers, – internal events' (Leader 2)	'The design and production of the T –shirts was very self-leading. Some had the idea, one member warmed up the artist, and the T –shirts with "Algie" were ordered.' (Culture booklet)	The 'squad' brand was observed in organisational clothing items worn, cakes served, and the hashtag used on the Instagram posts in the company profile. The 'Algie' icon was observed in the offices on organisational clothing items, stickers on laptops, and in posters.

indicate that the top leaders' prototypicality was distinctive in that, in contrast to the employees' former jobs, the leaders were consistently perceived and treated as *equals*. This was highlighted for instance, when the discussion topic of leadership was introduced in the focus groups and, in for example group 2, the informants started laughing and Software Developer 9 said: 'We don't have leaders (here), but we inspire each other'. The perception may have partly resulted from the way leaders modelled equality in their rhetoric and behaviour; or even positioned themselves beneath the employees, as in this quote from a company monthly review meeting: 'We don't have anything beyond the work you do, everything is based on that'. Another contributing factor was that, according to all informant groups, the leaders were openly held accountable and even publicly criticised, as Designer 4's account demonstrated: 'people are calling out (leaders) – if they think something is wrong. Initially, I thought they would be sacked! Hah hah!'.

Leaders' Advancement – Promoting the Identity

According to the interviews and focus groups, the foundation for the leaders' advancement was building an environment where the members could be authentic and pursue their personal motivations. This started from the culture handbook given to newcomers, where they highlighted that voicing 'different perspectives are employees' valuable input for the company'. The principle was also confirmed by Systems Specialist: 'There's no pressure to agree. You can say if you disagree. And then it's discussed'. Additionally, the leaders fostered a considerable professional freedom, which had enabled some members, like Designer 3, to venture into new areas of expertise: 'I wanted to do something else, got educated, and am now working on different things'. This appeared to be a highly valued organisational attribute, as Assistant said: 'Here you are trusted and given the room to bloom (professionally)'. Leader 2's quote illustrates that sometimes this proved to break new ground for the organisation: 'Many of our businesses started when technically capable and interested people began applying a new (approach) in their work, and our capability grew'.

Additionally, the primary data sources indicated that the leaders were set on growing the organisation in an identity-advancing direction through their strategic decisions. For instance, Leader 2 explained how the company expansion offered the members new, interesting growth opportunities: 'More private clients made business sense, but employees had also asked for them'. Some employee-informants, like Software Developer 4, also corroborated this preference: 'It's nicer to work for private clients'. Moreover, as Leader 2's quote illustrates, the leaders were determined to retain the flat organisational structure: 'Despite our growth, we don't want to create any hierarchies or siloes'. The employee-informants consistently stated the flatness to be the most valued organisational attribute: 'I joined the company because of the responsibility and freedom that's offered here'. (Software Developer 8). Some employee-informants also deduced the outcomes of the flat structure and seemed to agree that it contributed to the lack of internal competition, which also supported their ability to be authentic at work: 'Not having hierarchies, – changes the game; there's no people trying to climb up the hierarchy'. (Software Developer 9) – 'Maybe we can be more genuine (thanks to that)'. (Systems Specialist).

Central to the leaders' identity advancement, however, was including the members in the organisational discussion and decision-making. While the leadership team had the

final say in strategic matters, the primary data sources showed that the leaders invited the employees' contributions before making decisions, e.g. through surveys: 'Our mission was created from the employees' answers to a survey'. (Leader 1). Employees also confirmed the approach: 'In decision-making, the leaders make sure everyone gets to say what they think. Obviously, though, somebody needs to pull the lever'. (Designer 1). Leader 2's quote illustrated the approach taken on other decisions with organisation-wide impact: 'When we designed (a new shared leadership structure), we invited those interested to join workshops'. The background and the interview data demonstrated that alongside shared leadership practices, these workshops resulted in the creation of a range of formal peer-leader roles. HR Manager's quote illustrated a part of the resulting framework: 'We have divided the traditional supervisor positions into several roles, like the ones in the onboarding team'. Software Architect described how these positions gave the employees the option to join specific teams where they made joint decisions on, and promoted people-related matters that are most often the HR team's responsibility: 'You can volunteer to join the recruitment team'. For several employee-informants, like Designer 3, the shared leadership practices and the general approach to decision-making appeared to have created the experience that they 'all sort of lead the company'.

Peer-leaders' Advancement – Promoting the Identity

Key examples of the peer-leaders' identity advancement was the work of the recruitment and onboarding teams. This was demonstrated in the way recruitment peer-leaders made the hiring decisions based partially on identity-reflecting matters. HR Manager described the approach like this: 'We evaluate the candidate's overall cultural fit versus, for example, communality. – It's more about the values of communality; some like to go to mass events and others get together in small groups, so it's a broad term'. The Service Manager's quote captured an indication of the outcomes of these decisions: 'you meet a foreign colleague for the first time, and afterwards you feel like you are friends'.

Regarding the onboarding team peer-leaders' identity advancement, they promoted the identity by facilitating the newcomers' integration into the workplace. HR Manager's quote suggests that they achieved this by tailor-making the induction programme to meet the challenges the newcomers had experienced, including some that seemed to suggest they had experienced problems in embodying the identity: 'The onboarding themes address the challenges the newcomers have faced, like participating in the shared events because of client work'. The HR Manager described how the peer-leaders guided the newcomers to work together to overcome these challenges: 'each (group) got to name signs of (being in a challenging situation) and suggest solutions (to it)'. Hence, the peer-leaders' advancement helped to anticipate the signs of potential contextual barriers in identity embodiment and to overcome them.

Leaders' Entrepreneurship – Defining the Identity

The founders had established the company on a set of values which appeared to inform the way the employees described the organisational identity. Another important influence was the 'cultural cornerstones' which, according to Leader 2, '(Leader) wrote down (based on) what had already existed since the spirit of the first employees'. The leaders regularly

reiterated these aspects in the company monthly review meetings, as in the following: 'Transparency needs to be fostered actively – relevant information to be brought up and discussed, by everyone'. (Leader, public townhall). Thus, their influence on the employee-informants' accounts of the organisational identity was unsurprising.

Additionally, a significant part of the leadership practiced in the organisation was extending identity meanings in context. Leader 1 described it like this: 'The leader's job is to guide thinking, and help people understand a perspective, through a discussion'. The leaders appeared to refine identity meanings at occasions varying from the company monthly review meetings to personal conversations and the organisational discussion in the enterprise social media. For example, in the monthly reviews they regularly highlighted organisational stories like the following, where the members' identity embodiment and advancement had resulted in business success, thus enriching the team's understanding of identity meanings: '(Innovations) are nearly always created by the personnel here. Our strength has been listening carefully to the newcomers' ideas, and we need to continue that'. Software Architect provided another example: 'If the discussion on (enterprise social media) is derailing, (leader) may join and guide people to think (about the topic) from another perspective'.

Employees' Entrepreneurship – Defining the Identity

The employees were central in defining organisational identity to prospective job applicants, as they wrote posts on the public organisational media channels. The following quote from a Senior Service Architect in the supportive evidence highlights how these posts seemed to describe the employees' prototypical traits: 'People who – want to get involved and – dare to challenge the entire workplace will fit in best here'.

Moreover, the recruitment team peer-leaders were key to defining the identity for candidates in job interviews. The HR Manager said that during the interviews, the peer-leaders 'go through the company mission and discuss (its) values and culture, (which) sparks off a lively conversation (with candidates)'; all of which reflected the company identity. The Assistant's playful quote illustrated how these discussions were then repeated in the interviews: 'The brainwashing of the values begins in the first interview, so everyone internalises them'.

When a new employee joined the organisation, the onboarding team peer-leaders refined identity meanings to them. The HR Manager described how peer-leaders asked the newcomers to individually contemplate matters that appeared to reflect the identity: 'We have a facilitated discussion of our culture; and go through written thoughts with the new-comers'. The workshop flipcharts depicted in the supportive data included questions like: 'What does communality mean to me? How can you make it happen?'. The HR Manager described the next steps after the personal reflection like this: '(we) discuss what culture means in practice, and they can ask us questions. Thus, the newcomers came to discover different perspectives to each matter. The HR Manager summarised the onboarding approach in the following way: 'We try to provide (the newcomers) with the tools, but they express (the identity) in their own way'. The Service Manager's quote and Software Developer 4's response to it indicate the outcomes of the recruitment and onboarding practices: '(We are all) somehow similar – everyone fits in here so well!' – 'Although we are all pretty different!'.

Leaders' Impresarioship – Identity Embedded in the Organisation

The leaders had integrated the identity into several resources that supported the team's consistent and independent work. For instance, all three data sources highlighted some examples from the decision-making principles the leaders had developed. Designer 1 described the most commonly cited general principle: '(It) means that if you can make the decision yourself, you just do it'. In turn, Leader 2 provided an example of a specific principle: 'We have a six percent working time rule-of-thumb for expertise development'. The leaders had also created digital resources to support the application of the principles. Some were automated, while others relied on the members' input, like Leader 2 described: 'There's no specific budgets, but the cost reports on (the intranet) give people an idea of the appropriate cost level. – (Chatbot) shares, for example, information of our billing rate to create awareness of how we are doing and thus, enables shared influence on that rate'.

The enterprise social media was a resource connecting all members and leaders into a shared platform which hosted the notably lively organisational discussion, which Leader 3 described the following way: '(it) is used really actively and more socially (than just for work). Indeed, the interviews and focus groups indicated that the system was also an important social hub linking the different locations in various professional development communities and a range of leisure and after-work channels. The quote from Software Developer 6 captured both aspects: 'You get good ideas from the intense professional discussions on (enterprise social media). And you meet others; get tips on getting balanced'.

Shared Impresarioship – Identity Embedded in the Organisation

The results presented earlier established how the top leaders had initiated the creation of the shared leadership structures, which integrated the identity into the practices the peer-leaders implemented when promoting identity reflecting matters. Next to the recruitment and onboarding practices described, another key example was the work enjoyment team. A leader described the team's work in a company monthly review meeting as follows; 'we developed our culture systematically (in the work enjoyment team) by seriously considering, what kind of a workplace aligns with our values'. Senior Service Architect's quote in the supportive evidence described how this development occurred in practice: 'The team covers topics from onboarding and learning, to benefits, rewarding, and – identifies development areas and solutions'. Additionally, the Service Manager's account demonstrated that the work-enjoyment team peer-leaders independently organised events, which gave the members the opportunity to meet and build personal bonds: 'Xx thousands of euros of company money were burned up in the event, and none of the leaders knew (about the cost)'.

The interviews and the supportive data also showed that the employees actualised some shared leadership practices entirely independently. Leader 1 provided one such example: ' – we have a strong practice of giving positive feedback to peers in (enterprise social media)'. The supportive data showed that the practice also gave the members the opportunity to give each other symbolic rewards, like the chocolate bar pictured on an Instagram post on the company profile. In the following, Leader 2 describes the typical feedback given: '(it) is about someone saving the team from disaster'. Similarly, there

was a variety of practices dedicated to in-person community-building, such as the leisure clubs, which the Culture booklet described like this: 'Interested in badminton, board-games, marathon, –, or something else? Start a club! The company supports (them) – with 500 € / year / club'.

Additionally, some leaders and employees had integrated the identity into icons and artifacts scattered across the working environment. Leader 1 described one such icon: 'I was inspired to create the "squad" brand. We ordered some clothes featuring it, and it spread'. The 'squad' brand seemed to reflect the organisational team and its prototypical traits. It also included a rhetorical device, 'squad', categorising the members as one team, which was repeated across the leaders' rhetoric and organisational communications, as HR Manager demonstrated: 'In our first email (to newcomers) we write "Welcome to the (company) Squad"'. However, Leader 2 described how employees had created the most popular icon, depicting a prototypical member: '"Algie Algrim" is a goofy cartoon character. – Algie was conceived when a few (members) were having a beer and had the idea of T-shirts featuring this coder-character'. Throughout the data collection, 'Algie' was observed on various organisational clothing items, and on stickers on static and portable items.

Discussion

Traditionally, identity leadership has been investigated in work-organisations from the perspective of vertical leaders, and only two studies thus far explored how employees, i.e. peer-leaders contributed to identity actualisation. Therefore, this study aimed to refine identity leadership theory by introducing new evidence of how organisational identity was led collectively in a self-managing organisation. The theory-guided thematic analysis focused on finding evidence on the collective efforts to actualise the organisational identity in the multi-source data. The analysis moreover sought to understand how organisational-level factors, such as policies, practices, and work design may have contributed to shared identity leadership. Overall, the results suggest that shared identity leadership has potential to considerably strengthen leadership effectiveness.

Identity Leadership Enriched by Shared Leadership

First, the results suggest that innovating organisational-level factors such as work design, as well as organisational structures and resources to embed identity may be needed to facilitate effective shared identity leadership.

Starting with work design, the findings illustrated how it had been reformed to accommodate the formal peer-leader roles. Rather than appointing individual peer-leaders to distinct roles, as in Fransen and colleagues' (2020b) intervention study, our results demonstrated that many formal peer-leader positions were assumed by volunteers, who enacted shared identity leadership collaboratively as a team, alongside their core professional roles. Some of the positions resembled those set in the previous intervention (Fransen et al., 2020b); namely, the social and motivational leader roles. The difference is that in the present study, the formal peer-leaders coexisted alongside the *informal* ones. So, while formal 'social leaders' did indeed organise team events, the results also demonstrated that ultimately, all members were informal 'social' and 'motivational' leaders. Facilitated by the organisational resources, they independently connected with each

other and created events around shared interests. The findings likewise pointed out that all members motivated and rewarded each other for behaviour which appeared to embody prototypical traits. Thus, informal and formal peer-leaders seemed to complement each other's identity leadership, resulting in stronger identity actualisation. Furthermore, given that the members interacted directly with the top leaders and external stakeholders, there was no need for 'external leaders' as in the earlier intervention (Fransen et al., 2020b).

The results also provided new evidence of a formal *organisational-level* 'identity integration' peer-leader position (see Table 3 for a description). These peer-leaders formed the work enjoyment team, and their importance was a result of their impresarioship with the top leaders, as they integrated the identity into organisational-level people-practices and policies, which then guided the team's actions and experiences at work. This aspect of their role resembled the 'realising' phase described in the intervention by Fransen and colleagues (2020b).

Another new, significant formal peer-leader role was the position held by the socialisation peer-leaders. Their entrepreneurship and advancement was consequential as they hired and integrated the team in a way that seemed to create the opportunity for the members to be more prototypical, but in their own authentic way. Indeed, the results illustrated that employee-informants felt they could be their true selves at work, and perceived their colleagues to be 'similar', but also 'different'. Considering the experimental evidence showing that neutrally primed members can adopt the identity through a discussion with their primed colleagues (Postmes et al., 2001; 2005a; 2005b), the peer-leaders' entrepreneurship likely aided the candidates and newcomers to understand the practical and broad meanings of the identity and thus adopt it. Their discussions may also have offered the candidates and newcomers the opportunity to discover personal identity meanings. Hence, the conversations would have given them the chance to endorse the identity authentically. Previously similar opportunities to reflect identity were found to successfully integrate employees following an acquisition (Harikkala-Laihinen, 2022).

Furthermore, the results suggest that the members' prototypicality may well have been made more likely by peer-leaders' advancement as they made hiring decisions and led a structured but also individualised onboarding programme promoting prototypical traits. The individualised approach aligns with Bracht and colleagues' (2024) findings

Table 3. Peer-leader roles described in research.

Peer-leader role	Definition
Formal Socialisation Peer-Leader	Employee volunteered to join the recruitment or the onboarding team, responsible for identity entrepreneurship and advancement during organisational socialisation. In other words, defining the identity to candidates and newcomers, and also making hiring decisions promoting prototypical traits, or helping newcomers to overcome contextual barriers to integrate into the organisation.
Formal Identity Integration Peer-Leader	Employee elected for a one-year term to join the work-enjoyment team, which practiced identity impresarioship with the top-leaders, i.e. developed organisational practices and benefits in line with identity.
Formal Social Peer-Leader	Employee elected for a one-year term to join the work-enjoyment team, practicing identity impresarioship and independently organising team events.
Informal Peer-Leader	An employee taking initiative and promoting the identity in an emergent and fluid; informal way in their work or leisure time; without any pre-set responsibility or designated position.

on onboarding which promoted self-leadership, a prototypical trait in this study (see Figure 1). Moreover, the newcomers' integration was likely strengthened by the onboarding combining structured training and the influence of peers; the two factors previously found to be individually positively related to integration (Antonacopoulou & Güttel, 2010). Altogether, the socialisation peer-leaders' identity actualisation induced a shared understanding of 'us' at work and laid the foundations for effective work and collaboration in the organisation.

Finally, the results also presented new evidence of the informal peer-leaders' advancement and impresarioship. The findings showed how informal peer-leaders' advancement had created innovations that became significant to the business. Contrary to Smith and colleagues' (2018) findings, it appears that these innovations emerged from the informal peer-leaders' identity-aligning personal motivations rather than from a pre-set goal.

Regarding informal peer-leaders' impresarioship, the results showed how they had created icons and artifacts that embedded the identity in the working environment. As these items captured and reminded the members of their prototypical traits, they resembled the trademarks the formal peer-leaders created in Fransen and colleagues' (2020b) intervention. By contrast, however, they seemed to be used to celebrate and induce feelings of pride and cohesion; rather than to hold the members accountable (Fransen et al., 2020b). Together with the top leaders' similar contributions, they appeared to have created a material reality that embedded the identity into the everyday organisational environment. This likely strengthened the structural salience of the identity, which, according to earlier experiments, these symbolic means may indeed enhance (Greenaway et al., 2016; Worchel et al., 1998).

Taken together, these findings extend the results achieved in an organisational intervention (Fransen et al., 2020b) and ethnographic study (Smith et al., 2018), and also in team sports (e.g. Fransen et al., 2020a). They demonstrated how work design can be reformed into a modular format which accommodates the formal peer-leader roles alongside the core professional positions. Additionally, they showed how organisational-level structural factors like practices and policies can be shaped to reflect the identity and thus guide shared identity leadership and effective organisational action (cf. Slater et al., 2016). The results also revealed new, particularly significant peer-leader positions employees may assume to lead the identity; not only in team-level but also on the organisational level. These additions may be particularly relevant for identity leadership, as they highlight how peer-leaders may contribute to outcomes that promote employees' voluntary identity actualisation at work. Furthermore, the findings presented new evidence of the collaborative enactment of shared identity leadership, and of co-existing formal and informal peer-leaders in work organisations. By complementing each other, these different identity peer-leader formats and formalisations seemed to result in even stronger identity leadership. However, the results also showed the top leaders' critical role in identity leadership, including the aspects facilitating shared identity leadership. This is discussed next.

Top Leaders' Identity Leadership as a Boundary Condition for Successful Shared Identity Leadership

The findings suggest that successful shared identity leadership emerges from the top leaders' identity leadership actualisation. To begin with, the results demonstrated how

their impresarioship had integrated the identity across a range of organisational-level resources common to the self-managing workplaces (e.g. Martela, 2022). Some reflected organisational policies, like the decision-making principles. Together with those sharing information, they aided the employees and peer-leaders to independently choose solutions aligned with the identity in their work. Other resources connected the members on a shared platform where they could come together as a team to actualise the identity in, for example, decision-making, or socialising. Additionally, the findings showed that the top leaders' advancement initiated the development of the structures which integrated the identity into the organisational practices and work design facilitating shared identity leadership.

Considering all organisational structures, resources and work design embedding the identity, they may have made the identity a key part of the team's everyday work. This would have resulted from most employees likely participating in at least some structures, such as the events and trainings. Furthermore, the employees likely used the resources or were exposed to the icons that embedded the identity in their working environment. Being a peer-leader likely made identity reflecting matters even more common in daily work. Hence, these structures, resources, icons and work design may have made identity particularly salient for employees and thus guided the team's united, identity-aligning action extremely effectively, independent of the top leaders.

Additionally, the findings provide new evidence on the quality of the top leaders' identity leadership that may be required to reap the full benefits of shared identity leadership at work. Perhaps most important was their advancement, considering the freedom of contributions the top leaders fostered. Their frequent entrepreneurship, i.e. re-iterating and refining these matters in their rhetoric, may have given the employees the confidence to fully embrace their formal and informal identity leadership positions. Without the leaders actively nurturing these values, the informal peer-leaders' innovations the results section captured might have been much less likely.

The results also introduced new insights on the dynamic interplay between top leaders' and peer-leaders' identity leadership. They demonstrated that the top leaders were critical in laying the foundations and continuously developing the support for effective shared identity leadership. First, the findings highlighted how the top leaders' advancement included the members in organisational decision-making, and in designing the practices which resulted in the creation of the peer-leader roles. Likewise, the top leaders' advancement was behind major organisational decisions like holding on to the most valued structure, i.e. the flat organisational hierarchy. Instead, the findings indicated that the peer-leaders' advancement was central in building the authentic and better aligned team and in promoting team cohesion. Second, the results illustrated how the top leaders' entrepreneurship was somewhat exclusive in the sense that they defined the identity and extended its meanings. The peer-leaders then passed these on, as they defined and refined the identity to candidates and newcomers. Finally, as noted earlier, the top leaders' impresarioship appeared to be largely behind the organisational structures and resources that embedded the identity into the working environment and supported the peer-leaders' and employees' independent advancement and work, consistent with the identity.

Indications of Shared Identity Leadership Effectiveness

The results and the discussion above suggest that shared identity leadership may induce pronounced outcomes. Indeed, the company monthly review meetings and the background data offered indications of clear, positive objective organisational performance, like turnover and personnel growth, prior to data collection. Considering the findings as a whole, the objective performance may well be partly attributed to the top leaders' and the socialisation peer-leaders' entrepreneurship and advancement. The former likely had somewhat direct link to the performance by creating an environment which encouraged the team to engage in innovative behaviour. This seems plausible given that the results indicated it had led to innovations significant to the business. On the other hand, the latter may have influenced performance by producing shared expectations for work and collaboration. Additionally, considering experimental evidence suggesting that groups are more productive when their identity fosters diverse views (Postmes et al., 2001), the collective decision-making facilitated by shared impresarioship and the top leaders' identity advancement may have contributed to organisational performance. Finally, the top leaders' identity advancement by maintaining the flat organisational structure likely also enhanced organisational performance as it seemed to have removed internal competition.

The results also suggest some individual level outcomes; most significantly, a considerably strong organisational commitment across all focus groups, as several employees described their organisational membership as personally very valuable. This seemed to be supported by the members' similar traits and the numerous opportunities to connect with other members, which had also resulted in personal relationships and a strong sense of cohesion. Concurrently, it appeared to be facilitated by the ability to be authentic and pursue a personally chosen development direction in the organisation. Finally, the exceptional opportunities to participate in organisational decision-making, not only via the peer-leader roles but also when making strategic choices, were important commitment drivers for the employees.

Taken together, therefore, these findings present compelling new evidence of the potential of shared identity leadership to enhance organisational outcomes and thus, leadership effectiveness in mobilising the team to freely take identity-aligning action.

Theoretical Implications

With our integrative approach, this study contributes to the identity leadership theory by demonstrating the dynamic interplay between vertical leaders, formal and informal peer-leaders, as well as the organisational-level factors such as structures and resources in together facilitating effective shared identity leadership. While earlier organisational research did not consider how vertical identity leadership might promote shared identity leadership, our findings suggest that vertical identity leadership may pose an important boundary condition in promoting successful shared identity leadership. Furthermore, we showed for the first time how shared identity leadership and identity leadership, in general, may be fostered by innovating organisational-level factors, such as policies and practices, as well as ICT systems and work design to embed the identity. Additionally, our study extends the theory by revealing new, particularly significant peer-leader positions, not only on team-level (Fransen et al., 2020b; Smith et al., 2018) but also on

organisational level, which have a profound impact on promoting identity-relevant outcomes at work. Moreover, our findings showed that in addition to distinct roles, peer-leaders may also enact shared identity leadership as a team. Finally, the results demonstrated that both formal and informal peer-leaders may coexist, and employees taking these positions may assume not only distinctive but also similar, highly significant roles. Thus, shared identity leadership is not reliant on the exceptional few but rather becomes all the more powerful when distributed by many.

Practical Implications

The findings propose several implications for organisational leaders, consultants, and HR professionals. The overarching suggestion for leaders is to work with employees to redesign organisational practices, policies and resources to reflect identity. The results also suggest that leaders should consider shaping practices, policies, resources and work design to facilitate shared identity leadership. The findings further suggest that optimal peer-leader roles are responsible for recruitment and onboarding, and also for communality at work. The peer-leader roles seem to offer improved organisational efficiencies due to setting shared expectations regarding work and facilitating smooth collaboration, which most leaders appreciate. Additionally, they offer highly motivating growth opportunities for the employees and equip them for career advancement into more formal leadership positions.

The results also have specific implications for organisational socialisation. To begin with, organisations would be wise to include the wider hiring team in making the recruitment decisions and discuss the organisational identity with the candidates throughout the job interviews. It would be advisable to then use the candidate's reflections as one of the hiring criteria but to be broadminded when assessing the way candidates endorse the identity. Similarly, the findings propose that structured, peer-led onboarding programmes, including workshops on the practical meanings of the identity, would be useful in accelerating the newcomers' integration. Additionally, the results indicate that more individualised on-boarding programmes addressing the challenges the newcomers may have faced may support more effective integration, particularly in self-managing contexts.

The results also indicate that shared identity leadership may require a shift in the leaders' mindset. Leaders may need to increasingly see themselves as the inspirers and guides of the team. Furthermore, they may need to consider that the employees are motivated and capable of taking more responsibility at work. To create a truly united team, leaders would also be well advised to be open to feedback, and even to constructive criticism. To support the team to succeed more independently, the findings suggest that modern leaders create resources such as guiding principles and information access to facilitate this. While the results indicated that strategic decisions would continue to be on the leaders' desks, they also propose that to ensure better decisions, leaders would be well advised to include the team in making them. The present case then speaks for the power of identity leadership to advance these goals in workplace reality, achievements, and important outcomes.

The results propose that shared identity leadership may have valuable benefits for organisations and employees alike. To summarise, shared identity leadership makes managerial sense as it unites the team behind the shared mission.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite support from the multi-source data, the findings were obtained in a single case study investigating identity leadership in one self-managing organisation. While the general findings on the benefits of integrating identity into organisational practices are relevant irrespective of the organisational form, future research should explore whether similar results can be found in other self-managing or hierarchical organisations. Second, it needs to be acknowledged that despite the consistent findings across all data sources, the possibility exists that the employee-informant sample was skewed towards the most committed members. Hence, although the informant who had recently resigned also echoed the same sentiments as the other employees, future research should explore the topic in a field setting with a quantitative design and a large, diverse sample. Moreover, considering the indications of how shared identity leadership may have led to strengthened outcomes, the quantitative design would benefit from investigating the effects of shared identity leadership.

Furthermore, to establish if self-managing organisations differ from their hierarchical counterparts in terms of identity leadership effectiveness, further research is needed to address the phenomena across these organisational forms in the same design. Additionally, as the results would suggest the wider potential of shared identity leadership in all workplace contexts, future research should explore more widely how and which peer-leader roles may contribute to identity leadership in organisational settings. Finally, given the increase in remote work, more research is needed to address how shared identity leadership is enacted e.g. in fully remote organisations.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand how organisational identity was collectively actualised in a self-managing workplace. The findings extend the social identity leadership theory by indicating that shared identity leadership was the result of a dynamic interplay between the vertical leaders and peer-leaders, as well as organisational-level structural factors that together seemed to strengthen organisational effectiveness. These results suggest that shared identity leadership may have considerable potential in work organisations. Future research should explore the phenomenon more widely, both in self-managing and hierarchical organisations.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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