Leaders being challenged to care and confront suffering

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1. Introduction

Current leadership research proposes that supervisor behavior has a greater effect on employee mental well-being than many other factors (Kelloway et al. 2012, 1; Gilbreath & Benson 2004). Even though there is an increasing recognition of the very nature of humanity and our need to interrelate (Rynes et al. 2012, 507), caring as an organizational leadership perspective has not yet flourished. Kahn (1993, 555) proposes that unless the superiors establish caring connections across the organization, subordinates may withdraw emotionally from one another, creating relationships in which they are regularly disengaged, alienated, and emotionally absent rather than present.

In our empirically grounded research, we wanted to grasp lived experiences of work-related suffering and survival. We built this research on our former work of leniency of leadership, in other words, leaders being humane and caring also towards themselves when confronting hardships. For further development of leniency as a form of caring, we aspired for lived experiences of work-related change, in this case, entrepreneurs forced to end their business. Our research questions are, 1) what kind of combinations of thoughts, feelings, and actions emerge in the individual work-related suffering, and 2) how these combinations challenge leaders to care and respond especially when confronting the subordinate. This article focuses on leader-subordinate “confrontations” from the leadership perspective, since the most severe leadership hardships that emerged in our former study were the ones with leaders having confronted subordinates with negative personal issues (Kohtakangas, Perttula & Syväjärvi 2015). By confronting we mean these two parties meeting face-to-face the first time after the subordinate hardship occurs. Our work on leniency experiences, situating in the research on psychology of leadership, draws from theories of self-leadership and self-compassion. Through investigating a work-related changes, we hope to gain insight of the needs and aspirations of the subject in the edge of change, and how this experience can be effectively handled in leadership situations.

Our empirical material consists of 14 (6 women) semi-structured entrepreneur interviews, of which three are from a publicly broadcasted current affairs program called “the Human Factor”. The empirical material was collected during April, 2014 and January, 2015. Since our attempt is to gain new understanding, and to build theory of leniency being a dimension of caring, we apply grounded theory approach to investigate these social influence processes (Parry 1998, 90). Grounded theory is about discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research (e.g. Strauss & Corbin 1990). Our ontological understanding claims the existence of multiple realities and perspectives, which leads to subjective epistemology and interpretation.
2. Theoretical frameworks

In our research, we are willing to follow the aspirations of Dutton et al. (2006, 90) of “how social organizing processes that unfold inside organizations, where so many of people spend the majority of their lives, cultivate life through how they foster collective goods such as compassion, wisdom, integrity and other social accomplishments that represent the best of the human condition”. Dutton and colleagues argue that organizations are sites for human pain, but also for human healing, as emotions activate and mobilize responses to human pain in organizations (Dutton et al. 2006, 84; 90). Kroth & Keeler (2009, 515) examine the perspective of social exchange theory and state that leadership develops through reciprocity, as employees develop beliefs about how the organization values them. Caring has positive outcomes as increasing perceived positive organizational support (POS) that further strengthens affective commitment, enhances emotional climate, and increases performance (Kroth & Keeler 2009, 513).

On our former work on leniency of leadership (Kohtakangas, Perttula & Syväjärvi 2015), we built our framework on theories of self-leadership and self-compassion (e.g. Neff 2003), resulting in a model of individuals learning through experience to develop a caring and compassionate approach towards oneself and others. This model of living through hardships in a satisfactory manner guided us to look closer on caring and well-being in the work context. When planning the research design, we had to think how to get access to lived experiences of work-related suffering and how to interpret them as the means of qualitative research. Due to the times of recession, people who lost their jobs would have served as a wide and diverse sample. However, we relied more on the emergence of self-compassion in some sort of remarkable turning points, as self-compassion refers to a healthy way of relating to one’s misery, sadness and grief whenever we confront failure or loss. Instead of isolation or being driven by emotions causing negative effects, one feels worthy of comforting, mindful, and inter-connected, being able to recognize suffering as part of the human nature (Neff 2003). This condition guided us to study survival in a culturally sensitive issue: ending one’s business and/or being bankrupt.

3. Methodology

Grounded theory refers both to a method of inquiry and to the product of inquiry. According to Charmaz (2005, 507), grounded theory offers a set of flexible analytic guidelines that enable researchers to focus on their empirical material collection and to build inductive middle-range theories through successive levels of empirical material analysis and conceptual development. Researchers are encouraged to remain close to their studied worlds and to develop an integrated set of theoretical concepts from their empirical materials that in addition of synthesis and interpretation also show processual relationships. (Charmaz 2005, 508.)

Grounded theory suits leadership research well since leadership is about social influence processes and grounded approach strives to make theory of social influence processes with a pragmatic usefulness as a criterion of a good theory (Locke 2001, 95; Parry 1998, 91). Parry (1998, 100) also advises to investigate change incidents as leadership emerges in a variety of contexts, by different agents. Contributing to our former work, we employed a deductive frame (attributes of leniency and potential emergence of self-leadership and self-compassion experiences) to an inductive research setting (entrepreneurs who have ended their business and moved on). We aspired for deeper understanding and fulfillment for our emergent substantive theory from another area of leadership. This research has an emphasis on lived experiences interpreted on the lens of leading oneself through suffering.

Research participants were first retrieved with a snowball sampling, using a consent letter and with following conditions: having ended one’s business (either controlled shutdown or being bankrupt), having had employees in their firm, and having moved on
We used entrepreneurship associations’ email-lists and twitter to spread the invitation to participate. The consent letter included ethical considerations of protecting anonymity, choices for contacting the researchers, concerns of taping the interviews, and of usage and storing the material. The semi-structured interviews were conducted during April 2014 and January 2015. Participants were heterogeneous with respect to age, gender, current situation (entrepreneurs and wageworkers), reasons for ending the business and time since ending the business. All of the eleven interviewees were located in the northern part of Finland, and had employee(s) in their business.

During the empirical material collection on September 2014, the Finnish public service broadcasting company (channel 2) aired a current affairs program called “the Human Factor” including interviews of three bankrupt entrepreneurs (one woman). This program resonated well with our research interests, so it was chosen as an additional empirical source for our research. What is also remarkable in the program is that it reflects on the cultural discourses directed towards having ended one’s business, either voluntarily or being forced to. All the interviews and “the Human Factor” – program were transcribed verbatim during the collection. Interview transcripts were immediately checked back with the participants to avoid any misunderstandings. Totally the empirical material consists of 14 interviews, 21 hours of speech and transcriptions of 230 pages (font and spacing 1).

Grounded theory strategies consists of simultaneous empirical material collection and analysis, coding, using comparative methods, writing memos with construction of conceptual analyses and developing ideas, and sampling to refine emerging theoretical ideas and integration of the theoretical framework (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Grounded theory analysis in essence is learning about the concerns of the participants, resulting through abstraction as a substantive theory. In this research, we follow the three-stage coding of Strauss and Corbin (open, axial and selective coding), with an emphasis on the constructivist and pragmatist nature of the empirical material.

4. Preliminary findings: The process model and the Focal point experience

After the first conducted interviews, we began with a line-by-line coding, asking what is happening in here. Soon we realized that the experiences resulted in four different stages of the “survival” process. Those stages were labeled as Background, Focal point, Transition and Aftermath. Partially this division stems from our interview guide, although these stages, though more compressed, often emerged already in the first narrative of the respondents, in their story of their entrepreneurship.

The ongoing material collection and analysis resulted on an emergent theme of confrontation with other people, being one of the great concerns in the experience of ending one’s business. Our empirical material talks about the experiencing self in the middle of holistic psychosocial needs, aspirations and worries. The Focal point experience is to some extent understandable by the aspirations in the Background stage, especially on the category of “Entrepreneurial entry” including variations in knowledge of entrepreneurship (“inherited model” or “novices”), and motives for entrepreneurship (e.g. higher standard of living or fulfilling one’s dreams). In addition, as a change event itself, the Focal point is a starting point for another complex processes.

In the core of the Focal point experience is the emergence of a distinction made between one’s ongoing and forming experience while constantly reflecting on other people’s actions. This finding moved us to consider leader-subordinate confrontation as one of the critical points in caring leadership practices. Next we will shortly introduce the process model of the Focal point experience (Figure 1.) and then discuss the applications for caring leadership.
“Entrepreneurial entry" as a subcategory includes, in addition to motives and knowledge, setting up the business in a certain life situation in a certain time with a personal analysis of the requirements and potential risks of entrepreneurship. Besides, one makes certain financial and inter-relational commitments (e.g. companionships). In theorizing the entry as a sub-category, the motives transform the action while one is constantly gaining new knowledge in a determined surroundings. This resonates as feelings of capability, being respected, and successfully operating as an entrepreneurs, thus being independent, self-actualizing and internally motivated.

When challenges begin, either by changes in global or local economy (e.g. recession), difficulties with companionships or by unexpected life situations, entrepreneurs seem to "set ready for a battle". In other words, quitting is never the first option and for many, the battle against challenging and intervening conditions goes on for a long time. This battle slowly drains the energy out, as revenue is tight, work amount is high and one is dedicated to try all the magic tricks against failure. Symptoms such as being sleepless, grumpy, unable to concentrate and having cynical thoughts and a desperate mind actually depict symptoms of burnout. The last straw for those who independently decided to shut down the business was usually a reckoning that the struggle is not worth totally sacrificing one's health. A majority of the entrepreneurs were quite conscious during the “battle time" about the potential threat of shutdown.

When the business is shut down and the Focal point is at hand, the individual starts to consider loss and his/hers remaining resources. We were interested to find, with what combinations of thoughts, emotions and actions this change is confronted. “Reacting to change" is a self-centered category which transforms the processes started in the entry to a response for unfulfilled goals (motives) set for entrepreneurship and the experience of inadequate know-how (loss of self-actualization). No matter the reason of shutdown, being responsible of one’s business makes the failure personal. In addition to this sense-making self-talk and emotional responses of worry, shame, grief and also relief of ending the battle, one thinks about the others influenced by the change (family, companions, customers, employees). This relates the self-centered experience to the consideration of other people involved and still in the sight. The experiencing person is tied to his/hers social surroundings, although these surroundings are also subject to change due to changes in the entrepreneurial status and identity and more broadly, ending of partnerships and belongingness to societies of other entrepreneurs.

“Experiencing other people" includes the process of isolation (either self-made or external), environments of authenticity (“safe spots”), and layers of social groups (the core team as "family"; the helping, compassionate others, and the "adverse party" that stigmatizes or intervened to the shutdown). "The ongoing negotiation"-category as the potential core category depicts how one reflects on personal status, capability, worthiness, and memberships of social groups as a transforming, interactive process. This “negotiation" is an evitable part of regaining meaning and resources toward
transition phase, where the identity and meaningfulness can be rebuild. Basically, “toward transition” depicts how one tries to scale to the loss with the help of other people and finally decides to see what else life have to offer. The categories presented are still in the progress of development and densifying.

5. Preliminary conclusions: Theorizing confrontation as a form of caring leadership

Our theory of the Focal point experience suggests that the experience is inward-looking interpretation of the effects of the change while constantly reflecting on one’s resources, such as caring and trustworthy relationships, knowledge and other feelings of self-worthiness. What we theorized as an ongoing negotiation process, depicts a transformation of self-image and values in relation to one’s social groups while gathering up resources for regaining meaningfulness. In the work context, when a subordinate encounters personal suffering for whatever reason and starts to react to the change, the leader (and the work community) have a change to support the negotiation process with a caring and compassionate reply. Next, we will continue to develop the substantive theory of confrontation with existing theories of dimensions of caring (Kahn 1993), compassion organizing (Dutton et al. 2006), caring as a managerial strategy (Kroth & Keeler 2009) and ethics of care, thus developing our contribution to leadership psychology.

Literature:


