Learning-orientated leadership: Actionable knowledge when looking outside the school setting
Marianne Döös & Lena Wilhelmson, Department of Education, Stockholm University

Introduction
In organisations of today the learning and competence issues have entered both the task responsibilities of managers and the strategic level agendas. Sandberg and Targama (2007) identify such priorities in management practice, and describe it as a necessity that managers develop a “more important pedagogical role” (p. 9). There is an increasing amount of evidence of the importance of workplace learning for organisational performance and success (Cedefop, 2011, 2012). When workplace learning is regarded as the key to organisational performance, knowledge is required both about how people learn, and about how to influence and forward such learning. Based on a learning theoretical stance this paper analyses managerial influence activities as learning-orientated leadership. The theoretical stance points to the fact that work-integrated learning is the genesis process behind competence (e.g., Billett, 2004; Döös, 2007; Ellström, 2001a). The concept of learning-orientated leadership is defined as a managerial task that intervenes into learning processes integrated in the carrying out of an organisations’ main tasks (Döös, Wilhelmson, & Backström, 2013; Wilhelmson, Johansson, & Döös, 2013).

In the Swedish school setting the concept of pedagogical leadership has a lengthy story and is described as tenacious political rhetoric lacking scientific ground (Nestor, 2006). As organisation researchers we find pedagogical leadership, as a concept in school contexts, to be contaminated with pedagogy being the core activity of a school organisation. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate attempts to make clear how to understand the principal’s pedagogical leadership in stating that pedagogic leadership is “everything that concerns to interpret the goals and to describe activities for a good goal fulfilment in relation to the national school goals and to improve the school’s results so that every student reaches as far as possible in his/her learning and development. This means that the principal must have knowledge about and competence to interpret the mandate, carry it into effect in teaching, lead and govern learning processes, and create understanding among the co-workers for the connection between effort and result.” (Skolinspektionen, 2012, p. 6, our translation). This praxis definition of “everything” does not seem to bring about much clarity. Also in the scientific literature it is not uncommon to find highly general descriptions of what principals do or need to do. An example is that principals enact instructional leadership through sharing with teachers, leading a learning community and so on (Stronge, 2013). Instead, Stronge suggests that a “comprehensive, authentic portrait of the principal’s work” (p. 64) needs to be provided. In times when leadership transition is asked for, this paper argues the fruitfulness of going outside the school context to find and learn from actionable knowledge about managerial influence work in other branches of working life.

By using an empirical study (Döös, Johansson, & Wilhelmson, work in progress) from the software communication industry the paper introduces learning-orientated leadership as an alternative concept to pedagogical leadership. The aim is to contribute knowledge about learning-orientated leadership as part of managers’ everyday work and to discuss this knowledge as relevant to leadership in the school sector.
Previous research
The research literature points at an existing interest in leadership in relation to the development of learning workplace environments (e.g., Agashae & Bratton, 2001). However, the specific interest in managerial facilitation of co-workers’ learning has to our knowledge largely concerned direct coaching activities (e.g., Bredin & Söderlund, 2007; Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999; Ellinger et al., 2011; Macneil, 2001). Leaders have been described as designers, teachers and stewards (Senge, 1996), as enablers of workplace learning (Warhurst, 2013) and as facilitators of learning (Wallo, 2008). Based on an empirical study Wallo presents three leadership roles (supporter, educator and confronter) and relates those to two perspectives on leaders as facilitators of learning: the performance-orientated and the development-orientated leadership. In both cases, focus is on how the manager can support the learning of an individual employee in a direct and deliberate manner. Both Wallo (2008) and Warhurst (2013) bring forward understanding based on managers’ beliefs about learning and their thinking about how to enable learning. Our emphasis is rather on how influence on co-workers’ learning shows in managers’ descriptions of how they attempt to influence. The kind of things that managers describe that they do in order to influence, especially indirectly and in relation to work-integrated learning appear as relevant actionable knowledge also in schools. Since the direct influence is earlier depicted (e.g., Bredin & Söderlund, 2007; Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999) to a greater extent, we concentrate more on expanding the knowledge about indirect influence.

In the school context there seems to exist a dividing line between two competing ideas concerning how to improve and develop schools. On the one hand it is argued that near leadership in terms of the principals visiting classrooms and thereby coaching each teacher individually is what matters. This connects to so called instructional leadership and to the principal title which emanates from the term principal teacher and relies on the underlying assumption that “the principal had more skill and knowledge than anyone in the building and would guide others in how to teach” (Hoerr, 2008, p. 84). The classroom observations have been problematised in that the principal mostly will observe teachers in content areas where the principal has no knowledge which leads to generic observations (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). On the other hand, the idea that schools, as well as other organisations, profit from a leadership that organises good conditions for the co-workers’ work-integrated learning (e.g., DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Larsson & Löwstedt, 2010). DuFour and Mattos (2013) state that “schools need learning leaders who create a schoolwide focus on learning both for students and the adults who serve them” (p. 40). In this vein we locate our own previous research within a working life and organisational pedagogic tradition (Granberg & Ohlsson, 2011) where we have used learning theoretical as well as complexity theoretical points of departure to study leadership (Backström, Döös, & Wilhelmson, 2006; Backström et al., 2013; Wilhelmson, Johansson, & Döös, 2013).

Managers’ influence on work-integrated learning is here regarded as a leadership task to fulfill, and in general leadership is defined in terms of influence. While managerial work is described as multi-faceted and fragmented (Tengblad, 2006), this paper looks into one aspect of middle managers’ work and details how middle managers describe their efforts to influence the work that is carried out. Their efforts to influence were interpreted and analysed with the help of learning theory as defined below.

Theoretical points of departure
The main theoretical point of departure concerns work-integrated learning. Work integrated learning is closely interconnected with the development of work related skills and competence (Ellström,
2001b), and a key part of organisations performance. Such learning has the potential to enable people to individually and jointly carry out tasks in more adequate ways in relation to intentions and goals. This theoretical lens opens up for identifying everyday learning processes that are intervened into, and to focus an aspect of managers’ everyday leadership actions as a learning-orientated task. Learning, from a work-integrated and thus experience-based point of view is a process understood as a by-product of people’s carrying out of tasks (Billett, 2004; Dixon, 1994; Döös, 1997; Kolb, 1984). This means three things: firstly, people don’t have to be aware of the fact that they are learning, on the contrary, many times learning is a subtle process that changes people’s understanding about something gradually, what Marsick and Watkins termed as incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Secondly, learning is not bounded to certain training activities, instead learning is continuously on-going in everyday working life, which means that e.g. managerial influence activities can be analysed as opportunities for learning and as constituting a certain learning environment (Billett, 2004; Johansson, 2011). Thirdly, learning occurs through an interplay between the affordances of the workplace and individuals’ readiness to learn (Löfberg, 1989) and different types of learning are stimulated under different contextual circumstances (Johansson, 2011). Discretion and reflection are among what is frequently regarded as important aspects for learning.

In all actions people continuously construct and re-construct their own and others’ conditions for learning. Based on experiential learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2010; Kolb, 1984) Döös and Ohlsson (1999) made a distinction between two types of pedagogical interventions, direct and indirect. The direct interventions use communication to influence people’s conceptions, e.g. to inform about the risks with smoking in order to make someone aware of the need to quit. These kinds of interventions are often seen as easy to make, but their effects on action are found to be limited. The indirect interventions influence conceptions via changed preconditions in people’s environment. The idea here is that changed preconditions make people behave differently and new acts inevitably produce related thinking. The distinction between direct and indirect influence is essential to how we analysed data. Interventions can be understood as taking place in two different worlds, namely either the specific work environment, or the individuals’ meaning context, i.e. their conceptions of this specific environment (ibid.). An example of changed preconditions is when a school introduces a system with two teachers in each class. Being to teachers, sharing responsibility, changes radically the preconditions of the task.

We rely on Yukl’s definition of leadership as the “process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives.” (Yukl, 2002, p. 7). This definition opens up for collectivity, which is relevant both in the context studied and in Swedish school settings; it also points towards the leadership task of creating favourable learning conditions for the accomplishment of organisational goals.

**Methods**

Research has been performed using qualitative methods in a case study (Döös, Johansson, & Wilhelmson, work in progress). The empirical setting was a global organisation within the software communication industry where competition is sharp. The study was conducted in a software research and development (R&D) unit, which consisted of approximately 1200 employees (mostly engineers working as coders, designers, testers, and managers) divided into nine sub-units of varying size. The unit belonged to a large R&D unit with ten units and some 5000 employees. The unit
focused both the immediate needs of the customers and on the middle-range long development of new software solutions. The corporation had been through phases that represent shifts in the degrees to which operational tasks or developmental tasks were in the foreground. Around the millennium shift, at the burst of the IT-bubble, the corporation’s customers could not afford to buy its products, and the number of staff was reduced by somewhere between a third to a half in the years that followed. In fall 2008, the corporation had recovered, yet not regained full strength. Some good signs were that they made profits again, small innovation cells were started in every country, and some managers managed to free money for risk taking. Two years later, on our return for the main data collection in the early fall of 2010, there existed islands of early adopters of a variety of new agile ways of working, alongside the ordinary focus on deliveries in operational technology development. The external landscape was perceived as highly competitive, where Chinese and Indian companies were transforming themselves from fast-followers into technology leaders. Through cooperative processes, the middle managers now worked to anchor new agile ways of working both within and across sub-units – this period forms the point of departure for the description of managerial influence that now follows. This was looked upon as a full scale experiment with an uncertain outcome.

Data was gathered during 2010 and 2011 and partly at a time of a re-organisation that was due to a perceived need to connect various products, as well as people, in ways thought of as flexible in order to meet with customer demands. The data material when searching for learning-orientated leadership origins from individual semi-structured interviews with nine middle managers belonging to the top management team of the 1200 people R&D unit (the manager, his deputy manager, six middle managers and one program manager) and one of this manager’s colleagues from another R&D unit. These managers all had long experience (10-31 years) within the corporation and also considerable decision latitude. The interviews did not explicitly contain questions on learning; rather they concerned work tasks and on-going changes.

The basis for the analysis is learning-theoretical as we departed from the distinction between direct and indirect pedagogical interventions (Döös & Ohlsson, 1999) as presented in the theory section. As a first step an analysis scheme was constructed to take this difference into consideration. Direct influence was searched for as verbal communication attempts to influence sensemaking in order to change conceptions held by the managers and co-workers of the organisation. Two main types were identified: influence through convincing conversations incl. delivery of feedback, and collective conversations for mutual sensemaking. Indirect influence was searched for as managers making some kind of change in the organisational context, thus producing changed affordances to act for the members of the organisation, that in turn would influence conceptions of work according to the learning-theoretical logic (ibid.). The indirect influence first emerged as four categories: to set requirements and follow up, create space, organising of work, and other. After this analysis step a line was also drawn, on grounds of principle, to distinguish between examples where a more educative or fostering leadership approach was described, in contrast to a more facilitating or enabling approach. Having reached this point the two types of pedagogical interventions (direct/indirect) and the two kinds of leadership approaches (fostering/enabling) were chosen to structure the findings and later

1 To be kept in mind here is that technology development is the core activity of the corporation. In this paper, however, it is the organising tasks that are referred to in the distinction between operational and developmental.

2 A group of software development methodologies, where requirements and solutions evolve through iterations and incremental development between people with different functional expertise.
also to name and describe four categories of learning-orientated leadership that are presented and further developed in the findings section.

**Analysed findings**

The middle managerial work at the unit included a number of tasks where the managers’ intended to influence different parties in the organisation (could be co-workers, manager colleagues, and also superior managers) regarding the ways work was carried out. By focusing on the managers’ statements about what they did when attempting to influence, four thematic empirically based categories of learning-orientated leadership were generated. The direct influence was categorised as *convincing or inviting communication*, and the indirect influence as either *aligning or freeing structures*. The categories of convincing communication and the aligning of structures were interpreted as part of a fostering leadership approach, whereas the categories of inviting communication and the freeing of structures were interpreted as part of an enabling leadership approach.

The presentation of our findings is grouped into direct and indirect influence, and structured with the help of the fostering and the enabling approaches. A brief generalised interpretation of the category is presented.

**Direct influence – via communication attempts**

Communication is part and parcel of managers’ leadership. Managers took part in numerous formal meetings and were also engaged in flows of informal conversations, e.g. in the hallways. When searching for different qualities in managers’ direct influence activities we discerned on the one hand and within the fostering approach a) attempts to convince others with information and arguments, and on the other hand and within the enabling approach b) attempts to invite others to mutual exchange of views.

**Convincing communication**

The managers’ *convincing* communication is talked about as a kind of fostering task, making others aware of what one believes are the desired ways of thinking and doing, and the necessity of this. As managers are acting towards reaching the jointly set goals of the organisation, this approach entails to communicate somewhat lecturing, persuading and confronting. This approach is also characterised by managers having a fixed view of the objectives and then using communication to convince others to do or think in that direction. Here, managers act control-orientated in the sense that they are trying to be in control over how something should be interpreted or done.

**Inviting communication**

In contrary to being convincing the category *inviting* communication is characterised by mutuality and openness for differences in opinions and an interest in listening and learning from others. Being open concerns activities when managers describe themselves as active in listening, reasoning and searching for common understanding. Talking and listening jointly is held as important in order to catch and value ideas, and then forward them to other parts of the organisation. Here, the managers act emergence-orientated in the sense that they trust the value of an open process where diversity in opinions and listening to one another will bring forward new solutions. It is also characteristic that managers actively invite other people to be part of decision processes, i.e. enacting high involvement and distribution of control.
**Indirect influence – via change in the organisational context**

In managers’ descriptions of their work it was possible to identify various activities where they attempted to influence conceptions indirectly via the altering of organisational preconditions for work integrated learning. Thereby aiming to change how work was carried out. When searching for different qualities in managers’ indirect influence activities we discerned on the one hand and within the fostering approach attempts to align structures, and on the other hand and within the enabling approach attempts to free structures. The alignment could either concern soft structures (e.g., institutionalised norms, rules) through making requirements that would influence ways of working or organisational structures which meant a re-design of the organisation chart or of principles behind team composition. The freeing of structures could either concern soft structures and a creation of action space that afforded authority to people to act at their own discretion or that organisational structures were broken up or disregarded.

**Aligning structures**

There are times when middle management in an organisation experiences a need to redesign and (re-) connect different parts of their organisation as a means to achieve more alignment in how work is carried out. As already mentioned, we entered the studied organisation during such a period.

**Soft structures – setting requirements to influence ways of working**

In their work of managing co-workers and manager colleagues, the middle managers describe that they make decisions that influence what (or how) something is expected to be done, that is, they are making requirements as a means to influence the ways how work is carried out. They also put the decisions into practice. The setting of requirements stretches beyond the direct interaction and communication, but may, of course, need communication in order to be performed. However, the mechanism here is not to convince or invite by communication. Rather, the mechanism relies on decisions made, goals set and on procedures to control those.

**Organisational structures – re-designing the organisation chart**

As a part of their work the managers occasionally re-design the organisational structures of their units with the intention to better accomplish goals that are set, that is, aiming at finding what they think are the most appropriate organisational structures supporting certain ways of carrying out work. Reorganising organisational structures is here assumed to force people into new thinking, new energy, new acting, and prevent stagnation and too comfortable thought patterns. Thus, re-designing was seen as a force for learning.

**Freeing structures**

As mentioned above the alignment of structures was contrasted with the freeing of both soft and organisational structures which characterise another kind of organised influence activity.

**Soft structures – creation of action space/discretion**

Contrary to making requirements as a way to influence the work carried out, was when managers made space for others to take place and also integrate them in the strategic work. Based on a belief in the power emerging from a high involvement, the members of a management team e.g. elevated and became parts of the manager’s running of the business. Overall, this kind of influence can be described as cases where managers when making space advocate high involvement and distribution of control. Making space can also concern creation of new meeting spots to stimulate new patterns of interaction and possibilities to share experiences. Contrary to designing structures for alignment
managers here act with an intention to design structures that give space for emergence of ways of working based on what others in the organisation find appropriate.

**Organisational structures – broken up or disregarded**
That managers dare to leave pre-decided rules and systems, not only by allowing space within structures, but also by actually breaking up or setting structures out of play is part of how they attempt to influence. Within the freeing of structures the managers create temporary ‘task force’ units to solve critical situations with short and sharp deadlines, where the ordinary organising of work is not sufficient and capable of dealing with the situation.

**Summarising comment**
As shown above the analysis of managerial influence activities yielded four main categories – summarised in Table 1 – with the help of a division between on the one hand direct and indirect influence, and on the other hand fostering and enabling leadership approaches. The two indirect influence activities were in turn categorised into sub-categories.

**Table 1.** Four categories of learning-orientated leadership with two sub-categories added for each category of indirect influence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership task purpose</th>
<th>Direct influence</th>
<th>Indirect influence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fostering approach</strong></td>
<td>Convincing communication</td>
<td>Aligning structures • Soft structure alignment • Organisational structure alignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enabling approach</strong></td>
<td>Inviting communication</td>
<td>Freeing structures • Soft structure spacing • Organisational structure breaking up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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On the one hand, managers engaged in influencing activities within a *fostering* approach, through direct convincing communication and indirect influence via aligning both soft and organisational structures. As the empirical examples indicate, the fostering approach built on fixed views of objectives, trust in predetermined organisational goals and procedures, and on control of the interpretations of objectives. On the other hand, and within an *enabling* leadership approach managers engaged in inviting communication as well as in the freeing of both soft and organisational structures. The enabling approach built on confidence in the emerging competence, on favouring a diversity of opinions, listening and high involvement of others. The enabling approach involved to facilitate and to empower or authorize people, affording discretion and trusting the outcome.

**Discussion**
The theoretical body of learning-orientated leadership is limited as the concept is relatively new. Previous research pointed towards a gap in respect to understanding especially the indirect interventions where conditions for co-workers’ work-integrated learning are created. This paper aims contribute knowledge about learning-orientated leadership as part of managers’ everyday work and to discuss this knowledge as relevant to leadership in the school sector. The leadership task thereby
in focus is found in managers’ everyday work. Our empirical analysis shows that when expanding learning-orientated leadership as a unit of analysis to also include activities being part of managers’ organising of everyday work practice, it gets obvious that a number of managerial activities influence the opportunities for work-integrated learning in the organisation. The facilitation of work-integrated learning therefore needs to be understood in a wider sense than as the manager-as-coach who directly influences the learning of single individuals. In this study, managers were found to facilitate work-integrated learning as direct influence of individual co-workers but also indirectly through the organising of work tasks. This knowledge is potentially useful for school principals in relation to their strive to fulfil the national educational goals.

What was studied in this empirical case concerned how managers’ descriptions of their influence activities may be understood as a learning-orientated leadership task. It is not possible to be fully sure of that the managers acted as they described. However, in this case the trustworthiness is regarded reasonably good as there is concordance in the data corpus, different people told similar stories and gave similar examples, concrete changes were carried out, new organisational plans and structures were introduced and so on. We also participated in several meetings and were then able to observe the doings. A conclusion drawn out of our analysis is that managers’ intentional influencing activities span between two approaches, representing two contrasting endpoints of a continuum: Having a fostering approach and having an enabling approach. The fostering approach is characterised by managers being goal-orientated and control-orientated. Thus, they are acting to achieve more or less explicit objectives, and, trying to control the means of how something should be done or interpreted. In this way managers influence the work carried out and thereby the work-integrated learning. On the opposite side of the continuum, when acting according to an enabling approach, managers are instead emergence-orientated, that is, acting with an interest of letting the objectives and means of work partly emerge in the continuous interaction. A consequence of this is that it also favours a distribution of power in the organisation.

So what does this mean in a school setting and in relation to the pedagogical leadership rhetoric (Nestor, 2006)? What is stressed here is the potential of linking leadership to theory about learning, thus in the school context liberating ourselves from contaminating this pedagogic leadership task with the fact that the main task of the activity is pedagogic. To study other empirical contexts than schools contribute to an analytical keeping apart of the pedagogical leadership task and the pedagogical activity task, which may be useful to learn from when returning to the school context. On a learning theoretical basis and with empirical material from another setting than the educational it was possible to identify learning-orientated aspects of managers influencing attempts. Thereby four main categories of learning-orientated leadership were identified and in the case of indirect influence also four sub-categories.

The idea of classroom visits and near leaderships is still valid. However, we would argue that it is obsolete to believe that this is the necessary route to school development and good student results. From what we see the principal profession can rely on combination of a number of skills, in fact the principalship may metaphorically be described as a decathlon\(^3\). And with the principal as a decathlete we open up both for seeing a need for joint principalship (Döös, Wilhelmson, & Backström, 2013; We would like to thank the political scientist Jenny Madestam for this metaphor as she within our collaboration on shared leadership research opened some of her previous interviews where political leadership was described as a decathlon.

\(^3\)
Kristiansson, Scherp, & Fagerström, 2008; Wilhelmson & Döös, 2013) as an organisational solution to a demanding task, and also for identifying the potential in accepting that there is not only one right way. This empirical study shows a number of ways in which managers exercise influence and we argue the potential in acknowledging multiple ways of working, ways where the individual principal’s competence to work along more than one route, as well as the joint leadership effort where all categories are in use and also seen as distributed. The praxis definition of pedagogic leadership cited in the introduction does not say anything about the qualities that constitute this leadership task. This paper’s contributions lies in looking into what it may mean to lead and govern learning processes.

References


