

## Taming the Survey

### Managing the Employee Survey to Create Space for Change Oriented Leadership

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# **Taming the Survey: Managing the Employee Survey to Create Space for Change Oriented Leadership**

## **Abstract**

Often, the space for agency and leadership for middle managers is understood to depend on their capacity to escape standardized controlling systems. In this paper, we challenge this view, and instead explore the possibility for middle managers to engage with and make systems enabling rather than constraining, thereby supporting locally relevant change initiatives. We specifically explore how managers engage with employee surveys, as organization wide standardized systems, and work to make these enabling. Based on interviews with 48 managers and observations of 10 meetings in 5 different organizations, we identify three main strategies: reinterpretation, prioritization, and embedding. Drawing on complexity leadership theory, we argue that through these strategies, the managers succeeds in creating a temporary adaptive space, thereby facilitating development and innovation. Our findings contribute to the literature on middle managers by developing a detailed understanding of the possibility for enabling leadership in this position.

## **MAD Statement**

Standardized measurement and control systems are often expected to drive change and development, but risk constraining rather than enabling middle managerial leadership. Our study of how managers engage with an organization wide standardized employee survey reveals that through their work, the system can be "tamed" and made to facilitate rather than hinder development. The

study suggests that to make the survey useful for change and development, aligned with organizational goals but at the same time adapted to local needs, the managers' extensive effort is a critical factor.

## **Introduction**

In this study, we explore the interaction between middle managers' leadership agency and standardized organizational systems for measurement and control. Middle managers are often portrayed as central actors in driving organizational change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; van der Voet m.fl., 2014), emphasizing the importance of transformational leadership or forms of heroic leadership for initiating and managing change (Faupel & Süß, 2019; Feng Cailing m.fl., 2016). However, middle managers are typically positioned in strongly constraining and complex organizational environments with a variety of standards, regulations and not least control and measurement system. Middle managers typically have conflicting roles and face contradictory demands, paradoxes and dilemmas (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Sparr, 2018), making the idea of leadership as individual and more or less heroic agency too simplistic.

Complexity leadership theory (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2007) strives to capture some of these challenges and tensions. The pressures on middle managers is here conceptualized in terms of the top-down logic of the operational core of an organization conflicting with and potentially stifling local adaptation and emergence. The logic of the operational core focus on alignment, efficiency and control (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013). This is realized not least in the form of system wide control and measurement systems, such as performance appraisal systems, budgeting systems, various forms of enterprise resource planning systems, and, as we focus here, employee surveys. Such standardized systems work to limit middle

manager discretion and space for heroic leadership agency. However, development and innovation demands local adaptation and some degree of freedom to experiment and create variation (Adler & Bohrys, 1996; Higgs & Rowland, 2005; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Complexity leadership theory conceptualizes arenas where this occurs as adaptive spaces (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018), where people and ideas are connected in temporary, often informal, networks. The dynamics of the adaptive space is thus in tension and conflict with the top-down logic of the operational core.

Middle managers are typically placed in the midst of this tension, facing demands for alignment and control as well as development and local adaptation. It is the role of leadership agency in this situation that we wish to explore. We are interested in what happens when managers on the one hand is constrained by the need to align with a system designed elsewhere, according to principles potentially at odds with the specific situation of the current workplace, and on the other hand is empowered by the legitimacy inherent in such system wide undertakings, ostensibly infused with the power to enable organizational development.

Complexity leadership theory suggests that enabling leadership agency consists in the ability to deflect and avoid the top-down pressures (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2007), working to escape the iron cage of control. However, in this paper we show that middle managers also perform enabling leadership in a quite different way. We explore the possibilities in the position of middle management to re-construct the role of the control and measurement systems, so that they enable and facilitate networking, local adaptation and creativity (Adler & Bohrys, 1996). Clearly, such a process of taming standardized systems to at least partly fill local needs, demands agency and effort.

The specific standardized system involved in this study is the employee survey (ES). This is a

widespread system and practice in contemporary organizations (Borg & Mastrangelo, 2008; Sanchez, 2007). The ES is used for providing feedback to top management about how strategies and core values are received by employees, to increase opportunities for employee voice, but also to contribute to, drive, and monitor change processes. In Sweden, where this study was done, ES are often carried out as part of a legally required process, called Systematic Work environment Management (The Swedish Work Environment Authority, 2001). Our research question is: Through which practical strategies can middle managers work to transform the employee survey into an enabling system, so as to facilitate adaptation and organizational change?

This article is structured as follows: first, we review the relevant literature on middle managerial leadership, and develop our research interest by building on complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) and Adler and Bohry's (1996) distinction between constraining and enabling systems. Secondly, we describe our methods and analytical procedure, including the particular standardized system we have studied, namely employee surveys. Thirdly, we present our main findings in the form of three central strategies of enabling leadership to make the system more conducive of development and local adaptation. Fourthly, we discuss our findings in relation to the existing literature on complexity leadership theory and middle managerial leadership. Finally, we conclude by drawing some central implications from the study.

## **The complexity of middle managerial leadership**

Middle managerial leadership is often positioned as critically important for organizational change and development (Bligh m.fl., 2018; Mustafa m.fl., 2016; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Sparr, 2018; van der Voet m.fl., 2014; Woiceshyn m.fl., 2019). Perhaps most clearly expressed in the theories of charismatic and transformational leadership, leadership is understood as

an agentic force striving for change and innovation (Faupel & Süß, 2019; Feng Cailing m.fl., 2016), central to which is interpersonal influence. Studies have explored various behavioral influence tactics (Yukl m.fl., 2008) as well as the role of identity negotiation (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) through which followers might be mobilized (Lord m.fl., 1999; van Knippenberg m.fl., 2004). Facing uncertainties and paradoxes in situations of change, leaders engage in sensegiving (Sparr, 2018) to provide direction to and mobilize followers.

In this way, theories of leadership have primarily focused the individual and possibly his or her relationships, as the locus of change and agency. For middle managers, however, the organizational context is clearly complex and present obvious challenges to idealized notions of heroic leadership. By et al (2016) argue that rather than being performed by heroic individuals, leadership in change situations is typically distributed among several actors. Middle managers act within a complex web of relationships, obligations and possibilities, in a wide range of practical roles, such as “entrepreneur, communicator, therapist and tightrope artist” (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011, s. 357). In this situation, they are expected to implement change that is initiated by top management.

Complexity leadership theory offers a way to conceptualize these tensions while offering a less individualistic and heroic perspective on the role of leadership in relation to change and development. This stream of theorizing was developed by Uhl-Bien and colleagues (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). They suggest that organizations can generally be seen to contain both an operational core and entrepreneurial activity (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). The operational core focus on exploitation of existing knowledge and strives to create order and standardization. This is where we can locate the top-down pressures of control, information and measurement systems. Modern organizations are often described as highly rationalized and controlled environments (Dambrin & Robson, 2011), drawing on Weber's

metaphor of an iron cage of rationality, closing in on the individual and restricting the space for agency and free will. A central element in this rationalization and control is the widening array of management control and information systems constituting important aspects of the context for middle managerial leadership. Through such systems, ever more aspects of organizational but also private life are being monitored and measured (Brown m.fl., 2010; Courpasson & Clegg, 2006, 2006). Essentially, middle managers face expectations to act agentially and drive change and development, and on the other hand a vast array of information and control systems, limiting their discretion and space for action.

In contrast to the pressure for alignment of the operational core, the entrepreneurial activity consists of all new ideas and creative solutions emerging in day-to-day activities, in informal interactions within the organization and across its boundaries (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). While the operating system works to limit variation in responses (Boisot & McKelvey, 2011), the entrepreneurial increases it. These two systems stand in tension and conflict (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009), as they contain very different dynamics.

A central aspect of the challenging position for middle managers can thus be described as managing the tension between these organizational elements. According to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017), the most common way to handle this is to try to impose order on the entrepreneurial function, effectively stifling it. Needed change is attempted as a controlled, top-down process (Higgs & Rowland, 2005) rather than to build on the entrepreneurial activity.

However, complexity leadership theory suggests that innovation, change and development results not from individual heroic leadership or top-down pressures, but from the dynamics of interactions between heterogeneous actors and new ideas. The role of leadership in relation to such dynamics

consists in enabling connections and facilitating development of ideas. Complexity leadership theory conceptualizes this area as an adaptive space (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017, 2018), which is the zone of conflicting (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) where emergence and idea generation from the entrepreneurial function confronts the order of the operational function, creating tension. This is where new, temporary, networks are established in the informal system of the organization, in the form of new connections between people and ideas. Ideas are transformed and connections established, that might lead to changes in the operational system, thus making efficient exploitation of the innovative ideas possible.

This conceptualization suggest three quite different leadership functions (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). Entrepreneurial leadership concerns stimulating creation of new knowledge and ideas (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). Operational leadership, in contrast, concerns securing and monitoring efficient processes and procedures, and resonates strongly with major themes in the leadership literature, such as the importance of vision, inspiration, etc (Faupel & Süß, 2019; Feng Cailing m.fl., 2016). Finally, enabling leadership concerns facilitating the complexity dynamics of adaptive space, in the sense of creating conditions for building new and temporary networks where people, ideas and material artefacts might connect in new ways. Further, knowledge and ideas emerging from adaptive space need championing in the operational core, to be able to be integrated in routine operations. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) point out that we know far less about this function of enabling leadership as it is the operational function that has been the focus for the majority of previous leadership studies.

The tension between the operational core and the adaptive space is particularly relevant for understanding the challenges facing middle managers in relation to the expectation to drive change and development. According to Uhl-Bien and Marion (2009), the operational function (then called



administrative function) risks stifling the idea generation and network building. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2017) talk about the operational function in terms of a 'brick wall' (p. 15), as the 'adaptive space can run counter to the control systems that dominate many management practices' (p. 14), and Hazy and Uhl-Bien (2013, s. 88) talks about how the operational function (called administrative function) is 'entraining'. Essentially, the operational function is seen as a constraining element, potentially to the degree of stifling and blocking any innovation. The main way to engage in enabling leadership and support the adaptive space is then seen as resisting (Giangreco & Peccei, 2005), avoiding or deflecting the systems of the operational core.

However, systems and structures might not only be constraining. Adler and Bohrys (1996) suggest that they might also have enabling qualities. While a constraining system is seen to support and enforce mechanistic organizing, an enabling system instead facilitates more organic organizing, that is, allowing a more flexible use and situated adaptations. In other words, the concept of an enabling system highlights the possibility for elements in the administrative function (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009) to paradoxically facilitate adaptive processes. While information systems by themselves at times accordingly have been seen to drive change (Sundtoft Hald & Mouritsen, 2013), others emphasize that change occurs as an interaction between the system and people. For instance, Ahrens and Chapman (2004, s. 296) argue that '[e]nabling systems were not mainly about decentralization /.../ but are better understood as attempts to mobilize local knowledge and experience in support of central objectives'. Similarly, complexity leadership theorists (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009) emphasize the need for agentic forces, that is, people utilizing the possibilities offered by a system. Indeed, adaptive dynamics, which is where adaption is accomplished, occurs as a result of the interaction between adaptive conditions and agentic forces, that is, leadership (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009).

In sum, middle managers negotiate and balance a range of different roles in relation not just to other actors (Bryant & Stensaker, 2011) but also in relation to different functions and systems in the organization (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Their space for action and agency depends in part on the pressure towards efficiency and standardization from the operational system (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017) but also upon how the systems performing this pressure might be rendered less constraining and more enabling. A range of studies suggest that whether a system is constraining or enabling depends less on the technical characteristics, and more upon communication in relation to the system. Ahrens and Chapman (2004), Wouters and Rojijmans (2011), Wouters and Wilderom (2008), as well as Brogaard-Kay (2015), all show how involvement and user participation in relation to organizational systems are highly important for the degree to which these are enabling rather than constraining. However, to date the role of managerial leadership in shaping systems as enabling has received less attention.

It is precisely this tension that is our focus. We wish to explore how the two different entities, the standardized system and the agentic middle manager, might play together to produce possibilities for change and development. We wish to explore how a space for agentic leadership might be carved out, in the face of a constraining, standardized measurement system – in our case an employee survey. Drawing on complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009) as well as the distinction between constraining and enabling systems (Adler & Borys, 1996), we ask how leadership might contribute to turn potentially constraining management control systems into more enabling resources, supporting the connecting needed for adaptive space (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018), and what it takes for this to be accomplished. In other words, we focus attention on how a standardized and centrally conceived measurement and control system, an employee survey, might be tamed by first line managers, and turned into a resource for locally meaningful change and development. We are interested in the strategies and practices through

which leadership works to make a system enabling, facilitating organizational change accomplished both by middle managers and a management control system.

## Method

This study relies on case studies in five different organizations, where organization wide employee surveys are utilized. The studied organizations were: the logistics branch of a retail chain with more than 2000 stores (Retail); a chemical factory belonging to a multinational process industry with 1500 employees (Chemical Factory); a food processing industry with 600 employees (Food Processing); a hospital that was part of a large health-care organization with 10 000 employees (Hospital); and a regional administration consisting of hospitals as well as smaller units responsible for various specialized health-care services and special education (>7000 employees) (Regional administration).

The measurement system studied here is employee surveys (ES). Use of employee surveys is widespread in the western world, where according to some estimates (Sanchez, 2007) they are conducted in more than 50 % of all larger organizations. The practice of conducting an employee survey consists of at least three phases. In the first phase, the administrative system for the survey is established, including linking every employee to a direct report, something that in many organizations takes considerable work. The second phase consists in the actual delivery and measurement, where all employees in the organization answers the survey in the same time period. The third phase consists in all managers with identified subordinates conducting feedback sessions with the subordinates, normally consisting in identifying priority areas and constructing action plans to improve the situation for the future.

A typical employee survey consists of items focusing a range of work experiences, including leadership, opportunities for feedback, learning and development, work group climate and cooperation with colleagues, physical and psychosocial work climate, including conflicts, harassment and discrimination, and general well-being and levels of stress. Despite utilizing different providers for the ES, the surveys were strikingly similar in both content and process. The result is typically summarized in 5-15 dimensions or scales and represented graphically. Calculation of results and preparation of presentation material typically takes a month or more, which makes this a somewhat prolonged process. This process is repeated every, or more commonly every second year. In all cases in this study, the employee survey system was provided external consultancies. In Sweden, where this study was conducted, the employee surveys fulfill the demand for a so-called systematic work environment management, stipulated through national law as mandatory for every organization.

In each case organization, HR-staff and managers at various hierarchical levels were interviewed concerning their general experiences of employee surveys and more specifically experiences of conducting feedback sessions of results.

--- Insert Table 1 around here ---

A total of 48 interviews have been conducted, lasting between 30 minutes and 2 hours. All interviews except one have been audio recorded. Further, we observed various types of feedback sessions as well as some project meetings, in all 10 different meetings. Observations were audio recorded and extensive field notes were taken. All empirical work was negotiated with the authoritative representatives for the organizations, and consent for participation was obtained on a general level. Further, in interviews and observations consent was obtained from all participants.

The material presented here is anonymized both in terms of participating organizations and individuals.

All recorded material were transcribed verbatim and subsequently structured and analyzed using Nvivo (released March 2020). We utilized an empirically driven analytical strategy, in the sense of generating themes from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The first step was an open coding of the full material, focusing on experiences of working with the survey, and on how presentation of material from the survey was treated in feedback sessions. Through iterative rounds of coding reviews, a set of 69 codes was finally defined. To ensure high quality of the coding, both in the initial and later stages, a strategy of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) was employed. Codes were crosschecked across the material, similar codes critically examined, and cross tabulation employed to ensure that all material was examined similarly. When contrasting views about codes and the later theoretically driven code hierarchy emerged, these were discussed until a consensus emerged.

Subsequently, broader themes were constructed through an abductive process (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013), where the empirically driven codes were confronted with theoretically oriented concepts such as enabling and constraining functions, and limiting versus increasing variation. Through this work, both themes and empirical codes were iteratively refined and developed. The analysis finally resulted in three major strategies through which enabling leadership was accomplished: re-interpretation, prioritization; and embedding. These three themes are presented in the following.

## **Working to make the system useful**

In our analysis, we identified three major types of practices performed by managers in their practical work with the survey: reinterpretation, prioritization, and embedding. These strategies all address the tension between the standardized survey on the one hand, and the specifics of the work unit, that is, between the operating system and the local situation (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Further, these are strategies used by the managers as part of their attempts to foster change and development of their work units, that is, to adapt to their environment<sup>1</sup>. In that sense, these strategies constitute leadership attempts, where the manager tries to make the survey system useful in relation to local needs and development aims. In the following, these strategies will be described in turn, and their characteristics discussed.

### ***Reinterpretation***

The first strategy we identified entails adding details, nuances, and contexts to the numbers provided by the employee survey, thereby (re)interpreting and giving meaning to it (Sparr, 2018). In the language of complexity theory (Boisot & McKelvey, 2011), this process entails adding variability to abstracted and more standardized information, embedding it in a local context. The interpretation process thus includes not only making sense of the scales and numbers in the survey as such, including for instance figuring out if a higher value is to be seen as better or worse, but also and primarily to make sense of the abstract numbers in light of the particular work situation and recent developments of the unit in question.

<sup>1</sup>It is to be noted that we are not focusing on change in the sense of implementing organization wide systems, such as electronic patient journals, but on more local initiatives, for instance, quality development projects or improving efficiency and reducing stress levels.

Quite often, the presentation of results from the survey in the form of tables and numbers on PowerPoint slides, triggered questions and problems of understanding and interpreting the results. Even though these were answers produced by the people in the room, it was generally challenging to make sense of the numbers and figures, not least when they were compared to a norm value, that is, a value representing an optimal value on a particular scale (which is included in some ES systems).

One example is from a clinic at the Hospital, where the results were presented in full, indeed as the presentation was centrally designed to be done. This led to problems in reconciling the abstracted and simplified results of the ES with the actual local experiences. As the manager presented the number with the help of a PowerPoint presentation, the following dialogue played out in relation to the scale called “work tempo” in the survey results:

Manager: if we continue to the next, that is the work tempo and that one is yellow in both places there, but it is lower, now let's see, I guess it is, there, it is yellow because it goes a bit above the [reference mark] here and there it is yellow because it is too low, it seems as if the work tempo is not that high

Woman3: that is just crazy [laugh] yes, since you are in both places so [laugh]

Manager: it does not really represent reality for some of you while for others it might be like this but again we can't say who it is [reads the questions]

Woman1: but is that really the way to interpret it, that the work tempo is ... lower, I don't think you should interpret it like that

Manager: it says here, ...(reads aloud from manual)high levels are preferred except on challenges, where low values indicate low levels of challenge and with work tempo where

35-40 is optimal

(Recorded meeting, Hospital)

What seems to happen here, is that a strong sense of disbelief is expressed ('that is just crazy') and a sense of not being able to relate the results to one's own work experiences. There are questions regarding what lower and higher means, and how to link the numerical values to experiences of work tempo. The manager tries to clarify by resorting to the manual provided by the ES system. A significant amount of discussion followed, placing rather heavy demands of interpretation on the section manager.

This example shows that to be able to utilize the survey for supporting local development work, it needs to be tamed. A significant amount of interpretative work seems to be needed to link the numbers and charts to the local situation and to enable a space for constructing and orchestrating development initiatives. In this case, this was accomplished by delegating the interpretative work to a smaller group, where action plans were constructed. The taming process, making the ES system more enabling, was thus organized in two steps: first a discussion with all employees, and then a follow up process in a smaller group, which is where action plans were established.

In the many situations where interpretation problems arose, a common practice was further to relativize and reinterpret the results. New information was added, in the light of which the numbers could make better sense. In doing this, the results in a sense were made more relative and less comparable. An example is given by a manager in the Retail organization, where the overall scores in the Es was rather low. The manager then engages in interpretative work, trying to make sense of the general result by invoking knowledge about the workplace, and the idea of a general dissatisfaction with the workplace, biasing the overall result:



Manager: Because it is my experience, that it's often those people who have the most grievances/most critique that express a lot of opinions in surveys. Where you to some extent are anonymous. Then when it is brought up to the surface they don't say much and when you do changes based on the responses in the survey, they tend not to be satisfied anyway.

Interviewer: Is there something else there?

Manager: Yes it feels like there is something else going on. It's more like a general malaise. In some cases it can be a problem with one's position. It's like there are a lot of people in this organization who have worked here for many years. Some of them have made positive journey but for some there has been a dip and they have not recovered.

(Interview, Retail)

The results were very 'bad' (low ratings on almost everything), and according to the manager due to circumstances beyond his or his superiors's control, and were driven mainly by strong emotions. His tactic was therefore to discuss the survey in individual meetings with all employees. This tactic offers the possibility to reinterpret and recontextualise the numeric and aggregated results within the context of the individual's task, immediate work situation, and individual characteristics. The one-to one setting also makes the emotional aspects of the results more manageable.

The reinterpretation process typically involved both introduction of new facts and thus recontextualization, as well as a general relativization of the results. Both aspects were visible in a feedback session in another unit at the Hospital, where the results on the scale of workload levels were difficult to understand. As the questions were raised to the manager about what the numbers meant, she introduced a number of specificities to begin to explain them. First, the unit actually contained two subgroups that during the time for the survey had had quite different situations. In

one of the subgroups, there was increased pressure by a wave of sick-leaves, while the situation was different for the other. Secondly, there were a range of organizational changes occurring, that influenced what happened at the time. Thirdly, the scale could actually be interpreted in a number of ways, in the sense that high levels could both be understood as a limited workload and efficient work, and low levels could be understood as high workload and low tempo and inefficiency. In effect, working professionally in a high workload could potentially result in both high levels (efficient work) and low levels (high workload). After a while, a consensus emerged that the unit as a whole was really under pressure, but the employees were professional and efficient.

Often, the manager started the reinterpretation work well before a general feedback session with the employees. Some managers organized the feedback sessions in a very elaborate manner, providing the employees with guiding questions and a structured work process, tailored to the specifics of the local situation:

Manager: Then we worked in groups and those who weren't there also received this documentation. I put together some documentation relevant for me, for instance there was a red value related to participation.

Interviewer: This is something you did yourself?

Manager: yes, I did it, and I also wrote the specific questions that contributed to the result so they could see what this was about and where the critical limits are. We are close to yellow. And then I wrote and asked them to reflect on this. It was about discretion to decide about one's work and what should be done and influence decisions and so on. I wanted them to reflect on this and then answer. It concerns the extent to which one can and should have freedom to decide within healthcare that is to a large extent governed by routines, regulations and laws about how to perform the work.

(Interview, Regional administration)

In this way the results were contextualized in the specific context of the hospital and the work the unit was doing. The results were given new meaning, with new action implications. By recognizing what 'involvement' and 'influence' might mean in their specific situation, the manager and her subordinates were enabled to think about what to do more precisely, to develop their unit, as expressed by the manager in an interview:

Manager: And then as a form of action plan. 'What kinds of fora would you like to have access to in order to influence decisions that you miss today? Describe what authority/mandate you need in order to carry out your work? What would you like to change in your work to get more influence in your unit? In what ways would you like to communicate with your immediate superior that you are not able to do today?'

(Interview, Regional administration)

The re-interpretation opened for an action space where the manager could ask specific questions, develop specific action plans, and mobilize her unit in developmental activities. In other words, through the re-interpretation and contextualization of the information given by the standardized system, it begins to work enabling for the managerial agency, here materializing in the form of specific prompts being given the subordinates, and her working to facilitate and lead construction of a number of action plans. The agentic forces thus work in two steps: first, leadership agency works to tame the survey and make it enabling, creating an action space. The manager subsequently utilizes this action space (by formulating specific prompts, facilitating new connections between people and ideas (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) and construction of action plans) to work together with the system to produce development, that is, to engage in change leadership.

## *Prioritization*

One of the important enabling effects control and measurement systems might have, is to provide prioritization to the work. This is clearly true also for the employee survey. Results on different dimensions indicate areas needing attention and possibly intervention. In that way, the survey exercises agency, shaping and driving change (Sundtoft Hald & Mouritsen, 2013). In some ES packages, there is a reference value, to which the results are compared. Deviances from the reference value is typically indicated by different colours: green for being close to the reference value, yellow for scoring at some distance, and red for even bigger difference. These colours were often utilized as a given prioritization, in the sense that results that were red or orange were focused on, while green results were given far less attention.

While this information (deviances and colors) is provided by the ES system, the managers work to interpret and utilize them. Prioritization can occur by choosing some of the scales for closer scrutiny, typically at least partly based on the colorings. For example, as described by one manager in a Regional Administration:

Manager: Then we get the surveys from the different units and the results that we then have to work with. We then decide, and we had decided that, of course, all units have to work with the red staples. This year we had four of them.

Interviewer: When did you decide on that?

Manager: When we saw the results, what it looked like for regional services.

Interviewer: So, then you decided...

Manager: It was decided that each unit should work with the red staples, so that everybody is working on the same things, or the low staples, and that one understands. That is the way

it's supposed to be.

(Interview, Regional administration)

In this case, it was decided on the managerial level that all units should work with the “red” results. In that sense there was coherence in the work with action plans, although the dimensions that were red could differ between units. This provides legitimacy to the subsequent work with the action plans.

This also illustrates how the ES package performatively influences the organization and the managerial agenda. The survey provides a rationale for choosing certain areas, ostensibly resting on evidence and objectivity, rendering it highly persuasive. The fact that the construction of items and of scales rests on certain assumptions about the organization is effectively hidden.

However, quite often the prioritization provided by the survey had to be combined with a consideration of what was most useful or relevant for the moment, as described by this manager:

Manager: We got a PowerPoint so we presented the result, we went through the areas of questions and what the results were, then we agreed on three, I had a suggestion, I had discussed with my colleague. We had an idea about how to proceed... we selected three. ‘What do you think? Do you think these three might be representative?’ And they agreed and how should we proceed? So we agreed that two of the questions should we bring up on the next unit meeting and the third should be made a part of the individual performance reviews.

Interviewer: How did you come up with these three?

Manager: It was partly an intuition of where we are right now or where we might be but also

that that they were orange or red.

(Interview, Regional administration)

The prioritization was here based on a translation of the survey result to the managers' working knowledge and already existing agenda for the organization. The manager thus exercises a certain agency in not just accepting the prioritization provided by the survey, but adjusting it to the local situation, including his own ideas of where the organization is moving.

In another unit, the prioritization was done in a dialogue with the employees:

Manager: By itself, the results indicated that we were above average, but that we had some things to work on.... What we saw, what we picked out together with the staff, [was that] my unit was somewhat more orange (than the ward one floor above) and that is when it be effective to do some other things [than what the other wards work with]

(Interview, Regional administration)

Here, the results are compared to another ward and the somewhat different situations in these two neighboring wards are taken as an account for choosing some specific aspects to focus. By adapting the information given by the system to the local situations, the manager effectively creates a prioritization in collaboration with the survey, focusing on what gives most agency in the local setting.

Selected aspects of the survey could also be utilized upwards in the hierarchy, to legitimize complaints and development activities already under way:

Interviewer: Is there anything that has been constructive with this survey as you see it? Has it been helpful?

Manager: It has been, in a way, because it legitimizes. Things become more serious compared to if one just remarks on things. That is upwards I mean. That management see things in a different way. It becomes evident that this is not working well. One doesn't have a magic wand so that one can change things immediately. It doesn't work that way, but anyway I don't know how it would be without it.

(Interview, Hospital)

Using the results as rhetorical resources in relation to higher management demonstrates the validity of the manager's description of problematic aspects of his unit. He gains a stronger authorization by relying on selected results from the survey to validate his perspective, and in doing that, secures an action space for his leadership agency.

### ***Embedding***

The final strategy, embedding, consists in utilizing an already existing administrative process to embed the ES results, using the latter as input in the former process rather than as a free standing process in itself.

The ES was often related to ongoing organizational changes or to the work with business plans (Swedish: 'verksamhetsplan') in the organization. In the public organizations, the work with the business plan ran on a yearly basis, and the results from the ES fed into this process.

One manager followed a rather clear strategy of explicitly focusing the business plan process when presenting the ES results. In effect, she utilized the employee survey as input in yet another turn in

the work with the business plan. This was experienced by one of her section managers as a constructive process:

D: I mean, it feels like we've had a plan all the time how to engage with these difficulties, we have worked a lot with our business plan, we have worked with putting the new organization together with coordinator and other stuff, and then we have worked with the business plan for [this year] /.../ we take small steps all the time, and that is what I think is the strength, that [the manager] connects closely to the survey.

(Interview, Hospital)

Instead of placing the focus on the ES, the focus was on utilizing the results for creating better goals, that is, to work with the business process, thereby embedding the survey results in an already well-known process.

Feeding highly selective results from the ES into work with the business plan actually fostered creativity and new connections between people and ideas (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). The chosen aspects of the results demonstrated a low level of what was called 'goal quality' and that this applied to all levels of the organization. This constituted a motivator for engaging once again with constructing goals for the unit. While the lack of a clear goal structure for the hospital as a whole easily could have been perceived as a problem, indicating that this type of work was not valued in the organization, this situation was now reconstructed as more of a challenge and even an advantage. The lack of clear goals was now interpreted more as a sign of how well on their way and relatively sophisticated this department was.

In the Retail organization, the employee survey is followed by performance appraisal interviews,



and the survey is understood to feed into these interviews:

Manager P: If it's brought up in the weeks immediately after, we use to have individual meeting with the co-workers and follow up. ...It is usually surfaced in the individual talks. It was there he said, "that was actually me", It was brought up a month later, " I responded in that way because it feels like...". It turned out that ...he had problems at home which affected him emotionally in relation to his family. As a consequence, the job was affected. But it is difficult for me to do anything about that. Fortunately it can be like that, because there isn't much that I can do, that is if he has difficulties with his wife. The only thing I can do is to grant leave if he asks for it. Otherwise, it's not much I can do. If it is related to work comrades you have to look into it.

(Interview, Retail)

The survey produces issues and questions, that can be delegated to the performance appraisal interviews, and dealt with there. At times this means facilitating a re-interpretation of results in terms of personal issues affecting work, while at other times real work-related issues are surfaced, such as problems with peers. In essence, the survey is combined with the performance appraisal systems to shape a continuous process that suits this manager and his situation well.

In the retail organization, scheduling of work shifts was a problem. This surfaced in the employee survey, and action plans were formulated to work with it. However, rather than being a process started with the survey, the survey was fitted into what was already going on. The survey results were embedded in a change project already under way, supporting and facilitating it. As the ongoing change provided a context into which the survey could be embedded, the survey in turn provided more information, clarity, and a framework for construction action plans. Rather than the system

performing the strong agency of 'identifying problems, revealing improvement opportunities, and by helping prioritizing action' (Sundtoft Hald & Mouritsen, 2013, s. 1082), the manager could agentically utilize it in relation to already identified improvement opportunities, rendering it an enabling system that provided useful resources.

## **Discussion**

The strategies for engaging with the measurement system of the employee survey described above, shows how the system does present constraints and pressures on the agency of leadership, but also that this agency might be realized and even expanded through engagement with the ES package.

Following By et al (2016), individual heroic leadership in an organizational change context is clearly a myth. Whatever leadership agency can be observed, goes beyond the individual. While By et al rightly emphasizes leadership as shared and distributed in any complex organizational change setting, our study adds attention to the role that non-human standardized measurement and control systems might play in driving organizational change. While the tendency in much of the literature is to attribute change agency to either organizational systems (such as performance appraisal systems, (Sundtoft Hald & Mouritsen, 2013) or to individual leadership (Faupel & Süß, 2019; Feng Cailing m.fl., 2016), our study shifts the attention to the interplay and relationship between managers and organizational systems. Drawing on the concepts of enabling and constraining systems or structures (Adler & Borys, 1996) and complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009), our analysis shows how a standardized measurement system is rendered more enabling through significant work on behalf of managers. The managers recontextualize the abstracted numbers and outputs from the system, and in a non-standardized way, utilize and mobilize them for the benefit of the local work unit.

By engaging with the ES system, the managers work to shift the balance between variation in input and in responses (Boisot & McKelvey, 2011), to emphasize the enabling aspects of the system. The first strategy, re-interpretation, involves introducing a larger variability on the input side, than what is offered by the standardized system. Typically, the results from the survey are introduced into a description of a situation that is far more varied than the description provided by the standardized survey. For instance, in one of the hospital clinics, the local context of the workplace was re-introduced in discussions giving new meaning to variables such as work-tempo. Variability was increased as the same single number from the survey came to hold very different meanings, depending on which work-unit it was related to. Local variation might thus be used to explain unexpected results in the survey, in a way that normalizes the results.

The second strategy, prioritization, works by selecting a limited range of the results, that seems to make most sense in the current situation, and effectively ignoring the rest. Through the selection, the standardized system is restricted even further, based on an assessment of where there is a match between the results and the local situation. Managers used assessments of what might be representative or what felt useful, or comparisons with other units, to prioritize a few areas of the survey results. In essence, the tension between the administrative system and the local situation is managed by decoupling them, except where a match is perceived. The matching emanates from the sensemaking occurring on the local level, thereby forwarding the dynamic on this level and shielding it from the restricting influence from the standardized system.

Finally, embedding the ES in other processes is the most elaborate of the strategies identified here. The controlling function of the ES is to a certain degree not countered nor resisted, but deflected in a different direction and utilized as input in another process. Embedding concerns restricting both

the range of possible input, by selecting something as central, and of possible responses, by assuming that another process already provides those responses. For instance, using the ES as input into the business plan, and subsequent performance interview processes, implied that the most important dimension in the survey concerned goals, taken as input into how goals and directions were formulated in the business plan, later to be followed up in the performance appraisal interviews. The range of responses are here already provided by both the process of writing a business proposal and the performance appraisal interview. Similarly, to reinterpretation, embedding thus buffers the local level from unpleasant surprises from the ES.

Clearly, through the engagement with the ES system, and by drawing on the discretion of the managerial position as well as previous experiences and knowledge of both the system and the local situation, the managers established a space for leadership agency. The space for leadership agency seems to consist of two related aspects. First, the managers to a varying extent engaged with the system, reconstructing it and expanding its enabling dimensions. The manager thus drew on their positions in the operating system (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018), providing legitimacy and discretion to engage with the survey. For instance, they could engage in re-interpretation and prioritization, as well as prepare presentations of the survey results to highlight what they wanted. Secondly, they organized and facilitated processes and arenas where their subordinates could engage with the reconstructed version of the ES system, so as to foster change and development, adapted to the local situation, resources and constraints. They did this by organizing feedback sessions and structuring them through group composition and by providing guiding questions for discussions. Their enabling leadership clearly includes sensemaking and sensegiving (Sparr, 2018) but also the practices of orchestrating and facilitating new interactions and connections between people and ideas (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

This analysis also contributes to the existing theory of complexity leadership. Enabling leadership consists in engaging with the conflict between the adaptive and operational dynamics (Hazy & Uhl-Bien, 2013; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018), to achieve an adaptive fit to the local situation. Our analysis shows how the three strategies of prioritization, reinterpretation, and embedding work to facilitate this adaptive process. Rather than only constraining the adaptive dynamics, elements from the operational system can be made to enable such dynamics. The central factor making this possible is the agentic work by the managers, struggling to tame the survey to fit their local needs.

These strategies work to buffer the adaptive function in the workgroup from unnecessary disturbances by aspects of the standardized administrative system that are not suited to the variability of inputs and responses existing on this level (the local specific situation and its ad hoc management). At the same time, the system provides pressure and structure to engage with some issues, both coordinating the organization on a larger scale (through summarized results and summaries of action plans, and in some cases through providing input to business plans), and stimulating adaptive processes in the work group, through discussions, shared sensemaking, and agreed action plans.

Finally, while the attribution of change agency to standardized systems tends to portray this as an almost automatic process (Sundtoft Hald & Mouritsen, 2013), our study has demonstrated the extensive effort the taming of the ES demands. First line managers spend time, often outside of normal work hours, to design and prepare for feedback sessions, to enable the constructive discussions and adaptive dynamics they wish for and need. This extensive enabling and taming work constitutes a considerable burden on them, typically not acknowledged or accounted for in the discussion of the benefits and possibilities of standardized systems (Sanchez, 2007).

Clearly, our study suffers from a range of limitations. We have only studied a relatively small number of organizations and only one standardized system. Future research could test and elaborate on our claims by exploring middle managerial strategies also in relation to other systems, such as budgeting and performance measurements, and in a broader range of organizations. Further, as our analysis is dominated by interviews and only partly substantiated by observations, our understanding of the actual practice through which strategies of enabling leadership is accomplished, is limited. Future research could potentially draw more extensively on ethnography to explore the practices of enabling leadership, more in depth.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has analyzed the practical work of conducting employee surveys, as an example of standardized management control systems. The analysis leads us to conclude that there is much to gain from a broader attention to the organizational context, for the understanding of leadership in organizational settings.

The findings contribute to the literature on middle managers by theorizing and exploring the space for leadership agency in the midst of organizational pressures. Locating the middle managerial position in the midst of the conflict between an operating core and an entrepreneurial dynamic (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018), middle managerial leadership was understood in terms of how this conflict is handled in practice. Rather than leadership being accomplished as resistance to, or despite, the standardized administrative system, in our study it was accomplished by engaging with the system, adjusting it somewhat to the local situation. In doing that, middle managers found a way to accomplish enabling leadership and to foster adaptive dynamics (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2007) and facilitate development and change.

Central to this enabling leadership is the way middle managers worked to make standardized systems more enabling rather than constraining (Adler & Bohrys, 1996). This capacity of leadership agency extends existing understanding of leadership, operating in the tension between operational system and the adaptive space of a bureaucratic organization (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). The active work to render a standardized system more enabling was clearly central to the management of this tension. Rather than just being a ‘brick wall’ (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017, s. 15), the operational system comes to facilitate rather than stifle, adaptive dynamics, through the work of the first line managers.

Further, the study shows that the constraining or enabling quality of systems and structures depend not only on communication (Wouters & Roijmans, 2011; Wouters & Wilderom, 2008) or user involvement (Brogaard-Kay, 2015). Our findings show that leadership indeed has an important place here. Leadership is performed through sensemaking and sensegiving (Sparr, 2018) in interpreting and reconstructing the results produced by the survey. It is also performed as enabling (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) by organizing and facilitating new connections between people and ideas, in working with the results from the survey. Both these aspects draw upon the discretion, energy, and knowledge embodied in the first line managers.

These findings have important implications for the understanding of the role and work of middle managers in contemporary complex organizations as well as for the way that leadership is conceptualized. Our study extends the understanding of leadership as an enabling process, embedded in, rather than separate from, an environment characterized by standardization and proliferating control and measurement systems.

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## Table 1

Table 1. Case organizations and no of interviews and observations.

	Interviews	Observations
Retail	15	0
Hospital	13	8
Chemical process	5	0
Food processing	5	1
Regional administration	10	1
Total	48	10