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**THE INTERMEDIATE LEADER**  
**PULLED IN TWO DIRECTIONS: IN CONCERT A LEADER TO SOME**  
**AND A FOLLOWER TO OTHERS**

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A dissertation submitted in satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

*This thesis explores an important yet underexplored aspect of leadership studies, the phenomenon of an intermediate leader, here defined as an individual embodying both roles of a leader and a follower. Whilst these two roles are usually seen as belonging to people interacting with each other, this body of work is innovative in investigating one individual co-enacting both the roles and identities of leader and follower, as he/she connects different leadership relationships. This exploration starts with a broad research question: how do intermediate leaders enact both roles effectively? This thesis provides some answers by presenting three separate papers, each focusing on a separate study. Paper 1 reviews previous literature categorizing the tensions faced by intermediate leaders. It introduces the leadership triad, formed by an intermediate leader, his/her leader and his/her follower as a promising area of enquiry. It then contributes a theoretical dynamic model of co-enactment, through which intermediate leaders balance the tensions by embracing both leader and follower self-concepts as mutually important. Paper 2 and 3 are both based on longitudinal, inductive, qualitative studies, focusing on leadership triads in large financial organizations. Paper 2 unveils the practice of skip-level leadership, whereby the intermediate leader's sensemaking is bypassed by meaning formed in a direct leadership relationship between his/her leader and his/her follower. It reveals the disruptive effects that this can have on intermediate leaders' identity. Paper 3 explores authentic leadership from the perspective of intermediate leaders, who face two separate audiences, their boss and their teams, often embracing contrasting interests. This paper contributes a model of 'bounded authenticity' in leadership, revealing tactics used by intermediate leaders to be authentic amidst organizational-, relational- and individual-level barriers to authenticity. The overarching contribution of this thesis is to expose the interconnectedness of the roles of leader and follower, highlighting how the enactment of one informs the enactment of the other.*



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
PAPER I <sup>a</sup> - THE INTERMEDIATE LEADER, CONCURRENTLY SERVING AS A LEADER AND A FOLLOWER.....	7
Introduction .....	8
Searching for a theoretical explanation for the co-enactment of the two roles .....	10
A paradoxical process of equilibrium for the roles' co-enactment .....	15
Discussion and conclusion .....	33
Tables and figures .....	39
PAPER II <sup>b</sup> - SEEKING TRANSPARENCY WHILST EMBRACING AMBIGUITY: PROCESSES OF LEADERSHIP AND SENSEMAKING DURING STRATEGIC CHANGE .....	41
Introduction .....	42
Interplay of leadership and sensemaking during change .....	46
Methods .....	49
Findings .....	55
Discussions and conclusion .....	71
Tables and figures .....	80
PAPER III – BOUNDED AUTHENTICITY IN LEADERSHIP DURING STRATEGIC CHANGE .....	89
Introduction .....	90
Authenticity in leadership .....	94
Methods .....	101
Findings .....	108
Discussion and conclusion .....	133
Tables and figures .....	145
CONCLUSIONS .....	151
REFERENCES .....	153

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<sup>b</sup> Awarded 'Best Paper from Dissertation' at the Academy of Management 2018, ODC Division



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Zahira Jaser

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*To my dad Adnan Jaser (1941-2016), the teacher.*

*To my mum Franca Longo, the lighthouse.*



## INTRODUCTION

“During performance reviews we had to assign A-E ratings to our employees. However, to maintain a normal distribution each manager was handed pre-decided ratings from HR. That round I was handed two Bs and a D. I had to review three team members, who in my opinion were two As and a B. I tried to influence my boss to get me a better hand of grades, but not only I failed in securing that, I was also told not to disclose the forced rating mechanism, which was a confidential organizational policy. I still remember the tears of this ambitious, and diligent Irish young lady who received a D from me. I wanted to explain that I really meant to give her a B, but I couldn't. By doing that I would have let down my boss, and the company. She left after 6 months.”  
(Director, Bank)

In the opening vignette, the inability to negotiate better terms with her boss costs that manager the loss of a key member of her team. That manager was me. When I left my previous 15-year career in banking, I was highly aware that leadership was overrated, and romanticized (Meindl, Ehrlich, Dukerich 1985; Meindl, 1995), and that other roles, in the leadership process, were underestimated. As a result, for the first year of my PhD I steeped myself in the study of followership (Hollander, 1955; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, Carsten, 2014). I found great support in the literature to the idea that leadership is a relational activity in which leader and follower play equally important roles in the achievement of leadership outcomes (Meindl, 1995; Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, Uhl-Bien, 2007; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012; Uhl-Bien, et al., 2014). This made me realise that the main challenge for individuals at the head of teams or departments, in organizations, is not just to be an effective leader, or an effective follower, but to be effective in both roles, to contribute concurrently to multiple leadership relationships. Thinking back to my days as a manager it was clear to me that playing both roles effectively was not straightforward. For example, in some instances, like the one in the opening vignette, my success in staying a loyal follower, abiding by the corporate rules, and sticking to my boss'

agenda, was associated with my failure as a leader. Faced with cognitive, psychological and emotional tensions, I found it difficult to motivate and retain a valuable team member in an adverse situation. In short, I found it difficult to enact both roles effectively.

The organizational literature provides many examples which illustrate similar tensions faced in the concerted enactment of the two roles. For example, heads of teams or departments were found to promise their boss that they would protect resources, whilst they were in fact sheltering their team members scavenging for these resources (Burgelman, 1983a, Mainemelis, 2010); or to embrace contradictory emotions towards organizational change, by empathising with bosses' enthusiasm and team members' resistance (Huy, 2002); or to bridge opposite narratives, an abstract one to address top managers, and a more practical one, connected to the 'shop floor' for their teams (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). However, I found scant explanations in the leadership literature of how one individual effectively co-enacts both roles (Sy & McCoy, 2014). I decided to dedicate my PhD to the study of *intermediate leaders*, defined as individuals who play a pivotal function in connecting two leadership relationships, one in which they play the role of a leader, and another the role of a follower. The broad research question addressed by this thesis is: *how do intermediate leaders enact both roles effectively, in order to contribute concurrently to their relationships with their boss and with their followers?*

Addressing this question is important both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it is surprising that, given the widespread presence of intermediate leaders in organizations, we know so little about the co-enactment of the two roles. An explanation of this lack of knowledge possibly lays in the way we have predominantly studied leadership in the last 50 years, through the lens of a dyad

(Dansereau, Graen, Haga, 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In a dyad the co-enactment is concealed. We need to look at leadership interactions in a group of at least three concatenated individuals to see the embodiment of the two roles by the individual in the middle, the intermediate leader. Knowing more about intermediate leaders is important also from a practical point of view. Practically, leadership studies offer normative understanding to organizations and their members about what models and behaviours are more or less effective in achieving organizational goals. Given that most managers at the head of departments or of teams are in the position of intermediate leaders, it is of paramount importance to provide them with understanding and guidance on how best to perform their roles, or enact their identities. These new normative models can come from the study of the tensions faced by individuals who embody the two roles; of why this embodiment causes relational complexity; and of how effective intermediate leaders balance these tensions and deal with these complexities.

This dissertation contributes both theoretically and empirically to the development of our knowledge in the emerging area of intermediate leadership, through three studies. In Paper 1 I theorize intermediate leaders, categorize the tension they face, define the area of theoretical exploration as a leadership triad, including an intermediate leader, his/her leader and his/her follower. In this chapter I theorize a model of effective role-co-enactment through the lens of paradox. I propose that the most effective intermediate leaders show an acceptance of their self-concepts as leader and as follower as equally important, so they can attend equally attentively to the two leadership relationships. This paper was ranked Best Paper at the Academy of Management 2017 (OMT Division) and published in the proceedings.

In Paper 2, I present an empirical study based on a 30-month inductive qualitative study of a Risk Management team at the top of one of the largest financial institutions in the world. Here I study ten leadership triads, composing the entire Risk Management team, formed by a top manager, a senior and a junior manager, where senior managers occupy the position of intermediate leaders. By looking at leadership and sensemaking processes from the perspective of the intermediate leaders (senior managers), this study reveals the emergent phenomenon of skip-level leadership. Through skip-level leadership top and junior managers enter in a direct leadership relationship bypassing the senior manager. The findings reveal that in some cases (free skip-level leadership) the meaning constructed by the junior and top managers behind the back of the senior manager acts as sensebreaking, which has a negative effect on the triad. First, it disrupts the capacity of the senior manager to control the upward and downward processes of sensemaking that occur through formal vertical leadership exchanges. Second, by removing control on meaning formation, the sensebreaking creates an identity void, jeopardising the senior manager's sense of self as a leader. When free-skip level leadership occurs, in the long term it disrupts the triad, with either the junior or senior manager leaving the Risk Management team. This paper received the Best Paper from a Dissertation Award at the Academy of Management 2018 (ODC Division).

In Paper 3 I present another longitudinal inductive qualitative paper. Through a 33-month study in another financial institution I study authenticity in leadership from the perspective of intermediate leaders at different levels of the organization. This study adds a multilevel perspective to the study of intermediate leaders. It reveals how, at organizational, relational and individual level, on one hand authenticity is endorsed, and on the other limited, emerging as bounded. At an

organizational level it shows how information is enclosed in hierarchically tight chambers, therefore it is easier for intermediate leaders to be authentic with peers, than with team members, and it less easy to be authentic the lower they are in the hierarchical order. At a relational level, intermediate leaders use different tactics to be authentic in a highly compartmentalised organization. First, they allow open enquiry as a way to create relational transparency, by unlocking hierarchical chambers and letting their followers get in touch with their own boss. Second, they are secretly authentic, sometimes breaching company rules in clandestine ways for the benefit of the relationship with their followers. At an individual level, for intermediate leaders to be authentic means to have the ability to deal with constant ambivalent choices. In many cases they were found to have to be true to slightly different beliefs and thoughts, depending on the audience they faced (their own leader or their own followers), sometimes incurring in emotional dissonance.

Since I started my research on intermediate leaders four years ago, the literature has been moving to fill this gap: for example recent studies are exploring how individuals activate self-schema of leader and follower (Epitropaki et al., 2017). The impetus to explore this area stems partially from my work. Since the Academy of Management Meeting of 2016 I have organized three Panel Symposia on this topic, where scholars like Mary Uhl-Bien, Michelle Bligh, Ronald Riggio, Olga Epitropaki, Melissa Carsten and David Grant have contributed their perspectives on the topic of intermediate leaders. Because of the profile of the speakers these symposia have been well attended, with overflowing rooms, and buzzy question and answer sessions. On the back of this interest I have been invited to edit a book entitled *The Connecting Leader: Serving Concurrently as a Leader and a Follower* (Jaser, 2019 in Press), part of the Leadership Horizon series founded by James Meindl, one of the scholars who



initiated my curiosity on this topic. The authors of the chapters are amongst best-known scholars in the field of leadership and organizational studies, who have generously embraced this novel idea.

This dissertation will explore the papers in three separate chapters, and will present a brief conclusion at the end.

**PAPER I**

**THE INTERMEDIATE LEADER**

**CONCURRENTLY SERVING AS A LEADER AND A FOLLOWER**

**ABSTRACT**

*Some individuals, hereby defined as intermediate leaders, are in a position where they need to attend in concert to their role as a leader to some, and a follower to others. By enacting these two roles in concert they are often subjected to contradictory pulls, and experience tensions widely described by the change and strategy literature. Nonetheless, how some people are more successful than others in performing in concert the roles of leader and follower is largely unexplored. This paper uses the theoretical lens of paradox to propose a process of balance of the contradictory pulls that come with this co-enactment. This theoretical investigation takes place in the context of the leadership triad, formed by the intermediate leader, his/her leader and his/her follower. Following paradox theory, a model is built, highlighting how successful intermediate leaders acknowledge and accept their self-concept both as an able leader and an able follower. The mechanisms of balance are twofold. Firstly, through psychological flexibility, they attend to the material and practical tensions stemming from conflicting constituents' demands and needs. Secondly, through sensegiving and sensemaking, they attend to the psychological and cognitive tensions, caused by conflicting interpretations of events. The successful coordination of the paradoxical pulls reinforces intermediate leaders' self-concept as an able leader and an able follower, perpetuating a virtuous cycle, which characterizes a successful leadership triad.*

*Author's Note: This paper was ranked as Best Paper at the Academy of Management 2017 (Organization Management & Theory Division) and published in the Academy of Management Proceedings*

## INTRODUCTION

“How can I follow executive mandates, when I have been told to make my own decisions?” Manager at the LEGO Company  
(Luscher and Lewis, 2008: 231)

These are the words of people stuck in the middle, follower to some, and leaders to others. Leadership has long be defined as a social process of interaction between leader and follower (Hollander and Webb, 1955; Hollander, 1992; Meindl, 1995; Lord, Brown, Freiberg, 1999; Howell and Shamir, 2005). However advances in leadership and followership literature are pointing out how the same individual can be in the position of performing both roles (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). I have defined them as intermediate leaders. Indeed it is easily imagined how an individual, for example a head of a team or a department, is often in such a position as to have to lead some people as well as to follow others.

Additionally, as leaders and followers bring an equally important contribution to the achievement of leadership goals (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe and Carsten, 2014), it is conceivable that those individuals are tasked with performing both roles equally effectively. The leadership literature presents us with little if any explanation for this process (Sy and McCoy, 2014). This might be due to the prevailing area of investigation for leadership relational dynamics: the dyad (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995); here the concerted enactment is concealed, as leader and follower are treated as separate variables interacting with each other. In responding to demands to extend the research of leadership dynamics beyond the dyad (Graham and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Sparrowe and Liden, 1997; 2005) this paper proposes the *leadership triad* as an area of theoretical investigation. Formed by a intermediate leader, his/her follower and his/her leader, the triad helps the researcher go beyond interpersonal

dynamics into more complex systemic logics that managers need to face in the double role co-enactment (Krackhardt, 1999). The management literature brings many examples of the contradictory logics faced by managers caught between their own leaders and their own followers. For example, we know about the difficulties encountered by managers in bridging ‘the contradiction between the visionary but abstract concepts of top management and the experience-grounded concepts originating on the shop floor’ (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995: 9). Further, the corporate strategy, and innovation, (Burgelman, 1983a, b; Floyd and Woolridge, 1992; Rouleau, 2005) as well as the change (Beaty, Lee, 1992; Huy, 2002; Balogun, 2004; Sonenshein, 2010; Aherne, Lam, Kraus, 2014) literatures have widely documented the tensions that individuals encounter in processes of top-down or bottom-up translations in organizations. For example, we are told how these managers perform contradictory acts, by secretly sheltering ‘scavenging’ teams at the bottom, as well as embracing the strategy at the top of the organization (Burgelman, 1983a); or how they may need to empathize with resistance to change in the team they lead, whilst embracing the same change with enthusiasm as it comes from the top managers they follow (Huy, 2002). This paper attempts to illuminate a process that explains *how certain intermediate leaders are more effective than others at facing the contradictory pulls that arise in the concerted enactment of the roles of a leader and a follower, in the context of a leadership triad.*

Addressing this issue is important for several reasons. First, it provides normative models for managers not just as leaders but also as followers in balancing the tensions of the two roles, either by harmonizing or separating the needs of the triad’s constituents. Second, this research fills a real theoretical gap: whilst the leadership literature recognizes that a same individual must embrace both roles (Sluss

& Ashforth, 2007; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue, 2011; Uhl-Bien et. al., 2014; Sy & McCoy, 2014), it never illustrates how an individual effectively performs both in concert. Third, it responds to the rise of attention to the importance of followers in the achievement of organizational outcomes (Howell and Shamir, 2005; Collinson, 2006; Svenningsson, Alvehus and Alvesson, 2012; Uhl-Bien et al. 2014), recognizing that acting effectively as a follower, as well as a leader is important for the achievement of organizational outcomes.

### **SEARCHING FOR A THEORETICAL EXPLANATION OF THE CONCERTED ENACTMENT OF THE TWO ROLES**

In search for an explanation for how people deal with different roles, one is faced with two complementary models, one explaining the *intrapersonal* struggle faced by individuals in moving from one role to the other (Ashforth, 2001), and one detailing the *interpersonal*, relational challenges of acting concomitantly different roles, and facing different constituents (De-Rue & Ashford, 2010). Both these models offer partial, albeit complementary, explanations. Hence this paper proposes to use the theoretical lens of paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011) to identify an alternative integrated model. Paradox theory provides us with a process of reconciliation through which an individual can balance contradictory pulls in different directions, like those experienced by an individual having to attend to contradictory needs stemming from his/her leaders and his/her followers. A brief review of these approaches to roles co-enactment follows.

On one hand, theories of micro-role transitioning explain how an individual encounters and resolves cognitive and psychological challenges through an

*intrapersonal* process, (Ashforth, Kreiner, Fugate, 2000; Ashforth, 2001). When the role of leader and follower are embedded in hierarchical structures (Graham and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Yukl, 2012), they can be conceptualized as fairly stable, and separated by an imaginary line, a role boundary. In attempting to answer micro-role transitioning questions, like “how does a manager enact the role of boss toward her subordinates, and then enact the role of subordinate towards her boss?” (Ashforth, Kreiner, Fugate, 2000: 261), these theories illustrate an individual’s intrapersonal psychological process of role switching. They recognize that in crossing the role boundary individuals incur a struggle *within the individual*, caused by the difficulty to “wear different hats” or “shift gears” (Ashforth, et al., 2001: 261). Further, what constitutes good leader and follower behaviour varies subjectively (Lord & Maher, 1991, Sy, 2010), according to deeply held personal schemata (Medvedeff & Lord, 2007; Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, Topkas, 2013). Hence role switching can be even more complex for intermediate leaders who interact with triad constituents who have dissonant schemata regarding the roles of leader and follower (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Sy & McCoy, 2014). Whilst this literature provides answers on individual level challenges which an individual faces whilst switching from one role to another, it does not provide explanations of the relational intrapersonal complexities that an individual needs to deal with in coordinating multiple concurrent leadership relationships.

On the other hand, in searching for *intrapersonal* processes, insights are offered by the relational leadership literature (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Hosking, 2007; Gergen, 2009; Ospina and Sorenson, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). This perspective views leadership as occurring in relational dynamics *amongst people* throughout the organization (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 654). By recognizing that individuals

create and interpret reality as they interact with each other (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, Obstfeld, 2005), an individual is seen as a co-creator of the roles through intrapersonal dynamics (Hosking, 2007a; Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, McGregor, 2010). Here the roles acquire characteristics of fluidity, and emergence. An individual is conceptualized as being in a fluid state, simultaneously a leader and a follower, and leading and following emerge through language and practices (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Strains stemming from the potential lack of clarity (Pierce & Sims, 2002; Pierce & Conger, 2003) in the recognition of the respective relational-roles are resolved through a process where leader and follower roles are crystallized through actions of claiming and granting, which can be verbal/non-verbal and direct/indirect (DeRue & Ashford, 2012). This emphasis on a process based on social tactics paves the way for this paper's research. However the relational approach does not explain the internal struggle faced by an individual whose roles lack fluidity, but which are firmly prescribed by the individual's position in the organization. The characteristic of the above described interpersonal and intrapersonal processes are described in Figure 1, A and B.

In looking for a holistic process to address both the tensions stemming from *intrapersonal* role-transitioning dynamics, and the relational tensions, stemming from the *interpersonal* relational dynamics, the literature on organizational *paradox* (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011) offers a compelling theoretical lens. First, this literature is particularly adept at analyzing “contradictory yet interrelated elements ... that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously” (Lewis, 2000: 760). Indeed, the notions of leader and follower are mostly conceptualized as logically juxtaposed (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Collinson,

2005), and therefore might appear absurd when enacted in concert by the same individual, as they entail an adaptation to a “pull in opposing directions” (Smith and Lewis, 2011:386). Second, the paradoxical model doesn’t attempt to resolve the tension by providing a static theoretical solution. On the contrary, it looks for a dynamic equilibrium, which “assumes constant motion across opposing forces” (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 386), pointing towards a process in which individuals maintain equilibrium between their role as a leader and as a follower by adapting dynamically to the shift of direction of the process of influence in the two relationships. Therefore a paradoxical approach recognizes both the fluidity depicted by relational leadership theories (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Hosking, 2007; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012), and the interpersonal cognitive struggle identified by the role transitioning and the implicit leadership literature (Lord & Maher, 1991; Ashforth, Kreiner, Fugate, 2000; Sy, 2010; Sy & McCoy, 2014).

The paradoxical approach ultimately serves the purpose of analysing polarized constructs, which are pervasive in organizations: “quality/cost, differentiation/integration, stability/change, and cohesion/division” (Lewis, 2000: 762). *This paper considers that leader/follower might be viewed as one of these polarizations.* Going further in this analysis Lewis (2000), adopts the symbol of *yin and yang*, used to describe the paradoxical coexistence of opposites as illustrated in figure 1, C. *Yin and yang* embodies “a natural wholeness composed of contradictions. When one force (e.g., *Yin*, femininity, intuition, dark) escalates to its extreme state, it retains elements of its opposition (e.g., *Yang*, masculinity, rationality, light), eventually reversing” (Lewis, 2000: 763). In this sense, *yin and yang* can be used to symbolize how the leader and follower roles can be simultaneously conceptualized as stable and fluid, and how a process of dynamic equilibrium could provide clarity for



managers facing paradoxical tensions arising from the role co-enactment, whether focusing on *intrapersonal* dynamics, or on *interpersonal* relational ones.

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Insert Figure 1 About Here  
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By adopting paradox theory as a framework (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Lewis & Smith, 2014), this paper will theorize a process where the successful concerted enactment of the roles of leader and follower is rooted in the capacity of individuals for: (i) acknowledging and accepting the two roles as equally important; (ii) forming their self-concepts as an able leader *and* an able follower; (iii) dealing effectively with tensions caused by the opposing pulls that come with the two roles, through psychological flexibility and capacity for sensemaking and sensegiving. This is a model based on a constant dynamic equilibrium, where successful individuals who, by harmonizing or separating, can balance the tensions amongst the leadership triad constituents, and successfully act both roles. This success re-enforces their self-concepts as able leader and follower, giving way to a perpetuating virtuous cycle.

By theorizing this model this paper brings several contributions. Firstly, it provides a process model that acknowledges managers' daily complexities of connecting different organizational layers. It provides managers in the position of intermediate leaders with mechanisms for overcoming the challenges they face in the enactment of these dual roles. Secondly, it responds to a gap in the leadership literature about how individuals deal with concerted leader/follower roles. It seizes recent encouragements to adopt the lens of paradox to explore individual level phenomena (Schad, Lewis, Rasch & Smith, 2016; Fairhurst, Smith & Banghart, 2016). It adopts the leadership triad, bringing a methodological contribution to the study of leadership relationships (Grahen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014),

showing that in a triad the following (of one's leader) is equally as important as the leading, and it often informs the leading (of one's follower) itself. In doing so it proposes that sensegiving (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) and sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) are not just attributes of successful leaders (Gioia & Chittipedi, 1991), but also of successful followers.

The remainder of this paper sets out to unpack the process model of concerted enactment of the roles of leader and follower. In order to do this, first, it will unpack the relational dynamics faced by intermediate leaders, by exploring the dynamics at the levels of the leadership triad, formed by an intermediate leader, his/her leader and his/her follower. The triad helps highlight the tensions experienced by the intermediate leaders as they mediate contradictory demands from the triad's constituents. Second, it will unpack practical-material and psychological-cognitive tensions of individuals enacting both roles, through a review of the change and strategy literature. Third, the process model for the balanced enactment of the two roles will be defined through a series of propositions.

## **A PARADOXICAL PROCESS OF EQUILIBRIUM FOR THE ROLES' CO-ENACTMENT**

### **Theorizing the Leadership Triad**

If the concerted enactment of these two roles is such a pervasive feature of leadership relationships, one might wonder why it is so under-researched. One potential theoretical explanation can be found in the boundaries of the analysis typically used in the study of the leader-follower relationship: the dyad. As articulated

by Poole and Van de Ven (1989), paradoxes often emerge because theories are essentially incomplete. It is usually when theoretical assumptions and boundaries are taken for granted that the dissonance between empirical reality and theories can generate a breakdown (Alvesson & Karreman, 2007; Alvesson & Sandberg, 2010), such as to give rise to organizational paradoxes (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Lewis, 2000, Smith & Lewis, 2011).

The theoretical boundaries of leadership dyads have provided a fertile ground for research since the 1970s, (Dansereau, Cashman, Graen, 1973; Dansereau, Graen, Haga, 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987) culminating in the development of one of the most successful and prolific theories in the field, the Leader Member Exchange theory (LMX; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997; Liden & Maslyn 1998). LMX sees the relationship between leader and follower as a reciprocal exchange, in which both contribute, but it considers leader and followers as separate variables embodied each by a distinct individual, joint by mechanics based on more or less calculable individual exchange logics, and often conceptualized as juxtaposed (Grehan & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Collinson, 2006). *In a dyad the concerted enactment of the two roles is concealed*. This can be described as one of those ‘break downs’ between theory and reality (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Alvesson and Kareman, 2007), whereby, in keeping to the dyadic boundaries, the role co-enactment cannot be studied. Further, the dyad sees the juxtaposition of leader and follower as separate variables; hence a paradox may arise when these two (juxtaposed) variables are embodied by one same individual (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). In this sense, to see the co-enactment, and to unpack the paradox that might come with the co-enactment of the two roles, leader and follower have to be observed in a broader context than the dyadic one (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014). It is only by observing at

least three people interconnected by complementary leadership relationships - intermediate leader, his/her own leader and his/her own follower - that a richer relational picture emerges. For ease of understanding these three people will be hereby referred to as *the intermediate leader and the triad constituents*.

Triads have been theorized (Krackhardt, 1999) to move the relational dynamic from interpersonal, emotional logics, to group and systemic logics. This is confirmed by more recent studies: “Simmel asserts that triads tend to constrain emotions, reduce individuality, and generate behavioral convergences or uniformity because of ‘two against one’ social pressures. These forces are presumed to underlie and form the basis for uniformity, emergent norms, cohesion, and so forth. ... The broad implication is that triads are likely to produce cohesive relations more so than dyads.” (Yoon, Lawler, 2013: 1457/1458). Hence triads allow to theorize not only about the two relationships carried concurrently by the intermediate leader, but also about how the intermediate leader might be impacted by the convergence or divergence of the beliefs on leadership (Medfedeff & Lord, 2007; Epitropaki, Sy, Martin, Tram-Quon, Topkas, 2013), between the other two triad constituents. On this merit, in early studies of dyads Dansereau, Cashman, Graen, (1973) and Dansereau, Graen, and Haga, (1975) conceptualized “extra-dyadic’ behaviours, finding that “a leader upward relationship affected downward relationships. Specifically, managers who have favorable relationships with their own bosses are more likely to establish favorable exchange relationships with their subordinates, fostering more favorable job outcomes across hierarchical levels.” (Seers & Chopin, 2012: 57). How people enact these roles in concert is therefore function of relational dynamics that go beyond each dyad. The widening of the boundaries of research to include a triad, in which the intermediate leader is involved both as follower and leader, stands out as a promising focus of

analysis. This insight finds validation in previously established findings, stating that the shift from two individuals to three has more significant implications than any other change in group size (Weick, 1979). The following paragraphs are dedicated to unpacking a process that allows managers to balance the two roles, by addressing the material and cognitive tensions stemming from the triad constituents.

### **A Paradoxical Dynamic Process**

The remainder of this paper is dedicated to the theoretical exploration of the process through which some individuals are more successful than others in navigating the complexities arising from the performance of the leader-follower dual role. The process will explain how those individuals who develop their self-concept as one of a leader and a follower, and accept both roles as equally important, are better positioned to respond to the conflicting needs and demands that come from the triad constituents.

The ability of managers to deal with ambiguity, tensions and complexity is particularly recognized by the paradox literature. “Managers need to recognize, become comfortable with, and even profit from tensions and the anxieties [that paradoxes] provoke, for the contribution of paradox to management thinking is the recognition of its power to generate creative insight and change” (Lewis, 2000: 764)

Adopting paradox theory as a framework (Lewis & Smith, 2014) allows us to consider the existence of a mechanism by which the concerted performance of the roles of leader and follower can happen dynamically, whether the roles are stable and juxtaposed (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), or emergent and fluid (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Hosking, 2007a,b; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In considering for example the symbol of yin and yang, the two sides which stand for opposites “never conflict in absolute

terms” because of a constant dynamic balance (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1994). In this sense, whilst the leader and follower roles are conceptualized as interfacing opposites, or fluid relational constructs, they have the potentiality of not conflicting if the intermediate leader is able to balance the enactment of one role and of the other. So, whilst on one hand the intermediate leader occupies a structural position in the triad, where greater tensions can occur, on the other, he/she can also have the agency to bypass these tensions. In this sense this dynamism represents an opportunity for the intermediate leader to deal with the conflicting pulls coming from the two roles, and two relationships, and to create one successful leadership triad.

Therefore, consistently with the process of balance of paradoxical tensions proposed by Smith and Lewis (2011) at organizational level, this paper proposes a process, at *individual level*, that can explain the leader/follower role concerted enactment. Based on the same logics advanced by Smith and Lewis, for organizational level processes, this paper describes how a virtuous cycle can emerge when an intermediate leader succeeds in achieving a dynamic equilibrium between the pulls in different directions arising in the leadership triad. As described by paradox theory, this equilibrium will enable the intermediate leader to perpetuate a virtuous cycle of balance of the triadic tensions. Smith and Lewis (2014) define these individuals as ‘paradoxical leaders’, i.e. those who have the ability to accept and embrace simultaneously competing demands. They describe how repressing some of these demands can create short term order, but will exacerbate the pressure from the opposite demand (Smith & Lewis, 2012; Lavine, 2014). Hence, “effective managing paradox ... depends on being open and accepting rather than avoiding tensions.” (Smith & Lewis, 2012: 228).

In this sense, to achieve balance in a triad the intermediate leader needs to develop the

ability to deal with the tensions faced at the convergence of the interests and needs of the other two triad's constituents. For this reason, the description of the model of dynamic equilibrium starts from defining these tensions. These are categorized as material and structural (i.e. stemming from the structural need to mediate demand and needs for resources amongst the constituents), and cognitive and affective (i.e. generated in the different interpretations of meanings amongst constituents). Second, the process highlights how the intermediate leader needs to become cognitively aware of him/herself as a leader and a follower in concert, and to recognize that both roles are equally important. This acceptance, key to the balance of paradoxical contradictions, is fundamental to the initiation of a virtuous cycle. Through acceptance the individual can develop an ability to attend to different perspectives, cognitively and emotionally, through psychological flexibility, and the ability to generate plausibility of meanings amongst triad constituents, through sensemaking and sensegiving. It is these abilities which help the individual to address the tension and to create more balanced triadic exchanges. Further, the triggering of the virtuous cycle feeds back to the individual, reinforcing his/her understanding of him/herself both as a capable leader and a capable follower. The process, represented in Figure 2, will be described in details below.

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Insert Figure 2 about here  
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### **The Tension Faced by an Intermediate Leader**

Tensions which arise because an intermediate leader role co-enactment is dictated by their position in the organisation, and are therefore *inherent* to that position, have been named here as *material and structural*. Tensions which arise in

the process of co-construction of meanings between the intermediate leader and the triad constituents, and are therefore *socially constructed*, have been called as *cognitive and affective*. Smith and Lewis (2011) indeed propose that paradoxical tensions are both material and structural, i.e. stemming from material challenges embedded in the structure of organizations, or cognitive and affective, i.e. “created by actors cognition or rhetoric” (p. 385). In short, whilst material and structural tensions are caused by competing demand coming from the structural position of the intermediate leader, the cognitive and affective tensions are caused by competing meanings that an intermediate leader encounters in the co-construction of two complementary relationships. These paradoxical tensions will be unpacked below, and are summarized in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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***Material and Structural Tensions.*** The material and structural tensions of the leader-follower dual role enactment are those stemming from the very process of organizing (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In order to function, organizations are shaped in discrete, and hierarchically arranged systems, connected to each other (Cyert and March, 1963, 2003). Success in organizations is related to the capacity of managers to effectively co-enact the role of follower and leader, because while each subsystem can operate independently, success of the overall system depends on their interdependence (cf. Katz & Kahn, 1966 in Smith & Lewis, 2011). In hierarchical organization the connections amongst systems occur through managers who operate as “linking pins” (Dienesch and Liden, 1986). By virtue of their positions, they are recognized as the controllers of the distribution of resources and key opportunities from their superiors to their subordinates (Liden & Maslyn 1997, Sparrowe & Liden, 1997); this includes



material resources (e.g. pay and promotions; Woolridge & Floyds, 2002), as well as intangible ones like knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). The higher the quality of the leadership relationship, the greater the access to resources (Graham & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien et al. 2014); that is to say that an intermediate leader needs to balance the demand for resources with both other constituents of the triad. In this sense he/she is in the delicate situation to having to develop a high quality relationship with his or her own boss (as a follower), to ensure access to resources for him/herself and their teams; and (as a leader) to distribute these resources according to demands and relationship quality with his/her follower. An individual hence finds him/herself to balance the conflicting needs of groups situated in the different hierarchical layers (Denison, Hooijberg, Quinn, 1995; Smith & Lewis, 2011), and this is precisely what causes material paradoxical tensions. For example, managers in these positions have been found to perform a constant trade off between behaviours and actions aligned to adaptation to change, and resistance to change (Aherne, et al., 2014). Further, they have been found to promise upper echelons not to waste resources, whilst allowing their team secretly to scavenge the same resources; these games of compliance and deviance are at the root of corporate venturing and innovation, (Mainemelis, 2010). In this sense, intermediate leaders have to perform materially different actions to: comply with their leaders' strategy to gain their trust, and to deviate from the same to help their team reach top performance (Burgelman, 1983a, b; Floyd & Woolridge, 1992; Mainemelis, 2010). These tensions are highlighted in the first half of Table 1.

*Proposition 1a: Because of his/her structural position in a triad, an intermediate leader undergoes the pull between contradictory constituents' needs and demands for resources. This causes material and structural tensions.*

Smith and Lewis (2011) highlight how paradoxical tensions become salient when the status quo is unsettled. The management literature reflects this. Material and structural tensions, which can be latent in situations of business as usual, become salient when a situation of stability is perturbed, like when change or new strategies are implemented (Balogun, 2004; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011) and when innovation is harvested (Burgelman, 1983a, b; Mainemelis, 2010). In these situations, individuals become protective of their existing interests and routines, and therefore they manifest defensiveness towards change or new strategies.

*Proposition 1b: The material and structural tensions become more salient when individuals in the leadership triad are more likely to be defensive of their resources and actions, like when the status quo is unsettled.*

***Cognitive and Affective Tensions.*** In addition, *the cognitive and affective tensions* caused by the leader and follower roles concerted enactment emerge when it is recognized that the roles of leader and follower are formed through a process based on the social interaction between the organizational members (Hosking, Dachler, & Gergen, 1995, Uhl-bien, 2006, Gergen, 2009). Hence the intermediate leader co-creates the *meaning* of the two roles (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Hosking, 2007a, b) with the other constituents of the leadership triad. In situations of change implementation intermediate leaders have been found for example to bridge consistently constituents' different meanings of the change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Similarly Huy (2002) found that managers had to reconcile the enthusiasm for change at the top with the distress of the recipient of the change at the bottom; here intermediate leaders “experience a wide range of conflicting emotions and would probably need to manage their own

emotional ambivalence” too (Huy, 2002: 36). Socially constructed narratives have been found to be important in how individuals attribute meaning to the role of leader and follower, and often are at the root of the perception of a juxtaposition between the two roles. For example, organizational narratives have associated to opposing poles, respectively to masculinity and control, and to femininity and resistance (Collinson, 2005; Collinson, 2006). In this sense individuals “caught in the middle”, enacting the concurrent roles of leader and follower, can embody both these aspects of control and resistance. As found during a qualitative study managers occupying the position of intermediate leaders were “controllers and controlled. And at the same time ... resist[ed] those controls... [and were] resisted” (Harding, Lee, Ford, 2014: 1231), intermediate leaders were therefore controllers, controlled, as well as resister and resisted, in their dual role of leader and follower. Further, in the co-construction of two concurrent and complementary leadership relationships, cognitive and affective tensions can stem from discrepant meanings, and therefore expectations, of leadership coming from the two relationships. For example managers have been found to have to use opposite social influence tactics in the relationships with the senior managers and with their own team, having to adopt impression management in one relationship (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), and authentic and transformational leadership in the other one (Beaty & Lee, 1992). These tensions have long been recognized, and studied in the management literature. For example, since the 1950s in sociology, (Merton, 1957: 110), and then in organizational psychology (Katz and Khan, 1966), role-set analysis has helped analyze the predicament of an individual contending with expectations formed as a result of occupying concurrently multiple roles. In this sense the intermediate leader enacts the role of follower according to the relationship co-created with the leader, and the role of leader according to the relationship co-created

with the follower. A role-set approach helps highlight how a manager “is not simply selecting that set of leadership behaviours that he prefers, or that he thinks will be the best for him to use, but selects his behaviours subject to the social influence coming from his subordinates, his peers and his boss” (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1975: 142). The management literature has shown how tensions for the intermediate leader can arise from contrasting meanings that role-set members attribute to how roles should be enacted, and to organizational situations (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1975; Tsui, Ashford, Claid, Xin, 1995; Toegel, Kilduff, Anand, 2013; Humborstad, Kuvaas, 2013).

*Proposition 2a: Because of his/her mediating position in a triad, an intermediate leader faces cognitive and affective tensions, caused by conflicting meanings and dissonant interpretations of role expectations, and of events, across triad constituents.*

The management literature shows that cognitive and affective tensions can be latent when meanings attributed to roles (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1975; Tsui, et al., 1994), and to organizational activities, like change and strategy implementation (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011), are uniform between the triads’ constituents. In these cases the intermediate leader is less exposed to ambiguity. However, when there is discordance between the cues the intermediate leader receives from the other two members of the triad, with regards to the meaning and signifiers of roles, or of organizational activities, the role co-enactment can become tricky and ambiguous, and the tensions salient.

*Proposition 2b: The cognitive and affective tensions experienced by the intermediate leader become more salient the greater the discrepancies of meanings amongst triad’s constituents.*

## **Intermediate Leader Self-conceptualization as Leader and Follower**

*Conceptualization of Self.* Often organizational structures and narratives emphasize the importance of the role of leader over that of follower (Kelley, 1992; Collison, 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), hence individuals might not have taken the time to think of themselves as ‘followers’. So they miss out on the possibility of developing tactics of influence, or negotiation (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 1997) from the perspective of that role. However, if individuals internalize the possibility that they are both leader and follower in their self-concept (Sluss & Ashford, 2007; De Rue, Ashford, Cotton, 2009), then they are able to acquire a more multifaceted set of behaviors, skills, affects, that relate to the ... follower role” (Hall, 2004: 157). As mentioned above, this might result difficult, especially in those contexts where managers prefer to think of themselves as leaders, have potentially received “leadership” training, have read about leadership in management books, and have developed narratives and beliefs about why they are good leaders. They might not therefore have developed an equally good idea of what it means to be a follower: what skills, behaviors and actions they could use when enacting such role. The development of equally multifaceted self-concepts might vary with seniority, with more junior managers finding it easy to develop a self as followers, and senior ones to develop a self as leaders (Ibarra, Wittman, Petriglieri, 2014). However, the more intermediate leaders’ self-conceptualization includes both roles, the more they can develop clarity on the tactics they can use to enact in concert both roles (Ashforth et al., 2001; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). In other words, once an individual becomes present to the fact that he/she needs to attend to both roles, it becomes easier for

him/her to be aware of the co-existence of competing demands and competing narratives.

*Proposition 3a: In order to develop tactics of co-enactment and balance the two roles, intermediate leaders need first to form a conceptualization of themselves both as a leader and a follower.*

***Acceptance of Leader and Follower Selves as Equally Important.*** However, awareness that one is both a leader and a follower *is not enough*, because in order to enact both roles there needs to be *acceptance* that both roles are equally important, in the establishment of relational dynamics with the other constituents of the leadership triad (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). This acceptance of the importance of both faces of the paradox is a key element in resolving paradoxical tensions (Lewis, 2000; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Paradox theory emphasizes how ‘paradoxical leaders’ are those that have the ability simultaneously to accept and embrace competing demands; repressing some of these demands can create short term order, but will exacerbate the pressure from the opposite sides (Smith & Lewis, 2012; Lavine, 2014). Hence, acceptance creates clarity that both roles need to be attended to with equal resources and attentions. When this double role acceptance is missing there could be increased conflict and tension in the relationships (Collinson, 2005; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). For example intermediate leaders might privilege their relationship with their leader, and not pay enough attention to the relationship with their follower, or vice-versa. In this sense, the acceptance that both demands and needs of one’s leader, and one’s follower, are equally important, gives the intermediate leader the possibility of developing concerted tactics to balance them. Hence this paper proposes that the acceptance of equal importance, underpins the choice to dedicate similar

psychological, cognitive and material resources to both roles, and it is a prerequisite to the development of tactics of co-enactment of the two roles.

*Proposition 3b: The intermediate leader's acceptance that the leader and follower roles are equally important is crucial for the intermediate leader to dedicate similar resources to the demands coming from both the other constituents of the triad.*

### **Triggering a Virtuous Cycle**

*Intrapersonal* dynamics are also crucial for the development of balance amongst triad constituents. Paradox theory emphasizes the important role that an individual's "cognitive and behavioral complexity and emotional equanimity" play in ensuring this process results in a virtuous rather than a vicious cycle (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 392). These qualities can enable a manager to carry on an exercise of balance, sustained in time, between paradoxical pulls (Smith and Lewis, 2011, 2012). On the contrary, when an individual doesn't have these qualities, a balance is not reached and tensions can be exacerbated into vicious cycles. Therefore, once the intermediate leader becomes aware of the tensions, he/she needs to have the ability to exercise these cognitive (Weick, Sutcliffe, Obstfeld, 1999), and affective (Huy, 2002) efforts. This paper proposes an individual does this through psychological flexibility, and through sensegiving/sensemaking.

***Psychological Flexibility.*** A construct which helps understand the above described cognitive and affective abilities, is the one of *psychological flexibility* (Kashdan, & Rottenberg, 2010); this can be described as an individual's capacity for adaptation to fluctuating situational demands, as well as the ability to reconfigure mental resources, to shift perspectives, and to balance competing desires, needs and roles (p. 866). This

individual characteristic can be seen as a determinant factor needed for the successful co-enactment of multiple roles, whether the roles are conceptualized as stable, pre-determined and juxtaposed (Ashforth et al., 2000, 2001), or fluid, specific to time and space, relationally co-constructed (Uhl-Bien et al., 2012; 2014).

*Proposition 4a: The higher the degree of psychological flexibility, the greater an intermediate leader's ability to balance competing demands coming from the different triad's constituents.*

The literature recognizes widely that successful managers balance demands for resources between triad's constituents (Liden & Maslyn 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Floyd & Woolridge, 1992). Successful managers are able to balance competing needs, for example the trade-off between resisting and participating to change (Aherne, et al., 2014), and to deal with multiple logics, for example attending to the visionary but abstract concepts of the top leaders (as followers), and to the experienced grounded concepts of the base (as leaders; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). There is also evidence that managers that achieve innovation have the ability to embrace competing courses of actions, for example when protecting their followers' need to scavenge in their innovation effort (Burgelman 1983; Mainemelis, 2010), and then selling the successful innovation to the top management team (Burgelman, 1983; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992). This paper therefore argues that *how* the intermediate leader deals with the balancing of the roles of leader and follower, and the tensions that derive from their co-enactment, marks the difference between exacerbating paradoxical tension (i.e. spurring vicious relational cycles within the triad), and achieving a balanced co-enactment, (i.e. spurring virtuous relational cycles); and in this way coordinating the two complementary leadership relationship which form the



triad. An illustration of an individual-level vicious cycle is given by Luscher and Lewis (2008) in a situation of change implementation at the LEGO company. Here managers, in their capacity as followers, blame executives for the decisions made about the change implementation, but still need to portray themselves to their subordinates as compliant leaders, delivering a change program they do not believe in. As the managers do not reach balance between these two pulls, they find themselves paralyzed, and unable to act, and implement that very same change.

*Proposition 4b: The successful balance of inherent tensions creates a dynamic balance amongst the logics and actions of triad constituents, spurring a virtuous cycle.*

***Sensemaking and Sensegiving.*** Further, Table 1 also shows how intermediate leaders in leadership triads fulfil the roles of translators of meaning between triads' constituents, incurring *cognitive or affective tensions* when these meanings become equivocal, different or even contradictory. When the intermediate leader notices a break down or a difference in the narrative flow from one relation to the other, he/she makes efforts to “construct a plausible sense of what is happening, and this sense of plausibility normalizes the breach, restores the expectation, and enables projects to continue” (Weick et al., 2005: 415). This effort of construction of meaning is represented by the process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Further it has been recognized that, in organizational situations in which managers bridge different pools of stakeholders, not only do they construct meaning of event through sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005; Sonenshein, 2010), but they also pass on that meaning to other constituents through sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipedi, 1991; Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Several studies in the change and

strategy implementation literature depict intermediate leaders as a crucial part of the change success through their sensemaking and sensegiving capacity (Gioia & Sims, 1986; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Labianca, Gray & Brass, 2000; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Sonensheine, 2010; Huy, Corley and Kratz, 2014). It is their ability to make sense of events from one part of the triad, and to pass on that meaning to another part that can ensure change becomes effective (Floyd & Woolridge, 1992; Balogun & Johnson, 2004, Rouleau, 2005) and strategy is implemented (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, Chittipeddi, 1994; Sonenshein, 2010). In large change programs intermediate leaders' sensemaking was found to act as a process of interpretations of emotions that determined the legitimacy of the top leadership team (Huy, Corley and Kraatz, 2014). This paper proposes that the ability of an individual to create meanings retrospectively (sensemaking), and to pass on these meanings as a present or future image (sensegiving) up and down the triad is crucial to the coordination of the meanings at triadic level and hence crucial to the intermediate leaders dealing dynamically with socially constructed tensions.

*Proposition 5a: The higher a intermediate leader's ability to exercise sensegiving and sensemaking amongst triad constituents, the greater his/her ability to generate a plausibility of meanings at triadic level.*

***Virtuous Cycle.*** The ability of the intermediate leader to bridge meanings amongst triad constituents can act as a validation to him/herself that his/her self-conceptualization as both a leader and a follower bear equal importance, thus reinforcing the acceptance of them both as equal, and the willingness to dedicate similar resources to both sides of the triad.

*Proposition 5b: The successful management of equivocal meanings amongst triad constituents contributes to the creation of a virtuous cycle.*

Finally, the cycle perpetuates itself, as the intermediate leader's actions, which successfully bring balance to the triad's tensions, contribute to the individual ideas of him/herself as a capable follower, *and* a capable leader. The ability to achieve balance instigates a shift in the perception of leader/follower as dichotomous concepts towards a perception as more dialectical ones (Fleming and Spicer 2008; Collinson, 2005). Leading and following acquire similar importance, and are placed on a level playing field, reinforcing the acceptance that both self-concepts are equally important in the achievement of leadership and organizational outcomes. In other words, the ability of the intermediate leader to bridge meanings, and allocate resources amongst a triad's constituents perpetuates the dynamic process of equilibrium, by reinforcing the beliefs that individuals in organizations, to be successful, have to be both skilled leaders and skilled followers.

*Proposition 6: The ignition of a virtuous cycle reinforces the intermediate leader's awareness of him/herself as successful leader and successful follower.*

In conclusion, this process demonstrates that many qualities that have been attributed to leaders by previous literature, like the ability to embrace conflicting demands (Lewes & Smith, 2012), or to manage competing demands from multiple roles (Yuckl, 1989, 2012), are also characteristics of followers. A balance in the leadership triad can exist thanks to the intermediate leader's ability to be both a leader *and* a follower, who can embrace, separate or harmonize conflicting demands.

Similarly, the ability to master processes of sensemaking and sensegiving, historically attributed to people in position of authority (Gioia & Chittipedi, 1991; Balogun & Johnson, 2005) emerges as a key skill of intermediate leaders whichever of their two roles they are enacting. In a sense, the following by the intermediate leader (of the triadic leader) informs greatly the leading by the intermediate leader (of the triadic follower). This reinforces the idea that following is equally important as leading. In sum, the triad can work effectively if the intermediate leader can both embrace the *intrapersonal* challenge of acknowledgement and acceptance of him/herself as an equally able leader and follower; as well as exercise the *interpersonal* processes of balance of tensions, through psychological flexibility and sensegiving and sensemaking.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Over the past 20 years the role of follower has been recognized as important to the one of leader in the achievement of leadership and organizational outcomes (Meindl, 1995; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Howell and Shamir, 2005; Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al. 2014). This has encouraged research in innovative directions in the study of leadership and followership (Uhl-Bien 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Sy, 2010; Carsten, et al. 2010; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). This paper intersects some of this research and answers questions about how an individual can successfully enact concurrently the roles of leader and follower. It provides a process model that highlights interpersonal and intrapersonal mechanisms which allow for an intermediate leader in the leadership triad to create virtuous cycles of performance. The theoretical lens of paradox (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Lewis & Smith,

2014), which suggests that a dynamic equilibrium can be reached through the acceptance of juxtaposed concepts, helps the design of this process. By accepting both roles as equally important, the intermediate leader is shown to be able to balance competing demands coming from triad constituents, and to create plausible meanings across the leadership triad. This paper joins those studies that highlight the ability to accept and embrace juxtaposed forces as an essential element for organizational success (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Clegg et al., 2002; Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smith & Lewis, 2011). They argue that only when this dynamic balance exists, by virtue of acceptance of the competing and contradictory demands, can organizations turn paradoxical tensions into virtual cycles. In other words, momentum for positive outcomes emerges from a situation that could have delivered negative outcomes. This capacity for embracing multiple opposed logic simultaneously, has also been defined as an individual level quality that managers need to have to deal with paradoxes (Mom, Van Den Bosch, Volberda, 2009; Birkinsaw & Gupta, 2013). Therefore this paper is innovative in using an organizational-level mechanism, and applying it to an individual-level issue, as suggested by recent insights on paradox theory (Schad, Lewis, Rasch & Smith, 2016; Fairhurst, Smith & Banghart, 2016)

Further, by building on a long tradition of dyadic studies, demanding for leadership relationships to be studied in a wider context (Dansereau, Cashman, Graen, 1973; Dansereau, Graen, Haga, 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997), this paper proposes the leadership triad as a methodology for the exploration of leadership relationships. The leadership triad, formed by a intermediate leader, his/her leader and his/her follower, reveals the interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics of the role co-enactment. The triad allows us to blur the traditionally bright line that separates leaders and followers

as someone who knows more than others or less than others (Weick, 2007). As Weick (2007) reminds us, through the words of Dee Hock (the founder of VISA):

“In the deepest sense, distinction between leader and follower is meaningless. In every moment of life we are simultaneously leading and following. There is never a time when our knowledge, judgment, and wisdom are not more useful and applicable than that of another. There is never a time when the knowledge, judgment and wisdom of another are more useful and applicable than ours. At any time that ‘other’ might be superior, subordinate, or peer” (Hock, 1999: 72-73).

By looking at an individual as simultaneously a leader and a follower, the causal process attributed to the leader-follower relationship is deeply challenged (Meindl, 1995). In challenging this causality the triad helps to highlight that the meaning of the intermediate leader actions, as a leader, can only be understood after, he/she has processed, as a follower, his/her own leader’s actions. The process highlighted in this paper shows that at individual level the real beginning of leadership is in the process of following. The following provides values and qualities to the leader’s input. To sum this up, treating following as a consequence of leading doesn’t take into account that there was following before leading. The conscious enactment of the role of leader depends upon the role of follower having already taken place. *It is the following which establishes what finally becomes leading action, and vice versa.* These considerations help understanding further how an individual can enact both roles, of leader and follower concurrently, and how both roles need to be enacted equally effectively for the leadership outcomes to be fulfilled.

The above-described process at individual level brings contributions to recent theories of leadership, like ‘relational leadership’ (Uhl-Bien, 2006) and ‘adaptive leadership’ (DeRue, 2011), which consider leader and follower roles as co-existing and inseparable. This inextricable co-existence assumes crucial importance for the role co-enactment: “To treat leading and following as simultaneous is to redistribute knowing and doubting more widely, to expect ignorance and fallibility to be similarly

distributed, and to expect that knowledge is what happens between heads rather than inside a single leaders' head.” (Weick, 2007: 281).

In conclusion, the above described concurrence of two polarized actions of leading and following, in a circular flow can be made sense of through paradox: the coexistence of juxtaposed elements in one unity. Here paradox is used as a meta theory: “paradox offers an overarching approach to addressing organizational tensions” at different level of analysis (Lewis & Smith, 2014: 50). It is used here both as a ‘strategy for theorizing’ and as a ‘theoretical framework’ (Lewis, & Smith, 2014). Initially it is used as a rhetorical strategy that allows at the same time logically to by-pass and embrace the conceptualization of leader/follower roles as stable and juxtaposed, (Graham & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and as fluid and emergent (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Hosking, 2007). Through the symbol of yin and yang it helps understand how these two roles can be simultaneously juxtaposed and fluid, and emergent and stable (see figure 1). By adopting a paradoxical approach to the study of this phenomenon this paper also responds to recent calls for a greater use of “paradox theory” to resolve individual level tensions (Schad et al., 2016; Fairhurst et al., 2016); in doing so it brings a contribution to the paradox literature.

## **Research Agenda**

As a research agenda emerges from the considerations of this paper, at least two main areas stand as fertile areas of exploration. First, the leadership triad emerges as a complex and unexplored unit of observation, both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, it would be important to leverage the literature on networks and triads (Krackhardt, 1999; Granovetter, 1983, 2000) and apply it to the leadership triad. By

improving our understanding of leadership triads we might advance our understanding of leadership dynamics in organizations. For example, how would leadership dynamics work in a triad where the intermediate leader behave as a ‘tertius iungens’ (i.e. someone that cohesively brokers information amongst constituents; Obstfeld, 2005), versus a ‘tertius gaudens’ (i.e. someone that arbitrages the information amongst triad constituents to his/her advantage; Yun, Thye, Lawler, 2013)? Empirically, it might be interesting to test triadic dynamics through quantitative methodologies. For more than 20 years, dyadic LMX research (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden and Maslyn, 1998) has provided insightful understanding on dyadic leadership dynamics, and can inspire research questions answerable through triadic methodologies. For example, what are the personal qualities of an intermediate leader that allow the triad to be more or less balanced? Further research could explore how triadic dynamics vary depending on national and organizational culture, as well as on other contextual influences. It would be interesting to understand if triadic dynamics are different depending on the seniority of the triad; for example would a very senior triad, at the top of the organization (where the CEO is the most senior triad constituent), enjoy different dynamics than a triad lower down (where a middle manager is the most senior triad constituent)?

Another promising area of exploration is the area of identity. It is well known that self-identity influences how people enact their roles (Ashforth et al. 2000; Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002; DeRue & Ashford, 2010), and there is a wide literature on how the leader-follower interaction shapes self-identity (Lord & Maher, 1990; Lord, Brown, Freiberg, 1999; Lord & Brown, 2003; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Indeed in writing this paper self-identity popped up frequently as a potential area of exploration. Hence empirical research could explore how the intermediate leader



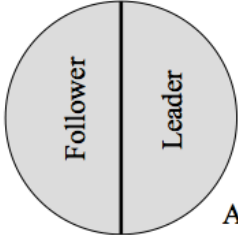
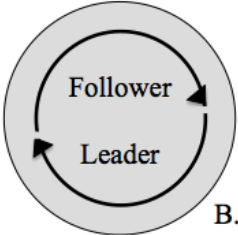
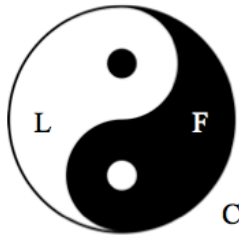
forms his/her identity as leader and follower at the same time in a triad. For example, how does an intermediate leader form his self-identity as a leader (Lord and Brown, 2003) by receiving inputs from both triad constituents? And how does he/she at the same time form a self-identity as a follower?

### **Practical Implications**

The practical implications of the acknowledgement and balancing of the triadic tensions can be huge for managers in organizations. To help individuals contend with the complexities arising from the simultaneous enactment of the roles of leader and follower, it would be useful for managers to gain an understanding of themselves not only as leaders, but also as followers. In this way, we would help managers develop narratives about being simultaneously leaders and followers; but also to converse about, reflect on, and accept that leadership outcomes can be reached more effectively if they pay greater attention to both roles. They could then overcome the dichotomous meaning associated with leading and following and develop a more dialectic one.

TABLES AND FIGURES

**Figure 1**  
Paradox provides an alternative process helping conceptualize the leader and follower roles as stable, and as fluid.

Visual of role conceptualization	 A.	 B.	 C.
Leader/follower role conceptualization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stable</li> <li>• Predefined</li> <li>• Juxtaposed</li> </ul> <p>Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Avolio, 2007; Yukl, 2012;</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fluid</li> <li>• Specific to time and place</li> <li>• Emergent</li> </ul> <p>Uhl-Bien, 2006; Hosking, 2007; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stable and fluid</li> <li>• Predefined and Specific to time</li> <li>• Juxtaposed and emergent</li> </ul> <p>Lewis, 2000; Smith and Lewis, 2011</p>
Leader/follower role co-enactment process	<p><i>Intrapersonal process, cognitive and psychological personal struggle to reconcile individual level tensions</i></p> <p>Ashforth, Kreiner, Fugate, 2000; Ashforth, 2001</p>	<p><i>Interpersonal process, tensions might arise from a lack of role clarity, these are resolved through a process of claiming and granting</i></p> <p>Colinson, 2005; DeRue and Ashford, 2010</p>	<p><i>Dynamic equilibrium process, providing a process of acceptance and resolution of intrapersonal and interpersonal role specific tensions</i></p> <p>Lewis, 2000; Smith and Lewis, 2011</p>

**Figure 2**  
A virtuous process for the effective concerted enactment of the roles of leader and follower, in the context of the leadership triad.

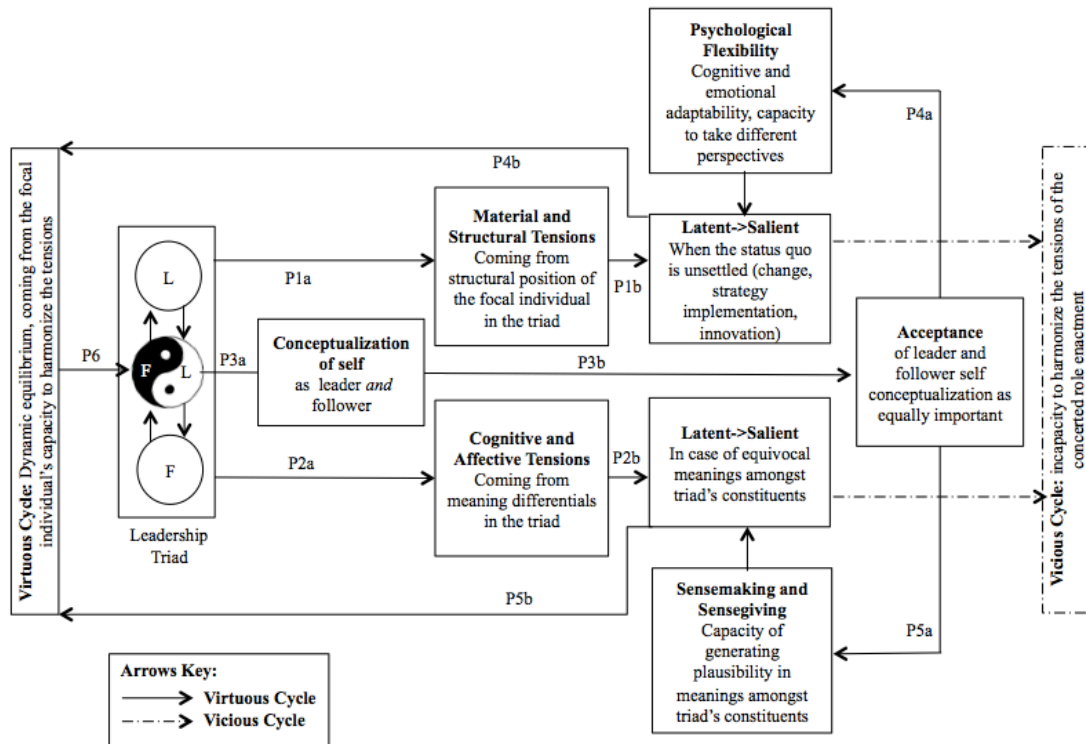


Table 1

**Inherent and socially constructed tensions faced by an intermediate leader**

<b>Tensions</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Literature</b>
<b>Material and structural</b>	Originating in material challenges from the very process of organizing (Smith and Lewis, 2011)	<i>Intermediate leaders need to bargain with opposing demands on resources; e.g. source resources from the top (as followers), and distribute them to their team (as leaders), often incurring conflicting requests</i>	Liden & Maslyn 1997; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Floyd and Woolridge, 1992
		<i>Intermediate leaders need to bridge opposing organizational logics; e.g. the visionary but abstract concepts of the top (as followers), and the experienced grounded concepts of the base (as leaders) of the organization</i>	Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995
		<i>Intermediate leaders feel paralyzed by opposing calls to actions, in their role as leader and follower; e.g. they are tasked with implementing change in as prescribed way (as followers), but asked to make independent decisions regarding change routines (as leaders)</i>	Luscher and Lewes, 2008, Floyd and Woolridge, 1992
		<i>Intermediate leaders juggle a constant cost/benefits trade-off amongst triad constituents; e.g. pushing their team to adapt to change (as leaders), and influencing the senior managers to keep the status quo (as followers).</i>	Aherne, Lam and Kraus, 2014
		<i>Intermediate leaders are asked to comply with senior managers guidelines, but to succeed in innovating they need to deviate from them; e.g. managers fear senior managers' reaction (as followers) when they allow their teams to engage in innovation that deviates from current strategy (as leaders). They then are praised (as followers) when the innovation is successful</i>	Burgelman, 1983a, Floyd and Woolridge, 1992; Mainemelis, 2010
<b>Cognitive and affective</b>	"created by actors cognition or rhetoric". (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 385)	<i>Intermediate leaders create shared meanings amongst triad constituents; e.g. they use sophisticated processes of sensemaking and sensegiving, between triads' constituents, to implement strategy and change across hierarchical lines</i>	Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011;
		<i>Intermediate leaders form opposing rhetoric about themselves; e.g. they passively resist the senior management (as followers), they then switch to active resistance (as leaders); in the same way they control (as leaders), and they are controlled (as followers)</i>	Harding, Lee and Ford, 2014
		<i>Intermediate leaders face emotional ambivalence in their role as leader and follower; e.g. they participate to the enthusiasm from the change from the top (as followers), and to the resistance of the change at the bottom (as leaders)</i>	Huy, 2002
		<i>Intermediate leaders need to engage in opposite social influence tactics with different triad constituents; e.g. impression management when selling issue upwards (as followers), and authenticity to persuade their teams (as leaders)</i>	Dutton and Ashford, 1993 and Beaty and Lee, 1992
		<i>Intermediate leaders juggle role-set cognitive dissonance in the social construction of the triadic complementary leadership relationships; e.g. the potential dissonance between two complementary leadership relationships schemata, causes tensions for the intermediate leader</i>	Pfeffer and Salancick, 1975; Tsui, 1984; Tsui and Ashford, 1994; Humborstad, Kuvaas, 2013

## PAPER II

### SEEKING TRANSPARENCY WHILST EMBRACING AMBIGUITY:

### PROCESSES OF LEADERSHIP AND SENSEMAKING DURING

### STRATEGIC CHANGE

#### ABSTRACT

*Extant literature shows that it is important for leaders to create clarity and transparency to foster trust amongst their followers, but also that it is important for leaders to embrace ambiguity and construct slightly different meanings for each audience they face. This paper illuminates how intermediate leaders embrace transparency, whilst maintaining ambiguity, in their relationships with their boss and the department they lead. This 30-month long research, based on grounded theory methods, happens at a time of strategic change. Through multiple interviews, field notes, archival records, and ethnographic observations, it zooms into a senior team, constituted by a top manager, ten senior managers (intermediate leaders), and various junior managers. The senior managers emerge as the mediators of meaning construction, between the top and junior managers, controlling ambiguous interpretations of events through sensemaking and sensegiving. The findings unveil different skip-level leadership dynamics, through which junior managers and top manager enter in direct leadership exchanges. These direct exchanges are found to disrupt the formal leadership relationships, affecting the senior managers' identity as leaders through sensebreaking. The interval covered by this study allows to propose that skip-level relationships can be unsustainable, and tend to revert to formal leadership, where meaning construction is controlled by the senior managers, as their sense of identity as leaders remains untouched.*

***Author's Note: this paper received the 'Best Paper from a Dissertation Award' at the Academy of Management 2018, by the Organization Development and Change Division***

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how processes of leadership (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012; Fairhurst, 2016), and meaning construction (Gioia & Chittipeddy, 1991; Pratt, 2000; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) co-exist and co-develop inextricably, in a senior management team, during strategic change. It aims to illuminate how leadership relationships and flows of sensemaking, and sensegiving, interpolate each other, at a time of ambiguity, as managers crave more transparency and greater clarity (Vogelgesang, Leroy, Avolio, 2013; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). Both leadership processes and meaning making processes, such as sensemaking (i.e. the co-constructed interpretations of events, amongst organizational constituents; Weick et al., 2005) and sensegiving (i.e. the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others; Gioia & Chitapeddi, 1991) underpin how information is handled in organizations. Therefore, it is interesting to appraise both processes jointly. In order to do this, this study focuses on intermediate leaders (Jaser, 2017), located at the intersection of organizational layers, like head of departments and of teams, who jointly embody the role of leader to their own unit, and follower to their own bosses.

To study meaning construction from this perspective is important because the way information is handled in organizations has consequences, for the organizations themselves and society at large; for example, a more transparent handling of information is advisable, as poor quality of shared information amongst organizational members (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016) was identified as one of the systemic elements at the root of the recent global financial crisis (Ashby, 2011).

Unsurprisingly, the leadership literature recognizes that the ability to be clear and unambiguous is essential to the achievement of effective leadership outcomes (Vogelgesang, Leroy, Avolio, 2013), and to the formation of relationship of trust between leaders and followers (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995) especially during situations of change (Norman, Avolio, Luthans, 2010). Organizational leaders success depends also on their ability to ‘be forthright about the motives and the reasons behind the information given, and the decisions taken’ (Vogelgesang, Lester, 2009:253).

However ambiguous information is a fact of life in organizations too. ‘To deal with ambiguity interdependent people search for meaning, [and] settle for plausibility’ (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005:419). Leaders’ success has in part been ascribed to their ability to embrace ambiguous information, and to translate it to the different audiences they relate to (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Maitlis, 2005; Sonenshine, 2010). The consequence is that leaders offer slightly different, or partial versions of the same event to their followers, and to their own bosses (Rouleau, 2005; Huy, 2011; Huy, Corely & Kraatz, 2014; Balogun, Bartunek & Do, 2015;), or to different stakeholders (Maitlis, 2005), depending on the objectives they want to achieve. They do it to turn ambiguity into inter-relational certainties, that underpin trust, fundamental to high quality relationships between leader and follower (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In fact, embracing and translating ambiguous information to one’s followers is an indispensable leadership practice (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012), for the successful roll out of organizational change and for the implementations of new strategy (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, Gioia et al. 1994; Maitlis, 2005).

Therefore, extant, literature shows that, on one hand, it is important for leaders to create clarity and transparency to foster trust amongst their followers (Graen &

Uhl-Bien, 1995; Norman, Avolio, Luthans, 2010); on the other, that it is important for leaders facing different audiences to construct slightly different meanings suitable to each audience (Balogun et al., 2015). These conflicting substantiations prompt the question at the base of this paper: how do intermediate leaders caught between two audiences (their unit members, and their bosses) embrace transparency, which is important for establishing effective relationships with their boss and their reports, whilst maintaining ambiguity, by creating a slightly different inter-relational understanding with each audience?

In the hope to expand our theoretical understanding of leadership relationships and meaning construction, I will explore leadership as a multilevel process (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Fairhurst, 2016) unfolding across the hierarchical structure, by zooming into the role played by senior managers, both interfacing a top manager, and some junior managers. I will study leadership processes through a case history, in which multiple interviews, field notes, archival records, and observations, provide a composite narrative that is the data of the analysis (Sonenshein, 2010; Fairhurst, 2016). This article therefore focuses closely on the sensemaking flows up and down the hierarchy (Balogun et al., 2015) and examines the accounts of leaders and followers in a senior management team in charge of the risk management of one of the largest financial institutions in the world. The research was conducted during more than two years at the time of the implementation of new global risk management system, therefore at a time of pervasive organizational change.

This paper is structured in four sections. First, I will provide a conceptual background reviewing the literature on transparency and ambiguity during change, focusing on the role played by leadership and sensemaking. Second, by following the tradition of grounded theory (Corbin & Straus, 1990; Corley & Gioia, 2004) I will

provide a rich description of the empirical settings, and the sources of data: here I present the data structure summarizing the categories emergent from the coding of the words of my informants. Third, I will present the findings, by showcasing a process depicting the relationships between the categories, and the high level themes emergent from the data. In this finding section I will exhibit how intermediate leaders, like senior managers, perpetuate systemic ambiguity through formal leadership processes, and how junior managers seek transparency through skip-level leadership (i.e. by engaging in leadership relationships that skip one or more hierarchical levels; Detert & Trevino, 2010). I will then illustrate how different types of skip-level leadership process (free and controlled) interact with the core formal leadership processes. I will show that free skip-level leadership, in which junior and top managers engage in direct leadership exchanges and meaning interpretations, destabilizes formal leadership relationships, by dis-intermediating the senior manager. Controlled skip-level leadership, on the other hand, where senior managers have the last say on the meaning construction, creates the illusion of greater transparency, but perpetuates the existence of ambiguity. Lastly, the fourth session of this paper contains a discussion and conclusions. Here I will highlight the contributions of this paper. This paper ultimately offers a micro perspective of how meanings are constructed during change, by zooming into the dyadic leader/follower relationships in a senior team, adding to research on sensemaking during change (Balogun et al, 2015). However, the main contribution lies in the unveiling of different skip-level leadership dynamics, and of the ways they interact with formal multilevel leadership processes across time (Fairhursts & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Fairhurst, 2016), favouring the existence of pragmatic ambiguity. These findings do pave the way for more research on how leadership processes influence meaning construction.



## **INTERPLAY OF LEADERSHIP AND SENSEMAKING DURING CHANGE**

### **Transparency, Ambiguity and Leadership Relationships**

Broadly, transparency has been defined as the ‘perceived quality of internally shared information from a sender’ (Schnakenberg and Tomlinson, 2016: 1788). Transparency therefore lies in the eye of the beholder. So in defining leadership as a relationship between a leader and a follower (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), transparency is the followers’ perception that a leader listens, and exhibits open communication (Vogelgesang et al., 2009), and vice versa. Transparency in communication has been recognized as an important dimension of leadership in organizations by practitioners (Pagano and Pagano, 2004), and academics alike (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May & Walumbwa, 2005; Shamir & Eilan, 2005; Norman et al., 2010). Transparent leadership behaviours are characterized by the extent to which managers exhibit openness in sharing information, acceptance of others’ inputs, and of disclosure of personal values and motives in making decisions (Norman et al., 2010). For effective relationships to take place, leader and followers are therefore both entrusted with the responsibility to act with transparency (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Gardner et al., 2005; Shamir & Eilan, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005).

However, complete transparency in communication might be an unrealistic attainment on the part of leader and follower. Ambiguity, defined as the quality of events, or communications, that are ‘capable of being understood in two or more possible senses or ways<sup>3</sup>’ is a pervasive phenomenon, especially during change, when

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<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster on line dictionary definition, as retrieved on 8<sup>th</sup> Nov 2017.

the status quo is unsettled, and there is not yet a clear idea of what the future will be like (Lewis, 2000). For example, in situations of strategic change, managers who act in pivotal positions, facing different stakeholders, have been found to use ‘strategic ambiguity’ (Eisenberg, 1984) in their own favor by constructing slightly different meanings, about the same events, with different stakeholders (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Balogun, et al., 2015) to achieve a ‘unified diversity’ (Eisenberg, 1984). More specifically, intermediate leaders have been found to construct two ‘sets of interwoven and interacting change narratives [in order to] mediate the relationship between the wider organizational change and local change actions’ (Balogun, et al., 2015: 960). In this dual exercise they embrace multiple, even equivocal, interpretations of change, with different actors, in an attempt to rally different audiences around common objectives (Sonenshine, 2010; Harding, Lee and Ford, 2014; Balogun et al., 2015). In these situations attaining transparency might be problematic, or even damaging to the purpose of maintaining different interpretations in order to rally a specific audience. It is not clear, therefore, how leader and follower maintain high quality relationships in the presence of this systemic ambiguity.

### **Dealing with Ambiguity: Leadership and Sensemaking**

In dealing with ambiguity intermediate leaders search for meanings with the people they interrelate with, up and down the hierarchical lines (Weick, et al., 2005; Balogun et al., 2015). With each actor they construct plausible meanings and move on: these are moments of sensemaking’ (Weick, et al. 2005: 419). As seen above, in the context of change, senior managers, leaders (to more junior managers), and followers (to the top manager), ‘construct two sets of narratives as they attempt to

make sense of their experience of change at any given time. The first set is about the wider organization change initiative of which they are recipients. The second set is about their local setting, for which they are the change agents' (Balogun et al., 2015: 974).

Therefore, when exploring how ambiguity is dealt with, in the context of strategic change, the sensemaking and the leadership theoretical lenses are interlaced (Maitlis, 2005). They both evoke the fluidity of iterative exchanges, rooted in language and action, evolving through time. On one hand leadership is defined as the co-construction of relationships, identities and meanings between two actors, a leader and a follower, who mutually influence each other (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Leader and follower are depicted to co-construct: relationships, through iterative processes of communication and action (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995); common narratives, through contextually specific discursive exchanges (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Ben, 2012); and even each other's identities, through individual, relational and collective actions of claiming and granting (De Rue & Ashford; 2010). On the other hand the process of sensemaking and sensegiving is also represented by a fluid iterative process, retrospective in nature, based on social interaction, between members of an organization, (Weick, 1995; Weick, et al., 2005). It is iterative and cyclical, where interpretation shapes actions and generates influence on to others (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011: 955). It is routed in communication as "it takes place in interactive talk and draws on the resources of language in order to formulate and exchange through talk" (Taylor & Van Every, 2000: 58). Further it affects mental models of reality, having a deep effect on the formation of organizational actors' identities (Weick, et al. 2005; Pratt; 2000).

In order to understand how these competing leadership dynamics, one

entailing the search of transparency, the other the endorsement of ambiguity, co-exist in organizations, I have explored processes of leadership and sensemaking in a risk management team during the implementation of strategic change at FinOrg. Plc., one of the largest financial institutions in the world.

## METHODS

This study is based on a two-and-a-half-year research project, following the principles of grounded theory (Corbin & Straus, 1990). I iteratively appraised the data as I collected it and analyzed it, compared it with other researchers, identified emergent themes, and then progressively explored them through existing theories. Through interviews, observations and the examination of archival documents I explored the relational interactions of each informant from his or her perspective as a leaders *and* a followers (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012) during the roll out of a global change program. By adopting a qualitative methodology in the study of leadership relationships and leadership processes I also address repeated calls for more qualitative studies of leadership in context (Conger, 1998; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Fairhurst, 2016).

### Empirical Settings Selection

This study took place at FinOrg Plc.<sup>4</sup>, which was a member of the *FTSE350* share index, a global financial company with more than 150,000 employees and with

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<sup>4</sup> All names of individuals and organizations are pseudonyms. In particular FinOrg Plc. is the organization in which the study takes place. FinReg is the financial regulator. FinComp is a pseudonym for competitors as they appear in the informants' conversations.

revenues larger than US\$30bn. The company was headquartered in the UK, but had a world wide reach, operating more than 2,000 offices in more than 50 countries globally, spanning Europe, the Americas and Asia. FinOrg Plc. offered wide range of financial services and was divided in several departments, each dedicated to a different segment of clients, or internal function. This research initially spanned different departments, but eventually focused on one specific team, the *Global Operational Risk Board (GORB)*, responsible for the implementation of the operational risk management strategy globally (as illustrated in figure 1). The key function of Global Operational Risk Board was to monitor, and assist departments around the globe to detect and countervail *operational risk*<sup>5</sup>. The company-wide operational risk team was composed of more than 500 employees, divided in 10 departments; they ultimately reported to 10 managing directors, hereby called *senior managers (SMs)*, each in charge of a department (as illustrated in Figure 1). For each SMn the study extended to one of their *junior managers (JMn)*, selected because they occupied key positions in the SMs' team, as described by their role in Figure 1. All the senior managers reported to the Global Head of Operational Risk, defined here as the *top manager (TM)*. TM was only two reporting positions removed from the chief executive officer (CEO) of the entire organization; therefore he was one of the most senior executives in the company worldwide.

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 Insert Figure 1 about here  
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***Sample Selection.*** In choosing the settings, I was guided by theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, at the industry level, large financial services are still

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<sup>5</sup> This is different from market or credit risk, and it involves mistakes and events that disrupt everyday business, including, for example, a failure to comply with regulation (regulatory risk), a loss caused by poor, faulty, or hacked computer systems (cyber risk), and human error (conduct risk).

considered amongst the most bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations (Knorr Cetina & Preda, 2006); highly hierarchical environments are particularly rich settings to explore processes of multilevel vertical leadership relationships (Contractor, DeChurch, Carson, Carter, Keegan, 2012; Yammarino, Dionne, Chun, Dansereau, 2014; Margolis, Ziegert, 2016). Second, the study happened at a crucial time of strategic change, during the implementation of a project here code-named ‘*Metamorphosis*’. Metamorphosis entailed the replacement of the current risk monitoring systems globally in response to regulatory pressure by FinReg (the UK financial regulator), requesting that companies improve the transparency of communication to reduce operational risk (Ashby, 2011).

***Strategic Change Overview.*** In order to implement Metamorphosis a new Global Head of Operational Risk, Michael Clark (TM) was hired at the end of 2013. By the beginning of 2014, the new Global Operational Risk Board was taking shape, with a new COO (SM1), and a new Global Strategy and Policies Officer (SM4). In 2014 the strategic change programme got the funding to go into a three-year stage, and it was named project Metamorphosis. The stages of the project are illustrated in figure 2. The core objective was to introduce a new risk framework, and new systems for monitoring and recording operational risk, across 150,000 employees, and 2,000 offices worldwide. The project was allocated a budget of approximately USD 120 millions (approximately GBP 90 million).

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Insert Figure 2 about here  
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### **Sources of Data**

This study includes real time and retrospective data, collected in more than 2

years, with the focus on 2 periods, *Time 1* (T1; Jul 2015 to Apr 2016) when the decisions made by the GORB were starting to be implemented across the departments, and *Time 2* (T2; May to Nov 2017) when the implementation phase was drawing to an end. I used three data sources: interviews, observations, and archival data.

**Interviews.** I conducted 42 formal interviews (27 during T1, and 15 during T2) and additionally I had a series of informal and unofficial conversations during observations times, totaling more than 100 contact points with informants during the 30 months of the study. *Informal* and unofficial conversations were promptly written down in the research notes. The majority of *formal* interviews were with the top manager (5), the senior managers (18), and the junior managers (14), 4 with project managers. Each formal interview was recorded and transcribed; it lasted 1 hour, with some running over time. Initially the interviews were semi-structured, reflecting a disciplined approach, through which I enquired about each manager in their role of leader *and* their role of follower. As the research progressed, the interviews focused more and more on theoretically guided themes, according to the tradition of grounded theory.

**Observations.** Each visit was used for the purpose of observations, ethnographical annotations, familiarization with the environment, and informal conversations with team assistants, other team members, and other people in the organization. I spent entire days for each research period in the firm, I was often given a desk on open plan floors, and so I was able to have informal access to people. Most field trips were recorded in research notes, no later than 24 hours after the end of the field trip. Additionally I was allowed to attend and record meetings of the entire senior team, participate to 'Buzz Calls' (weekly conference calls for GORB), to 'Town Halls'

(between the top manager and a broad body of junior managers), and ‘Exchanges’ (meeting for junior managers to ‘voice’ concerns to top manager). Further, in T1 to determine the quality of the leadership relationships between each leader and follower, I collected data about the quality of the leadership relationships amongst informant by using leader-member exchange scale (LMX-7, Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), which measures relationship quality on a 5 point Lykert scale, with 1 indicating the lowest and 5 the highest quality of the relationship. I measured the perception of relationship quality from the leader perspective and form the follower perspective. This means that for each SM-JM and TM- JM, TM-JM dyad I took two measures. The overall picture of the strength of the relationships is visualised in figure 3A. I considered a leadership exchange existed only when both dyads’ participants said there was *sufficient perceived direct* leadership exchange with the other party, so they were able to answer all the questions of the questionnaire. As a result, only three TM-JMn dyads, revealed a direct leadership relationship between TM and JM1, JM4, JM7. The values in figure 3A represent the average relationship strength<sup>6</sup>. During T2 I returned to observe how the leadership relationships had evolved, and the picture had changed, see Figure 3B.

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 Insert Figure 3 about here  
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**Archival Data.** Given the sensitivity of Metamorphosis for the reputation of FinCorp, and given the confidentiality of the documentation, I attained unparalleled access for such a project. I reviewed many documents, including primary internal ones (5 strategy plans, several e-mail directives and updates, 3 risk training presentations to

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<sup>6</sup> For example I summed up the result from the questionnaire filled by SM1 (3.57) about JM1, and the result of the questionnaire from JM1 (3.14) about SM1, and then presented the average result, 3.35.



staff, meetings minutes, HR policies), and public documents (5 press releases, 3 regulatory reports on the company, 5 annual reports, 12 web pages, 20 executive speeches), totaling many thousands of pages of material.

## **Data Analysis**

The qualitative research process was iterative, allowing me to go from data to concepts, back to data during a period of change in the environment of the actors I was studying (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Suddaby, 2006). Hence I analyzed the data as I was collecting it. I have included the data analysis stages in Figure 2. First, I began my analysis by constructing a thick description (Langley, 1999) of my personal experiences and reflections, I reviewed my field notes, and the documents I had gathered. Here I laid the foundation of my analysis, which, according to ground theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), progressed from a very detailed empirical reading to more generalizable conceptualizations of the events. Second, I focused on the informants' accounts about leadership relationships at FinCorp. Plc. (Boje, 2001; Oswick and Boje, 2004; Philip and Oswick, 2012). The collection of data during T1 and T2 allowed me to explore the evolution of the accounts at different stages of the implementation of Metamorphosis. At the end of T1 I did a preliminary coding in Nvivo to firm up emergent theoretical concepts. In this phase I coded for emergent themes, then triangulated with the observation and the archival documentation; in the summer 2016 I presented these preliminary findings to other researchers, discussed them at conferences, and I received critical feedback. I also noted my self-reflections and emotions in my research diary , and voiced them to my colleagues, in an attempt to minimize subjective bias. When I re-entered the field at the start of T2, I had more

precise theoretical questions, which informed my data collection. It was in this third phase that I started to distinguish more neatly the interplay of ambiguity, transparency, and the different leadership processes, as well as the sensemaking and sensebreaking amongst members at different levels of the hierarchy. I also saw the emergence of clearer, more defined higher-order themes. I collected more documents, observations and field notes to validate the themes. At this point I also engaged in axial coding looking for interactions amongst these themes. I constantly compared notes by engaging in peer reviews conversations with my research colleagues, who had followed the development of my research, and at conferences. Once I felt the concepts had drawn to theoretical saturation, I drew some conclusive findings. The data structure is illustrated in figure 4, which summarizes the second order themes on which I built the model illustrating the leadership process (figure 5).

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Insert Figure 4 about here  
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## **FINDINGS**

### **Leadership and Sensemaking Processes at FinCorp Plc, During the Implementation of a New Risk Management Framework**

This research revealed how intermediate leaders in the Global Operational Risk Team at FinCorp Plc. attempted to achieve greater transparency, whilst embracing ambiguity, through two leadership processes during the implementation of Metamorphosis. These processes interacted with each other, and they are represented in figure 5.

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Insert Figure 5 about here  
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The first process was dominated by formal hierarchical leadership, whereby intermediate leaders held, to a great extent, compartmentalized leadership exchanges with their own followers on one side, and their own leader on the other, in order to maintain and control a high degree of inter-relational clarity within each dyadic leadership relationship. The second process was dominated by skip-level leadership (Detert & Trevino, 2010), broadly aligned with a search for greater transparency, in which both managers at the top and at the bottom of the hierarchy were keen to skip reporting levels to seek further clarity of information. Skip-level leadership processes emerged in two distinct typologies: free and controlled. Below I will dive into each category, and explain how categories relate to each other.

### **Formal Leadership Process**

Metamorphosis was a very high-stakes<sup>7</sup>, high-visibility<sup>8</sup> project under the constant inspection of internal (FinOrg CEO, CRO and shareholders), and external (FinRegs and the press) high profile stakeholders. In my early interactions with the company during T1, the accounts of the top manager, when he spoke in his role as a leader, reflected a sense of clarity in purpose and mission; he felt he had agency in changing FinOrg risk approach for the better:

So I am a custodian for the firm, to make it succeed over multi-generations, and not just [to be] a short time phenomenon... I work with the regulator quite a bit; I can actually help

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<sup>7</sup> “The security of our information and technology infrastructure is crucial for maintaining our client services and protecting our customers and the FinOrg brand. Work is ongoing to strengthen internal security controls and to prevent unauthorized access to our systems and network. We are also improving the controls and security applied to protect our customers. Strong engagement and support within the industry, government agencies and intelligence providers helps to ensure we keep abreast of developments” (doc-07c)

<sup>8</sup> “Failure to implement our obligations under the US FinReg could have a material adverse effect on our results and operations” (doc-07).

restore, through the regulator and with the actions here [Metamorphosis] ... some of the trust that society places in [financial institutions]. So I do feel there is a higher order of calling, vocational calling, of actually repairing the role of [financial institutions] ... Restoring faith in [financial institutions], and doing it in one of the biggest [financial institutions] in the world.” (TM, int.01).

His struggle with ambiguity appeared when I enquired about him in his role as a follower to his superiors, about how he related to the CRO and the CEO. A different account emerged, as it appears from the transcript of SM1 interview:

You will silently hear him saying: ‘Oh, my God, FinComp’s CRO nearly got fired for bringing in a new system [like Metamorphosis], we are putting in a new system, should we be putting in a new system?’. But sometimes he won’t expressed that to me, you will just go off and have various conversations, and though he will come back and say: ‘Actually we’ve all decided that we are not going to implement the system’. Whilst your regular course of action, you already convened all the stakeholders that are going to win the RFP [Request for Proposal] to a committed outcome. And he’s got a little bit scared [to continue with a project], and then ... (SM1, int.02)

From the outset, therefore, I was very disciplined in paying attention to my informants’ accounts in their role as leaders of their teams, *and* as followers of the upper management, to build a picture of leadership processes in GORB. I focused especially on the perspective of the senior manager, who in the GORB embodied an intermediate leader, concurrently enacting both roles of leader to the junior managers, and follower to the top manager.

Three specific storylines of formal leadership characterized my informants’ experiences of dealing with ambiguous interpretations of events across leadership relationships: (1) interpretation and influence of leaders’ agendas; (2) elaboration of leaders’ agendas, and creation of a ‘new’ clarity; (3) preservation of the ‘new’ clarity with followers. In this findings presentation I have coordinated and integrated four data displays – the in-text accounts from the transcripts; figure 4, showing the progressive data structure; figure 5, showing the emergent model; table 1, showing additional supporting data for each theme. This should facilitate the reader to navigate and appraise the evidence of my findings.

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Insert Table1 about here  
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***Interpretation And Influence of Leaders' Agenda.*** Most managers, including the top manager, spent a great part of the interviews speaking passionately about their tactics in interpreting and influencing their bosses. Even the top manager was clearly scanning up the hierarchy in search for clarity:

It's probably the way I operate, I suppose. I am absolutely, um, trying to interpret, my bosses' agenda. So there is an *explicit agenda*, and there is an *implicit agenda*... And I try to understand both... My radar tries to be switched on. Whether I'm as sophisticated as I'd like to be [I don't know]. But it absolutely tries to be. ... And I mean, less so in other places, but in finance in general, only the paranoid survive. There is a little bit of paranoia into this (TM, int. 01)

So whilst TM's narrative as a leader projected great agency to the point of being a 'custodian' of the firm, as a follower he gave an insightful description of his attempts of deciphering his bosses' hidden messages, to create greater clarity. Similar accounts of *upward sensemaking* were pervasive from senior managers: SM6 (int.19) was keen to explore "what the nuances of that story are [from the top], and then work out the decision"; SM8 (int.12) interpreted and then checked back "so I've gone back to TM and said: 'This is the way I'm now going. Do you agree with where this is going?'" At the same time senior managers were trying to influence their leader, through a process of *upward sensegiving*. A strong example comes from how SM1 (int. 02), the COO of GORB, described how she addressed doubts at the beginning of Metamorphosis: "I tried to get back to the rationale. Reminding him [TM] why we were [implementing Metamorphosis] in the first place", or "[I told TM:] 'We all do everything in our power not to have a complete disaster.'" or "If-, if I am convinced in my heart that these are important outcomes to fight for I will tell TM." So SM1 played an important role in supporting TM in wading through ambiguity, and together they created inter-

relational clarity at the level of their dyad. Undoubtedly SM1 helped TM create inter-relational clarity: “SM1 is a very good builder [in planning Metamorphosis]”.

Ambiguity arose also because the needs on the grounds were different for all the senior and junior managers. Therefore inter-relational clarity between top and senior manager needed to take into account department-specific nuances for the implementation of Metamorphosis, and through upward sensegiving, senior managers grounded the top manager in their departments’ realities: SM2 grounded TM “in the perspective of someone in derivative settlement” (int. 03), or another in Asia convinced TM that they “will have to do it differently here” (JM10, int. 27). Through the process of upward sensegiving the senior manager influenced the top manager’s explicit and implicit agendas: “He-, he knows he can't articulate his agenda. And so I actually just help him with that articulation. It is, you know, making it conscious, rather than unconscious.” (SM8, int. 22) So, from the perspective of the senior manager’s, inter-relational clarity with the top manager was created, through the processes of upward sensemaking and upward sensegiving, which produced a shared explicit agenda at their dyadic level with the top manager.

***Elaboration of Leader Agendas and Creation of ‘New’ Clarity.*** Managers operated as linking pins in the connection of the two dyadic clarities, with top and junior managers, by forming *their own* interpretation of events: “then I elaborated it”, “I combined it into a story”, “I pieced it together”, “the way my brain works, and I add value, is by taking lots of pieces and making it into a coherent story”, or as the Head of Commercial Business put it:

So when [TM] talks to us at the op risk management board which is his directs’ [i.e. direct reports, GORB] meeting ... I take the messages to my team directly with the people who sit with me but also in my team meetings I have with my global team. I might put them into *my own* language and actually, I'm quite keen that I put direction to my team into *my own* words rather than just forwarding an email from [TM]. (SM5, int.18)

This process of ‘ownership’ was effectively a personal process of selection of meanings, or of explicit (and implicit) agendas. Clear agendas were instrumental to keep their followers focused on few, well-defined objectives, to ‘shield them away from disparate messages’, or from ambiguous information, ‘I want them to remain focused and motivated and not always exposed to the theatrics and challenges of the [top] management team’ (SM2, int. 03), or to ensure the message was understandable by a specific audience, so the content of some trainings about Metamorphosis was framed ‘as stuff that is important to the people in the [Private Client Business]... an embellishment on it, is a critical requirement to make sure that it lands appropriately.’ (SM3, int.10). Formal leadership processes were instrumental for a ‘new’ clarity to emerge as the fruit of, first, upward sensemaking/sensegiving with the top manager, second, of personal elaboration, which resulted in downward sensegiving, and third by co-constructing meanings with their own followers, through the process of downward sensemaking, as I describe below.

***Preservation of ‘New’ Clarity with Followers.*** The ‘new’ clarity had to be plausible to the senior and the junior managers, in order to become inter-relational clarity. Hence it was co-constructed through a process of *downward sensemaking* too, through which senior and junior managers engaged in interpretations of events related to Metamorphosis. Senior managers engaged junior managers as they wanted them to be ‘part of the solution’, or to ‘give them an opportunity to contribute’, they thought ‘that’s important they get involved’. Senior managers interviews were marked by possessive pronouns, when talking about their downward team, ‘*my* team’, when referring to their junior managers, revealing this sense of belonging, shared goals, but also a sense of ownership and being in charge, and exercising leadership. At the same time collective pronouns accentuated how the senior manager felt unity in

constructing meanings with the junior managers: ‘we [me and my junior managers] sit down’, ‘we say this is what we’re trying to do’, ‘how do we best get the message across’. Inter-relational clarity was instrumental to perpetuate the process of formal vertical leadership, and so senior and junior manager would agree together how to ‘filter the information down’, ‘we sit together, and work out how this can be landed within the areas we oversee’. This also allowed the senior manager to make sure that the meaning construed with the junior managers reflected his/her explicit agenda, and that the ‘new’ clarity formed in the dyad top-senior manager was upheld: ‘SM10 has the responsibility to do it in Asia. So he will monitor how we communicate on that’. (JM10, int.25) The control over the meaning emerged through two dominant types of accounts: one praising those that stuck to the ‘new’ clarity, and another one reprimanding those who diverted from it, as it can be seen in table 1. Therefore, in iterative processes of meaning construction (upward and downward sensemaking and sensegiving), the senior managers, as the linking pins, played a role of *meaning clearings houses*, by engaging in two formal leadership exchanges. However the senior managers’ mediation perpetuated a sort of systemic ambiguity, as they shielded the junior manager from fully transparent access to upper information. Therefore, in their search for clarity, both the top and junior managers tried to skip a level, to have greater visibility of each other’s interpretation of events.

### **Skip-Level Leadership Process**

The words of my informants, as well as my observations and archival documents reflected two ways in which the top and junior managers engaged in skip-level leadership exchanges: free and controlled. Similarly to the above-described



formal leadership process, these are illustrated by the informants quotes' in this finding session, by figure 4 and 5, and by table 1. Additionally, given the distinctiveness of these findings from previous literature on leadership, I have triangulated my sources and displayed additional data in table 2.

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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***Free Skip-level Leadership.*** The free skip-level leadership process worked as follows: first, it entailed an independent exchange, away from the control of the senior manager; second, this leadership exchange had the effect of unsettling the 'new' clarity, as it disrupted, or over-rode, the elaboration and interpretation of the senior manager through sensebreaking; third, it had the power to disrupt the dyadic relationship between senior and junior manager, when the senior manager felt that his role of mediator of meaning and his reputation as a leader were jeopardized. These points will be developed below.

Formal leadership created bottlenecks for the sensemaking and sensegiving flows up and down the organization. So a central theme in the process of meaning construction was represented by the propensity for junior and top manager to skip the senior manager, in order to gain greater clarity of information during the implementation of Metamorphosis. Junior managers saw their exposure to the top manager as aspirational and rewarding. For example, a manager in the Wholesale Business told me that 'unfortunately I do not even use the same block of lifts [than TM]' but he hoped that going forward, perhaps when SM2 was on holiday, TM would call on him so that 'at that stage you would think the relationship gets built up'. Or another manager in the Private Client Business appreciated how his exposure to TM would bring opportunities; they sat next to each other for dinner at an offsite meeting

and ‘he then approached me for a couple of opportunities in Hong Kong’; or other managers ‘totally appreciated he took the time to talk to [them] personally’.

Furthermore, during T1, three of the junior managers’ accounts reported free skip-level leadership exchanges with the top manager (JM1, JM4, JM7). These exchanges were characterized by such frequency and intensity that both the junior and top manager felt they could fill a questionnaire about the quality of their leadership relationship<sup>9</sup> (LMX-7, Graen, & Uhl-Bien, 1995), see Fig. 3A:

I have regular one-to-ones with [TM] directly, and I am the only [junior manager] in the GORB meetings. And I have a direct one-to-one [meeting] with TM. So I always have a chance to tell him things. Also he treats me as his voice of reason. (JM1, int.05)

I have a direct relationship with TM, I know him from [FinComp], if I see him at the coffee machine we can talk about anything. I'm going out for a beer with him next week just the pair of us. (JM4, int.09)

TM freely exercised these leadership exchanges, ‘I don’t need a legitimate reason [to go to speak with a junior manager]’, leaving it to the junior managers to clear them with their bosses: ‘if I look at um, JM4, I do not feel the need to manage that [with SM4]. JM4 manages it. And JM7 manages it [with SM7].’ These free interactions meant that junior and top managers could by-pass the senior manager as a mediator of meanings, and over-ride, or even destroy the senior managers’ interpretations of events.

***Unsettling the Preservation of ‘New’ Clarity.*** When the top and junior managers engaged in independent leadership exchanges, co-creating meanings separately from the senior manager, *sensebreaking* occurred: the practice of over-riding or ‘destroying meanings’ created by the skipped leader (Pratt, 2000; Mantere, Schildt, Sillince, 2012: 174). Sensebreaking would disrupt the inter-relational clarity that the senior manager

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<sup>9</sup> Rating on a Likert scale from 1-5 their perceptions of: how satisfied they were with each other as leader or follower; how well their own leader (or follower) would understand their job needs; what were the chances that their leader (or follower) would bail them out at time of need, and so on.

had built with both top and junior manager. This stands out clearly from the accounts of JM1:

But in the current situation she [SM1] just needs to accept that certain information I will tell TM and tell her both in the same way. She could not expect that sometimes I brief her and then she can brief him and then she can come back to me and another fine tuning and then she can go back to him right? It's redundant. Sometimes, time is of an essence, so we all sit on the same floor when I tell something to him as is going into a meeting I will brief him, I'm not going to book a meeting with her... sometimes making it formal breaks down the clarity of communication in my view. (JM1, int.05)

So, whilst the independent direct exchange between junior and top manager increased clarity it also had a negative impact on the ability of the senior manager to mediate meanings. In fact, free skip-level leadership was viewed as 'somewhat haphazard', and, as the TM told me: "It can certainly increase anxiety for the person in the middle. I'm sure if I started to have fireside chats with [the CEO], it would cause anxiety to [the CRO]." Therefore, sensebreaking manifested itself in an 'increase in anxiety' for the skipped leader, as his/her weaknesses, shortcomings, interpretations, or just explicit and implicit agendas could be exposed in the direct communication between junior and top managers. Direct communication between the top and the junior manager could 'destroy the identity' of the skipped leader, and cause a 'loss of respect' from his/her followers (SM5; int. 39). The risk was, in short, that the junior and top manager created their own inter-relational clarity, which would eliminate the need of the senior manager as a mediator, causing him or her a loss of role identity. This affected senior managers' ability to create and preserve interrelation clarity; it limited their role of mediators and controllers of meanings, ultimately affecting their sense of self as leaders. This could have at times a profound effect on the skipped leader, it made them feel 'anxious', 'vulnerable', 'cross' or 'upset'. The literature could not provide answers on processes of skip-level leadership (with only one known paper on this phenomenon: Detert & Trevino, 2012), and its consequences. Therefore,

during T2, I found how the team had evolved, and this evolution provided insights on the interaction between the two leadership processes.

***Disruption of Formal Leadership Relationships.*** In Autumn 2017, TM came to one of our meetings glowing, with the news that his boss, the CRO, had just received a letter from FinReg, confirming the success of Metamorphosis. The letter stated that:

We've gone from being in the penalty box and on probation with the regulator to being acknowledged to having turned it around. So now we're off probation... [we are now] fit for purpose, and some things [we]re doing are over and above what the industry's doing. (TM, int. 37).

The TM, who only eighteen months before had been afraid of causing his boss (the CRO) the loss of his job, had instead caused him to be praised directly from the regulator. However, he also told me that three managers had left unexpectedly between time 1 and time 2. Aside from the two heads of Asia (SM10) and US (SM9), who had left because of changes and restructuring in the 'regions', the remaining three were all involved in free skip-level leadership exchanges, as it is shown in figure 3B: they were JM1, JM4 and SM7. I then re-coded all my data in search for explanations, and enquired further about these disruptions with my informants, interviewing again the managers who had left. The coding revealed how sensebreaking could lead to the disruption of formal dyadic leadership relationships in two ways: (i) by overriding the senior manager ability to control meanings, or (ii) by causing a loss of face of the senior manager. First, junior managers knew they were playing with fire, in constructing meanings with TM:

So, on the one hand [having a direct relationship with TM] can be extremely powerful for me as an individual, but it can also be very disruptive for the team as a whole, or for SM4, if I don't wield that power well. (JM4, int. 09).

As skipping a level exposed the skipped leader's leadership skills to the judgment of their boss, sd TM told me: "[when] the managers below [you] poorly represent what you are doing [to your boss] ... Then to a certain extent that absolutely reflects on

how they have been led by you (laughs)” or “Any time that your ambassador [a manager you have sent to speak to the level above you] doesn’t have a great outing with the people above there is always some reflection on you. ” (TM, int.37) And occasionally, when both lack of control on meaning, and loss of face occurred together, the relationship broke down, as SM1 explains:

[Having JM1 in the team] it meant that I never really knew what was going on, and therefore, at times you felt vulnerable because there was information that everybody would think you knew, that you should know, that I didn’t know. And so ... Periodically, we’d talk it through. I know JM1 got very upset, I got cross and upset. (SM1, int. 36)

At the beginning of the implementation, the pressure was such that people were too focused on the task, rather than on particular individual relationships, however later during T2, when pressure eased off, as change was being implemented successfully, some leadership relationships broke:

For a long time, I just moved to accept it, because there’s too many other things I had to worry about. ... It took a long time to eventually had to say to him: ‘I know [JM1] is your friend, but it’s not working’. (SM1, int.36)

My worry is that JM4 was not able to rise up to the role, but on the other hand TM recommended him ... So I chose to invest in JM4, but when things went not well later [in the implementation of Metamorphosis], I had to- [push him out the team], it was not easy. But I couldn’t ignore what I was hearing about him... (SM4, int.32).

Further, as the relationship between TM and JM7 intensified during the implementation, SM7 started to look for alternative roles around FinOrg, hence SM7 lost control on meaning creation:

SM7 would have been concerned about JM7’s elevation in terms of looking what the future looks like [after Metamorphosis]. So as SM7 moves stage left, potentially to do his role outside of our, of our function- ... now that structure is being decided by JM7. (TM, int. 17)

In short, the informants’ words revealed that free skip-level leadership could have dire consequences on formal leadership relationships, when sensebreaking occurred, causing a loss of mediating role for the senior manager, or disrupting their sense of self as leaders. However other forms of skip level leadership were acceptable, as they

ultimately complied with institutional and social norms, which protected the formal leadership relationships.

***Controlled Skip-level Leadership*** . However, top and junior manager could communicate with each other, in search for greater transparency without unsettling the ‘new’ clarity, if the communication between the two was bound by institutional and social norms, in a form of controlled skip-level leadership. In those leadership processes, when junior managers encountered ambiguity of interpretations, they reverted to the senior manager agendas through a process of *bound sensebreaking*. A form of meaning construction that never fully over-rode previously created meanings, as it was bound by the control of the senior manager. This led to the acceptance of pragmatic ambiguity, instrumental to the corroboration of formal leadership relationships.

Controlled skip-level leadership took two forms, one to one and collective (see Table 2 for triangulated evidence). *One to one* controlled skip-level leadership happened when the top and junior manager communicated directly under the auspices of the senior manager. Because of the motivational properties of exposure to the upper echelons, senior managers were keen to reward those junior managers who they ‘trusted’ by ‘elevating’ them to speak directly with the top manager. Like SM1 said: “I would then start creating opportunities for these persons [who do not have direct access to TM] to be exposed to TM”; and similarly SM2 said that he had ‘elevated them [few junior managers] in front of him [TM] for their own personal career benefit’. Similarly SM8 said: “There are also some other members of the team who are strong, and have real potential, and actually I would like to create more time for them to see TM”. In this form of leadership the senior managers knew when the

junior and top manager had interactions, the interactions where legitimised by functional purposes, and the senior managers were kept informed. As SM1 told me:

TM quite often will sit down with [one of my reports] and will talk about something, or will sit down, have a one to one with [JMa], sit down have a one to one with [JMb]. But they are subject matter experts, so there is a clear qualification, or legitimacy of that exchange, anyway, outside from the personal relationship. Also we sit together-... they'll discuss with me. (SM2; int. 36)

Therefore those who were trusted, or who were legitimised by their expertise, were allowed, and even given, the opportunity to speak to TM. In this case, the search for clarity in which a junior manager would engage with a top manager was sponsored by the trust built with the senior manager, to whom the junior manager would stay loyal.

The second form of controlled skip-level leadership was the *collective* one. Collective skip-level leadership processes reflected an institutional attempt to provide the junior managers with greater transparency, through legitimate channels of communications with the upper managers, without jeopardizing the formal leadership process. The main two tools to achieve this were the Town Halls, and Exchanges (triangulation of data of both Town Halls and Exchanges are reported in table 2). Town Halls were top down collective meetings held quarterly, in which the top manager would address 50-60 junior managers in various departments; the presentation was highly scripted by the Head of Communication. I witnessed the TM preparing in advanced, and rehearsing. During the implementation Town Halls were mostly centered on updates about Metamorphosis, and there was a short Q&A at the end, which mostly centered on the clarification of technical points. Exchanges were also highly staged encounters. They were FinCorp wide events, the HR department had scripted very tightly how they were supposed to be run:

'Skip level Exchanges - encourage leaders to host Exchanges with lower levels of employee groups' or 'In Exchange meetings ... the host manager should listen with an open mind and do very little talking. Answer any questions they can and note down those they can not. Record the key themes so they can add the discussion themes to the dedicated Exchange site following the meeting' (HR document)

In Exchanges a top manager met with a group of junior managers, one skipped level below. They were designed to be without agenda for people at the bottom to feel free to speak up about any issue of interest. In short, through controlled skip-level leadership junior managers had exposure to the top manager and to his interpretation of events, however they were tightly delimited by social and institutional norms. Junior managers, albeit exposed to possible different interpretations of events, stayed tuned into the inter-relational clarity they had formed with the senior manager, reverting to the meaning created through formal leadership. They pragmatically decided to embrace ambiguity, surrendering the possibility of disrupting, or over-riding the inter-relational clarity with the senior manager.

***Preservation of Pragmatic Ambiguity.*** Pragmatic ambiguity was a ‘political necessity’ (Eisenberg, 1984: 229; Giroux, 2006), as it allowed junior managers to be exposed to different interpretations of events, yet also to ‘fill in’ the interpretations in a way that did not upset the inter-relational clarity previously formed with the senior manager. The preservation of pragmatic ambiguity was a relational practice that the junior managers, and managers in more senior positions did together, by creating the conditions for *bounded sensebreaking*. This was a process through which individuals had the opportunity to engage in sensebreaking, however they self-censored and stayed short of disrupting or over-riding meanings of their leaders, by virtue of social and institutional norms. This happened as junior managers observed their leaders, and reacted to what was acceptable to say or what was not. For example, in one to one controlled skip-level leadership, the senior manager was not just recognized as a mediator of meanings, but also a mediator of relationships, as he was the sponsor of the relationship between top and junior manager. As such, the junior managers stayed loyal to him/her. In these cases possible equivocal interpretations of events were



converted into pragmatic ambiguity, which still allowed junior managers to stay loyal to the senior manager. As highlighted by SM8:

If they get an opportunity to speak with TM or if he approaches them, the types of questions he might ask, they tell me. ... they don't want me to be surprised. One of the things I tell them frequently is: 'If you've got bad news, let me know. What I don't want to do is find it out to somebody else or find out later in the day. The earlier I know, the better.'" (SM8., int. 33)

In Exchanges junior managers found it more acceptable to speak about 'collective' viewpoints, about challenges 'they face together', with their managers too. In Exchanges people self-censored, paid attention to the top manager feedback, and reacted to his body language, and the body language of other more senior managers in the room. When I enquired with a junior manager why he had not spoken much in an Exchange I had observed, he articulated how happy he was to let more senior people speak on his behalf:

As much as Exchange meetings are a place where you can say what you need to say- but at the same time *I* do not think it is constructive to just starting to talk about any topic. It'll have to be collective [i.e. not personal], otherwise you would run out of time. So what is important is to pass the message as much as *we* can, in the most constructive way so that it triggers a discussion or an action to be undertaken. But if that's done, then *we* are happy that way. *We* are talking about challenges that *we* face *all together*" (JM, int. 42)

After all, Exchanges had been designed to allow sensebreaking, i.e. they were explicitly described as a safe forum, where people had the opportunity to bring up issues, or challenges to the way things were. In Exchange meetings there was not set agenda: 'In Exchange meetings ... the host manager should listen with an open mind and do very little talking' (HR Description of Exchanges, doc. 34). However, the mere presence of the top manager, and other line managers in the room, made the junior managers tune into what they considered was pragmatic meanings, i.e. acceptable by virtue of the boundaries created by those in higher levels of authority. These boundaries were made explicit during these meetings, as top manger couldn't hide their opinion about what had been said:

But whilst exchanges are there to encourage voice, they can actually deter voice... It's very easy to do. Particularly- I went into one of these exchanges. I was a bit grumpy, and these were my own people [junior managers]. It was a time that I felt that some of them were just not stepping up. We had two individuals in the room who are future talent, so I have high expectations of their talent, and they went off on a whinge. I was so bored, it was like when your children just push you one too far, they whinge. At that point, that got eviscerated [expressed by me]. Of course, it shut the entire room. So it's actually, you have to be very, very disciplined doing those. Otherwise, you will absolutely suppress. (TM1, int. 37)

One of them made a statement on a perspective, and it clearly pressed all the wrong buttons ... You could see the [top manager] go: 'You just cannot say that. What you just said there is such a-, I have to respond to that statement', You know.'" (JM, int. 41)

Therefore the top and junior managers meaning-making during collective skip-level processes was characterized by bounded sensebreaking activities, where attempts to over-ride or disrupt existing meanings were made, but where effectively every meaning that had the potential of being disruptive was deemed unsafe, or too risky. In short, through the process of controlled skip-level leadership, the managers and the institution itself attempted to create legitimate channels for the creation of transparency, but social and institutional norms bounded the junior managers to a form of pragmatic ambiguity, which only created the illusion of having achieved greater transparency.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

By considering three individuals involved in leadership exchanges, an intermediate leader (the senior manager), his/her own leader (the top manager), and his/her own follower (the junior manager), I have elaborated theory around three routes by which sensemaking and leadership interact in the interplay between ambiguity and search for transparency. These processes are: a formal process dominated by hierarchical leadership, a free skip-level process, and a controlled skip-level one. This elaboration has implications for understanding core assumptions about

how managers in the position of linking pins (Likert, 1961, 1967) construct multiple dyadic leadership relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), how these interconnected dyads interact with each other during change, and how sensemaking processes are affected by these dynamics. The interactions of the formal and skip-level leadership processes illuminate some of the core reasons why in organizations ambiguity prevails on transparency.

### **Leadership Processes and Intra-Dyadic Dynamics**

This research differs from greater part of outstanding research on leadership for two main reasons: first, it captures the temporal evolution of leadership relationships, and second, it goes beyond a single dyadic relational reality (Fairhurst, 2016). In doing so, it moves beyond the dominant lens used to study leadership, which has been cross-sectional, individual, and variable analytical (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Fairhurst, 2016), and adopts a longitudinal, multilevel, and process approach. The focus on a triad, rather than on a single dyad, provides a multilevel view where we see managers in their roles as leaders and followers concurrently. It allows for the analysis to move beyond heroic models of leadership (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002; Svenningson & Alvesson, 2003), as well as beyond the marginalization of the study of followership (Uhl-Bien, et al. 2014). The process approach helps overcome a ‘focus on an individual’s reading of the relationship as if there were a single relational reality’ (Fairhurst, 2016:497; Sparrowe and Emery, 2015), and instead captures the interaction amongst multiple relational realities. This multilevel process approach, however, does not abandon the leader-follower dyad as unit of analysis (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Wayne, Shore and Liden, 1997; Bauer and

Erdogan, 2015) but builds on it, unveiling intra-dyadic dynamics, as a key to the understanding of inter-dyadic phenomena.

In other words, this longitudinal study attempts to widen the focus of the analysis by studying leadership processes in which dyads are the building blocks, interrelating together. In doing so it affirms but also challenges our understanding of dyadic leadership dynamics. The analytical path followed here illuminates how, just by increasing the unit of analysis from a dyad to a triad, formed by three individuals connected in a chain of authority, we attain a more complex picture of how managers construct leadership exchanges during change from a perspective of their role as leaders, *and* as followers. Indeed, the data from the informants depicts how during the implementation of change, intra-dyadic relationships have an effect on the variance of inter-dyadic relationships, as epitomized by the statement: “I mean, you could read all the theory in the world about how to be a good leader of JM1, but you couldn't be a good leader of JM1, because she had the interaction with TM” (SM1, int. 37). SM1 an experienced lady in her 50s, who had mastered the roll out of large technology projects in other large companies before, could not construe a strong leadership relationship with JM1, because the latter was building meanings directly with TM. In detecting this variance this qualitative study adds on to a small body of quantitative studies, which appraise the influence of extra dyadic relationships on a particular leader-follower dyad. By enjoying statistical methodological advances these studies demonstrate how a leader relationship with their boss, has an impact on the exchange between that leader and his/her reportee, by affecting: the reportee's job satisfaction (Erdogan and Enders, 2007); his/her perception of the quality of the exchange (Tangirala, Gree, Ramanujam, 2007; Venkataramani, Green, Schleicher, 2010); and his/her performance, through the mediation of the leader's empowerment (Zhou,

Wang, Chen, Shi, 2012). However this study goes further, as it brings to our attention a third dyad, the skip-level dyad formed by the leader's boss and the leader's reportee. The study of these leadership processes provides temporal insights which reveal that when these two individuals (TM-JM) enter into a direct, continuous leadership exchange, the unsustainability that may develop unsettles the formal hierarchical relationships to breaking point, as the intermediate leader (senior manager) loses influence on the other two relationships. The temporal stretch of this study allows us to notice that none of the free skip-level leadership triads existed any longer at T2, as either the junior or the senior managers had left the team. The implication might be that, in the presence of free skip-level leadership, in order to re-establish the formal relational chain of influence, some adjustment needs to take place contributing to the breaking of the skip-level triad. This intra-dyadic process perspective challenges many of the approaches to dyadic leader-follower behaviours. For example, transparent leadership behaviours as those of openness in sharing information, of acceptance of others' inputs, and of disclosure of personal values and motives in making decisions (Norman et al., 2010) are very difficult to endorse with the majority of senior managers-junior managers dyads sanctioning pragmatic ambiguity as a 'political necessity'. They do this to honor the senior manager's personal elaboration of meanings, which was formed by taking into account the inputs coming from above, within the dyad senior manager-top manager.

Hence, by studying how dyads relate to each other, I expose a more multifaceted, less heroic role of intermediate leaders, as we catch them in the act of being followers and leaders at the same time. On the basis of these leadership dynamics, transparency might look as a possibility, when analyzing a single leader-follower relationship, but it looks less achievable when considering triadic dynamics,

in which a leader intermediates relationships and meanings. To better explain this point I proceed by analyzing how sensemaking and leadership processes interpolate each other within a triad.

### **Leadership Triads, Sensemaking, Sensegiving and Sensebreaking.**

By analyzing the accounts of managers as leaders and followers, I mapped the processes of meanings construction (Sonenshein, 2010; Fairhurst, 2016), and destruction (Pratt, 2000).-Extant research highlights that processes of sensemaking (Weick et al. 2005; Maitlis, 2005) and sensegiving (Gioia and Chitapeddi, 1991: 442) develop along vertical hierarchical lines: downward (Gioia & Chitapeddi, 1991; Balogun & Johnson, 2004); upward (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 1997, 2001); but also as a combination of both (Currie, 1999; Floyd and Lane, 2000; Balogun et al., 2015). I elaborate on this theory by mapping flows of upward and downward sensemaking and sensegiving. In this respect scholars have treated sensemaking and sensegiving as attributes of effective leaders (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) during strategic change (see also Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Some other studies highlight how managers in the role of followers use sensegiving processes like issue selling, to gain top management attention and influence organizational change (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton, Ashford, Wierba, O'Neill, & Hayes, 1997). This research reveals how intermediate leaders, embodying at the same time the role of leader and follower, operate as clearing houses of meanings, as they are at the epicenter of the downward and upward flows of sensegiving and sensemaking. By studying a triad of individuals connected by hierarchical lines, I highlight the

importance played by intermediate leaders own personal mediation of meanings in creating their *own* 'new' version of events, to pass down to their departments: "I want to keep people focused. So I don't always share everything with them" (SM2, int. 03); or: "I think successful leaders are about telling stories" (SM2, int. 02); or: "I have to take ownership of what he [manager above] has asked me to do and *make it mine*. That's an act of leadership." (JM4, int. 09). The role of mediator emerges as tightly coupled to the role of leader. When speaking from a perspective of leaders, managers reveal that being a mediator of meanings is part of their identity self-concept, defined as their 'self referential description that provides contextually appropriate answers to the question "Who am I?"' (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008: 27). Self-concepts are important for individuals because they help them situate themselves in a given context, and provides them with a set of cognition, affects and behaviour that allow them to navigate that context (Ibarra, Whittington, & Petriglieri, 2014).

The sensebreaking enacted by top and junior managers who reframe, change, or unmask the meanings controlled by the senior manager has the profound effect of disrupting the same senior managers' sense of self (Pratt, 2000) as leaders. Intermediate leaders, represented here by the senior managers, therefore see their ability to mediate, as a survival strategy as leaders, and, when sensebreaking occurs, their experience an identity void (Pratt, 2000). It is recognized that 'identity voids are often filled with anxiety and hope' (Ibarra, et al., 2014: 290), this is reflected in the words of managers that were dis-intermediated through free skip-level leadership, as they told me of how 'anxious', 'cross', 'vulnerable', and 'upset' they felt. In short, whilst free skip-level leadership generates greater transparency by providing junior and top manager with a clearer communication channel, the cost is the unsettling of the senior manager, who feels their role as a mediator, and their self-concept as a

leader, are threatened. That might be why free skip-level leadership creates instability, and at T2 all the free skip-level relationships had reverted to formal leadership, as the junior or senior manager left the team. Therefore, in attempting to create clarity, whilst holding control of the interpretation of meanings, senior managers become dependent for their very existence on the condition they claim they were attempting to change, i.e. ambiguity.

Nonetheless, in search for greater clarity, the top and junior managers demand channels that can provide opportunities to create greater transparency in communication. This paper in this sense contributes to our understanding of skip-level leadership dynamics (Detert & Trevino, 2012) as the data reveals how measures to ensure a controlled type of skip-level communication may take two forms. On one hand the organization itself puts in place a set of upward (skip-level exchanges), and downward (town hall) meetings for direct communication. On the other hand senior managers themselves sponsor forms of controlled skip-level leadership, which promote direct communication between junior and top manager. What comes to exist in this way is a form of pragmatic ambiguity, which is a 'political necessity' (Eisenberg, 1984: 229; Giroux, 2006), as it allows managers to search for transparency in a controlled way, so that they exercise a bounded form of sensebreaking, i.e. a tactful tentative over-riding of meanings, which never quite gets to destroy them, as junior managers self-censor, because they know that to destroy meaning is too risky and could back-fire. This only gives the illusion of greater transparency; here the senior manager's self-concept as leader is not threatened, as he/she retains the last say on how to implement change.



## **Limitations and Direction for Future Research**

This research has many limitations. First it is bound to time and context, therefore these findings should be generalized with great caution, perhaps after exploring the phenomenon of skip-level leadership and its effects throughout different contexts, like less hierarchical organizations, outside the financial industry. These findings could perhaps give rise to hypotheses to be tested through quantitative methods, and therefore contribute further to extant leadership research to explore dyadic linkages, as suggested by Sparrowe & Emery (2015: 296). Specifically further studies could focus on exploring the effects that skip-level LMX has on the other two LMX dyadic relationships within the triad. Further, this research relies on an individual case study, although studied in depth, through multiple data sources, and with a longitudinal approach.

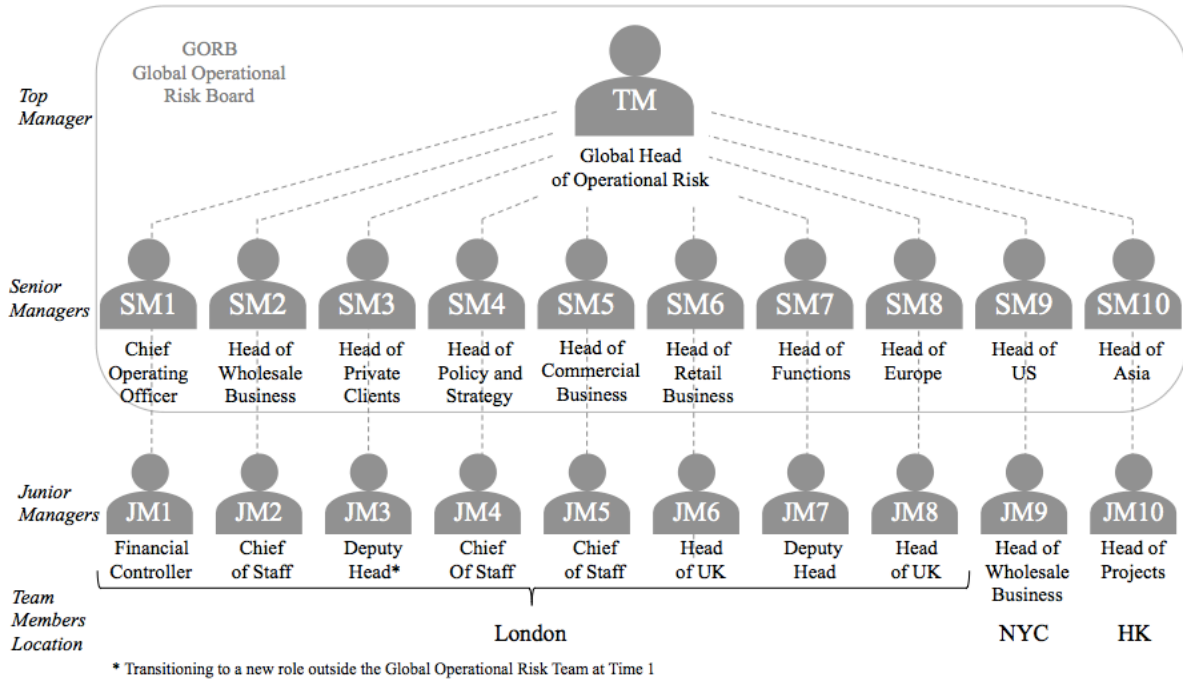
## **Practical Implications**

Speaking to your boss' boss, about your boss, might already be understood as an issue of etiquette. However, up to the submission of this study there was no evidence about the implications which these actions could have on (i) the exchanges between these actors, and (ii) the long-term implications for the relationship of leadership. From this research it appears clear that a head of department, or a team, or even a CEO, build their own identity as leaders around their capacity of controlling meanings, and therefore an interference in the process of meaning construction has the value of an identity threat. However, these findings also demonstrate the need for managers lower in the hierarchy to develop greater access to the upper echelons of a

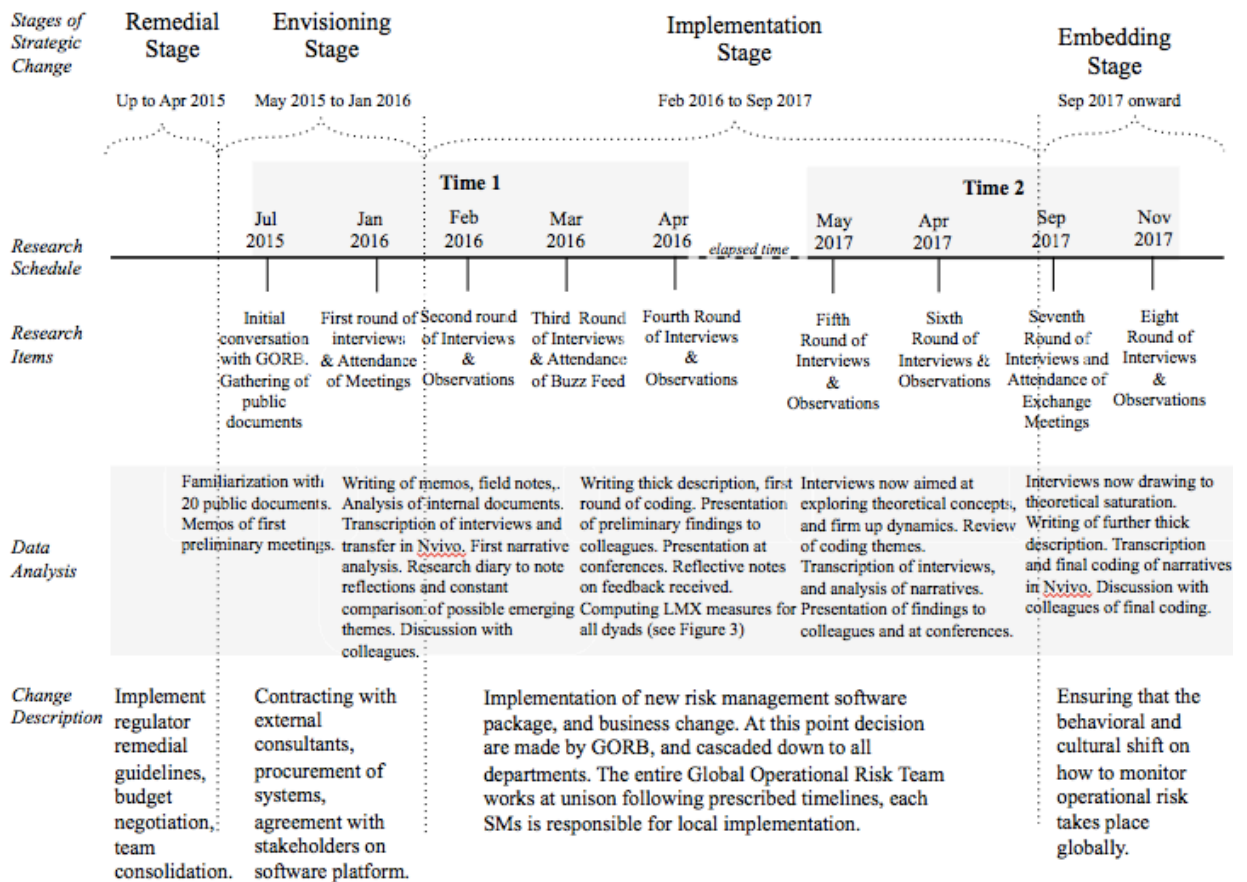
company, and the importance for companies to create opportunity for this access to result in greater transparency.

## TABLES AND FIGURES

**FIGURE 1**  
Structure of the Senior Management Team at Time 1, Highlighting Roles, Reporting Lines and Locations



**FIGURE 2**  
Strategic Change Implementation of ‘Metamorphosis’ and Research Time Line



**FIGURE 3**  
**A. Dyadic Perception of Leadership Relationship Quality, at the beginning of Time 1 and**  
**B. Leadership Relationships Evolution, at the beginning of Time2**

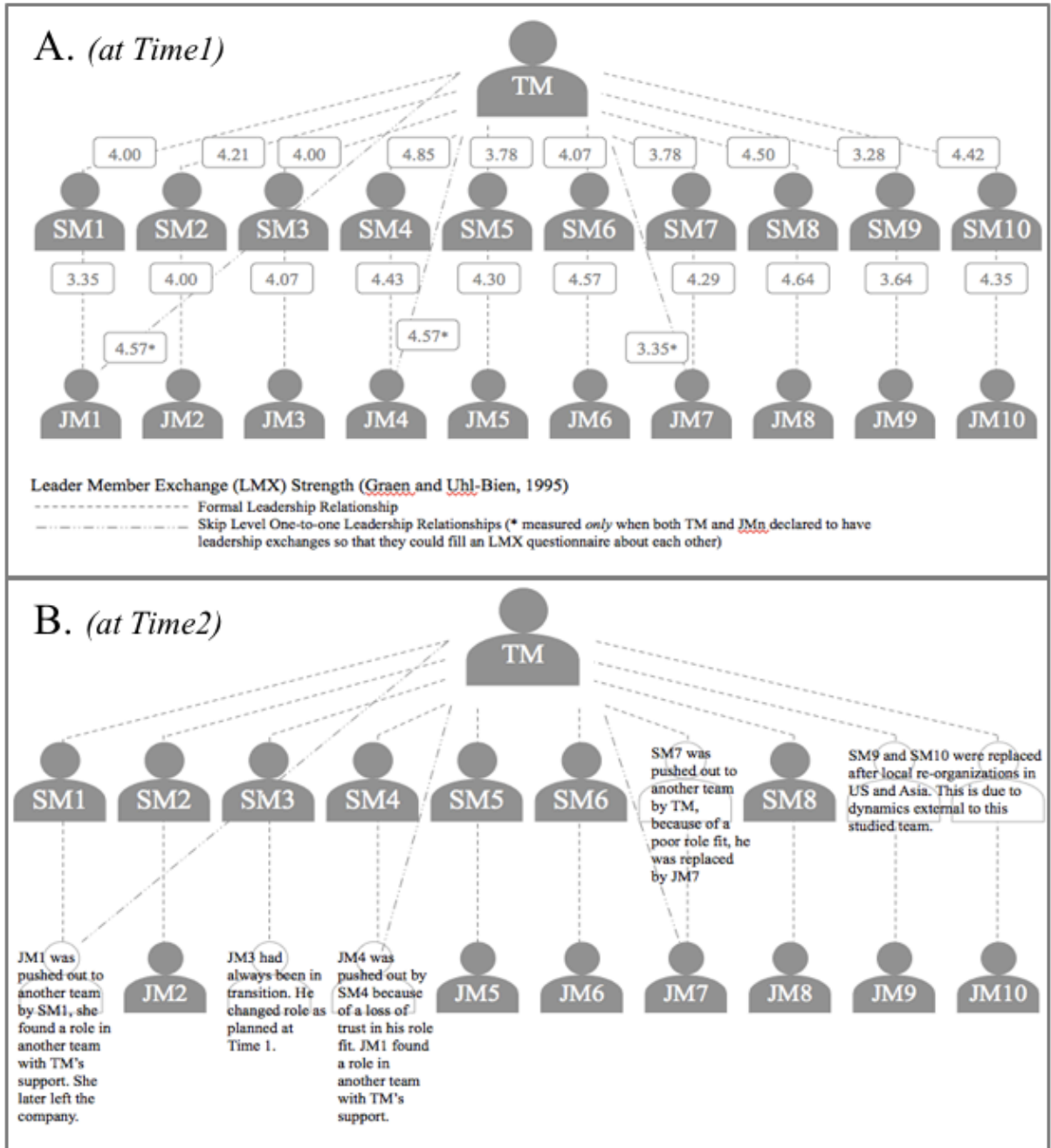
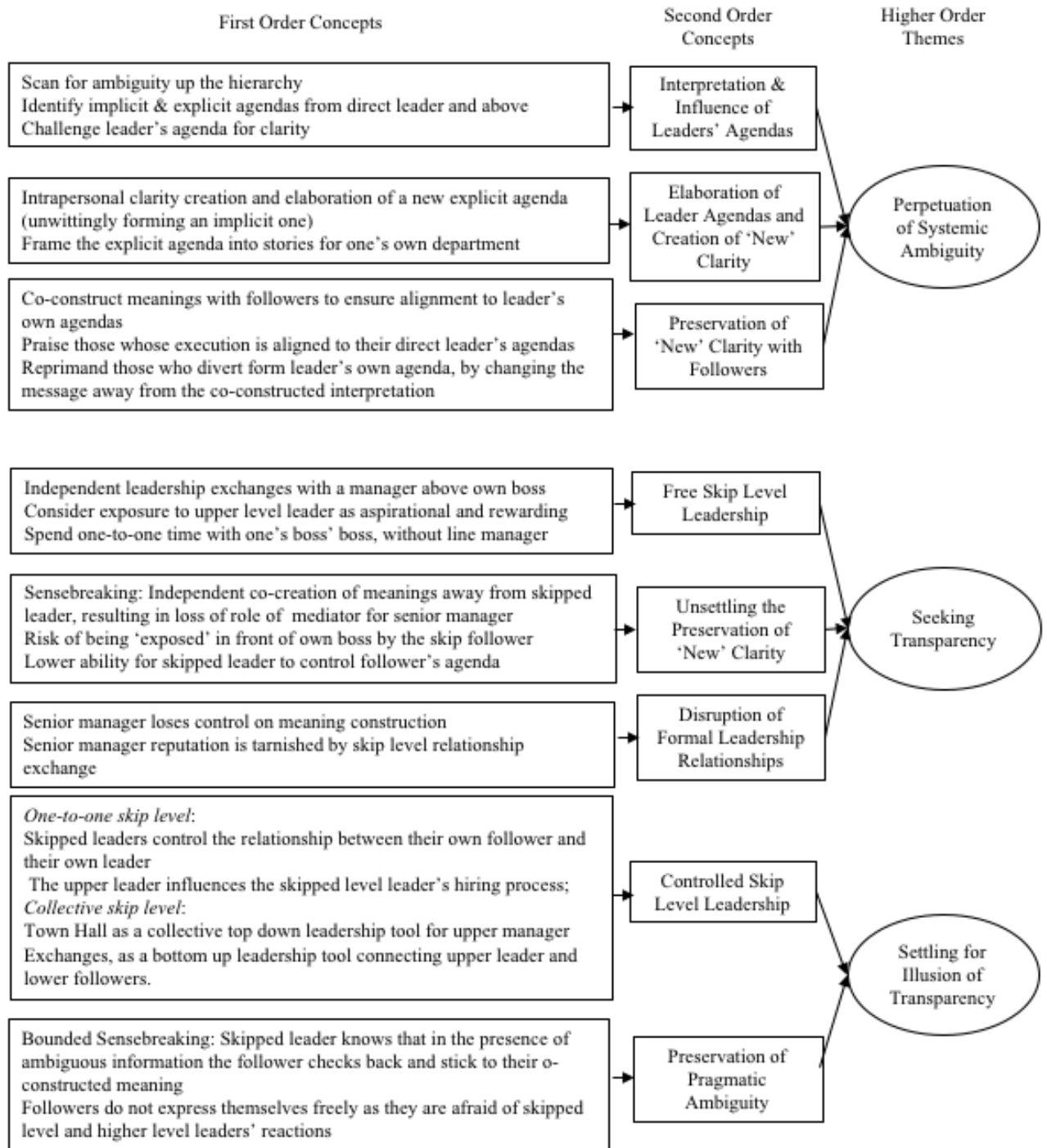
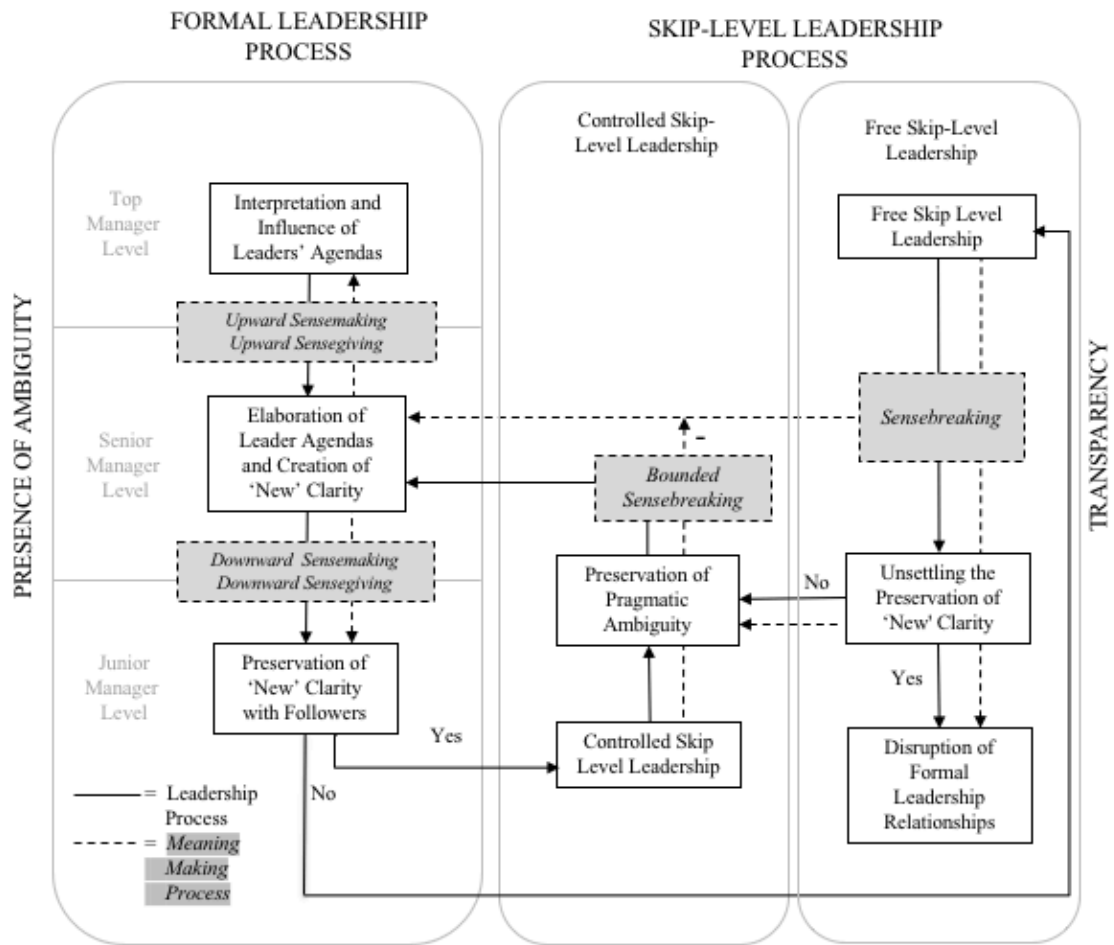


FIGURE 4  
Data Structure



**FIGURE 5**  
**Emergent Leadership & Meaning Making Process, from the Perspective of the Senior Managers**



**TABLE 1**  
**Data Supporting Interpretation of Leadership Processes**

Theme	Representative Quotes
<b>Perpetuation of Systemic Ambiguity</b>	
Interpretation & Influence of Leaders' Agenda	<p>- "[When I give my senior managers information], they will seek clarification... you know. These are the things, these are the issues they're seeing on the ground, you know... Sometimes they will use their one to ones [meetings with me] to, you know, they'll have their own list of things they want to talk about in a one to one, they'll have their own agenda." (TM, int. 01)</p> <p>- "The execution of [Metamorphosis] was ambiguous... So the implementation of [Metamorphosis], the mandate from TM originally was just go and get it done quicker, because it's all gone a bit slow and doesn't need to be working... However none of us understood exactly what we had to do for Metamorphosis." (SM8, int.22)</p> <p>- "[When that phase of the implementation of Metamorphosis comes to us.] For me it is a lot about predicting what TM will be challenging us on, and predict what challenges are and ask my team those questions before they come to the table. Like any good manager should do with their manager. (SM10, int.25)</p> <p>- "So I will challenge TM. If he says let's go do X, or let's do Y, I will ask him why he's trying to do that, and what the effect is that he's trying to achieve from that. Cause actually, if you understand the effect, then you better understand what it is you're trying to achieve." (SM8, int.12)</p>
Elaboration of upper agendas and creation of 'new' clarity	<p>- "And a lot of it I really didn't escalate to him (TM), I didn't discuss with him, because I was trying to establish <i>myself</i>, anything actually that worked out okay, because I managed to a number of deliverables which were coming through, you know, as part of what we had to do for [Metamorphosis]." (SM3, int.04)</p> <p>- [SM2] is quite capable to create <i>his own clarity in his mind</i> from a number of complex different inputs. I think providing clarity is something he does himself." (JM2, int07)</p> <p>- "So I took the execution of [Metamorphosis], discussed it with my team. Got their input. And then I elaborated it, and I took it back up to TM." (SM7, int.12)</p> <p>- "I think successful leaders are about telling stories. ... Actually if you're going to influence people, it is actually not about telling them everything you know, it's not about telling them the facts, it's about engaging them in a story, which encompasses the relevant facts that they need to know." (SM1, int.02)</p> <p>- "I try to give them only the salient things of what matters, not the entire message, and if there is any mandate changes we talk about it." (SM2, int.03)</p>
Preserve 'New' clarity	<p>- "[SM1] is able to, within the freedom I grant, to put her mark in terms of what she will do." (TM, int. 01)</p> <p>- "There is a huge amount of whitespace in that and what SM3 does, she takes that and she paints the white bits beautifully. So she interprets some of the things I say she makes a selection of the things that she can use you can't. And she does it well." (TM, int.01)</p> <p>- "Where I think they're off, completely off course, and I'll stick them quite quickly." (TM, int.17)</p> <p>- "I know [TM] would probably kill me if I heard that [laughs]... because the [FinReg] said we don't do things consistently, right? ... but sometimes the tools that we're given to do that are so generalist that actually we want to make it relevant to my audience, to the [Private Client Business]. (SM3, int. 10)</p> <p>- "And SM2 would sometimes say that part of my role is that of 'chief whip', getting them [reportees to SM2] in order' ... I try to get cohesion in what we are doing and what we are articulating. (JM2, int.07)</p>
<b>Seeking Transparency</b>	
Free Skip Level Leadership	<p>- "Because of [JM7] ability to form agenda problems, so, um, think through complex issues and form solutions to them. So he's featured on my radar ... because of the changes we're making [Metamorphosis] he's become my go-to person in that global functional space [instead than SM7]." (TM1, int.17)</p> <p>- "There, there are different ways things come to us. There are certain things that are mandated by TM ... that come to, to me to make sure we lead as a global team and land it correctly and deliver on time. So that, that kind of direct path [from TM] is there. Um, so for me, that's around essentially [understanding about] my allocation of responsibility with, um, within what comes down." (JM7, int.15)</p> <p>- "You need to tell people what to do, and not to do it, and that can come from only clear and what I would describe, as having a clear unified purpose... I want to know what TM's 'in order to' is, because that would drive ... what mine 'in order to' is down to my people ... (JM4, int.09)</p> <p>- "So [JM1] does run all my numbers... She's my cost person. She runs my budget. So JM1 is also my controller. So she controls the resources and she controls the costs and the resources. That puts in contention with, potentially even with her boss. ... Most of those directions go to SM1, sometimes it can shortcut directly to the JM1 (TM1, int.01)</p> <p>- "Because TM has people he brings in, and he gives to people [SMn], but he's still really giving and maintaining that direct relationship. . So, you know- So I'm interviewing someone today, right? [A] mate of TM's. For a job that will report to me or to SM2." (SM1, int.36)</p>
Unsettling the Preservation of the 'New' Clarity	<p>- "So they [junior managers] are-, they are future-, the future leadership team, and they are, they are all expected to lead. ... That group, obviously normally gets the messages directly... from my directs [senior managers]. But I often, I'll pull like, 'cause that group is so critical to me, I'll pull that group in the room and say, right, you'll hear it directly from the horse's mouth, I want you to ask me questions." (TM, int.17)</p> <p>- "Because of the strength of the relationship that I have with him [they worked together at two companies before], I am always telling things as they are. Rather than sugar-coating them [because] I don't have particular aspirations for my career." (JM1, int.05)</p> <p>- "[Having JM1 in the team] It meant that I never really knew what was going on, and therefore, at times you felt vulnerable because there was information that everybody would think you knew, that you should know, that I didn't know. And so ... Periodically, we'd talk it through. I know JM1 got very upset, I got cross and upset, and to some ... for a long time, I just moved to accept it, because there's too many other things I have to worry about. (SM1, int.37)</p> <p>- "If TM says to his leadership team [senior managers], we must deliver, deliver operational risk scenario analysis in 2016, ... I need to turn [what he says] it into something that's much more of a higher level story to help translate the 94 pages into something that's bite-sized chunks and palatable. (JM7, int.15)</p> <p>- "[Skipping levels] needs to be done in a way where you do not destroy the identity and the respect of the people have of the managers in the lower hierarchy, right? Because people can get confused, right, if they have a line manager and then, the guy at the top comes in all the time right? And there are possibly conflicting, or other messages. It also</p>

	<p>hinders the person at the lower end to build a strong rapport with the line manager, right? Or a strong relationship with the line manager" [SM5, int.39]</p> <p>- "I thought extremely long and hard before talking to TM, because on one side, it felt like a failure on my part in not being able to turn around and make the relationship with JM1 work. And, second, it felt quite high-risk, because I knew TM was very close and very supportive of JM1, and therefore it could have gone either way, right?" (SM1, int.31)</p>
Disruption of Formal Leadership Relationship	<p>- "Look I guess I've gotten used to the fact that TM speaks from his heart, whenever he sees [my] people and ... he doesn't necessarily think about the [hierarchical] order so it's not something I get too tied up in, because otherwise I wouldn't be able to deal with working for him. So it's fine, it shouldn't be that way obviously, it shouldn't be that I'm learning from [my people], about big events like that [the letter from the regulator]." (SM2, int.38)</p> <p>- "SM7 would have been concerned about JM7's elevation in terms of looking what the future looks like. So as SM7 moves stage left, potentially to do his role outside of our, of our function. [The one] who remains decides, and now that structure is being decided by JM7. ... JM7's a survivor, and the most senior of the survivors. The ones that we [TM] trust. So he's been asked to think about, you know, what the model will be [for the implementation of Metamorphosis]. If for some reason that bridge goes away from SM7, he will want to come straight back into his previous place. And only, you know, in the last few weeks has seen that: 'Oh my goodness, I could be caught here. If I have to jump back, then there's a new relationship being established between one of my subordinates [JM7] and [TM]". (TM, int.17)</p> <p>- "I didn't feel like it was my call, and it took a long time to eventually have to say to him: 'I know she's your friend, but it's not working.' Because I guess in the back of my mind, was he going to choose her over me? And that really wasn't clear. (SM1, int.34)</p> <p>- "I'm very cautious, if I am discussing work matters with TM, I need to understand the impact I have... I stepped and gone around my middle management but it's <i>how</i> I choose to do it" (JM4, int.09)</p>
<b>Setting for the Illusion of Transparency</b>	
Controlled Skip Level Leadership	<p><i>One to One Controlled Skip Level Leadership</i></p> <p>- "Typically in those one to one [meetings with my junior manager s] what I would be doing is encouraging them when they need to reach out to TM to say: 'That's a really good piece of work. You need to give this visibility of this to TM. Why don't you set up a session to go through it with him?' Etc, etc. So, it's not all pull from TM, some of it's push from them. Because, I encourage them to make themselves visible to TM." (SM1, int.31)</p> <p>- "Does he [TM] go directly to them? Sometimes he does, because what I have tried to do for a few people is elevate them in front of him for their own personal career benefit" (SM2, int.03)</p> <p>- "If he has asked about the work they are doing I am going to tell them. So that they know he is interested and that there is an opportunity to speak to him, or if he approaches them, what types of questions he might ask. I try to set them up for success." (SM8, int.22)</p> <p>- "There are also some other members of the team who are strong, and have real potential, and actually I would like to create more time for them to see TM, or find excuses for them to see TM. So he builds a relationship with other members of the team." (SM8, int.22)</p> <p>- "So, I encourage- ... I encourage my best team members and they've got important subjects to talk about, to turn up and present to his leadership team [TM and SMs] on those subjects. In order to really get exposure to and direct feedback from TM and his leadership team I think it's important, because it's easier for guys who work for me in that situation to prioritize, to hear direct feedback without my filter, to improve themselves, their ability to present ... (SM4, int.32)</p> <p><i>Collective SkipLevel Leadership</i></p> <p>- "The way [the Exchange meeting] has been tightened a little bit and the way it's meant to be used is, the top manager sits in the room and says very little, actually. He asks the group, tell him what's on their mind, and you're meant to just hear all the comments and just thank people for it and not really respond to it. Now, what a lot of us have done historically is, we use that as opportunity to position, educate, disavow, generally give them a bit more of a colour about what we're doing and why, but apparently that's not how we're meant to be doing exchanges." (TM, int. 37)</p> <p>- "And obviously when TM does his travels, he gets the groups together in that location. He'll typically have an 'exchange' session which is where, it's more of a feedback session, so in an exchange session, the senior person is supposed to be silent and just listen, and let people talk about the issues they're interested in, but hear about them." (SM1, int.34)</p> <p>- "It's FinCorp. Plc. wide. The concept of an exchange session is supposed to be senior leaders hold team sessions where rather than them drive the agenda, they're there to listen to what the team wants to talk about. And the team can raise anything, about anything from FinCorp. Plc policy, to what we're doing, to their fears or challenges, and topics that they want. (SM1, int.34)</p>
Pragmatic Ambiguity	<p>"For example he was out in Hong Kong a couple months ago and went to a guy that runs the team there and started to give him all kinds of new things to do... And he called me up and said TM is telling me to do this this and this... And I said great! Do it for TM... Because TM at the end of the day is the guy that pays us. (SM2, int.03)</p> <p>- "TM interacts more directly with some of my direct reports, than others. ... But they are subject matter expert, so there is a clear qualification, or legitimacy of that exchange, anyway, outside from the personal relationship. Also we seat together- , they'll discuss with me. (SM2, int.34))</p> <p>- "When they [my junior managers] go and speak to TM they'll tell me. They'll literally tell me, because, yeah, we've got to keep each other informed on what's going on." (SM8, int.22)</p> <p>- "There's always a risk that the senior leader will do exactly that. Somebody will say something that's a bit dumb and you can't let it slide, or even if it's not, you have to because it's a public policy you have to be seen to be standing up for, but it's also the challenge of, it'll cause a team often to react because it's top of mind, it's something that's a problem area, and they'll think, I cannot believe that person just said that, before they've helped themselves. It's almost instinctive. (TM, int.31)</p> <p>- "Now, generally we [senior management] get away with it [interrupting the junior mager], which is why we got the rules and we all now play a little harder of a script, but the exchanges are almost a bit staged now because we're trying to not interrupt, (TM, int.37)</p> <p>- "Exchanges are a bit staged. Because you're trying to get people's voices heard. At the same time, you're not using it as a fireside chat. Perhaps that's the better way of describing it. ... A fireside chat allows you an inner look into the true agenda. I think we blended the two." (TM, int.40)</p>



Table 2

## Coding and Triangulation of Data Sources for Practices of Free and Controlled Skip Level Leadership

### FREE SKIP LEVEL LEADERSHIP

#### Formal Interviews:

'So TM does not have a hierarchical approach [to our relationship]. If he thinks there is something that he believes is in SM1's remit, he will send it to her. If he feels that this is straight away to my remit he will send it to me ... And he has done a series of things already to make sure that the information flows doesn't stop [at SM1], so for example he told all of his direct reports that anything relating to finance et cetera should be solved directly by me.' (JM1, int.05)

'I'm going out for a beer with him next week just a pair of us.' (JM4, int.09)

'If you sat on the same floor and you bump into him [TM] in a lift, some mornings, or into a coffee machine, um, you build a relationship.' (JM2, int.08)

'I sat next to him [TM] for dinner [at our team off-site] and had a quite good evening chatting to him when he was quite new ... He then approached me for a couple of opportunities in Hong Kong.' (JM3, int.08)

'We meet every sounday morning by the pitch, our daughter play lacrosse together' (JM4, int.29)

'When he came over to Hong Kong he popped by my desk, and we had a series of direct conversations on what we are doing over here for the implementation, and what we should expect coming in the next months, he told me about what he wants to achieve, like, um, the big picture' (JM10, int.27)

'Yes I saw him when he came last month [in New York City], we had a coffee together, but not direct [foormal] one-to-ones. ... But, of course when he comes I, um, I talk to him, he is a nice man' (JM9, int.24)

'Because TM has people he brings in, and he gives to people [SMn], but he's still really giving and maintaining that direct relationship. So, you know- So I'm interviewing someone today, right? [A] mate of TM's. For a job that will report to me or to SM2.' (SM1, int.36)

#### Congruent Behaviour:

As highlighted in figure. XX TM has reciprocal leadership exchanges with three junior managers (JM1, JM4 and JM7). TM trusts these managers, he looks out for them, they confide in him, beyond confiding in their SM. TM hired JM4, and JM1 as they used to work together at FinComp (another financial institution). Beyond these reciprocal relationships other junior managers pop by top manager's desk informally for direct communication; junior managers stopped at coffee machine to discuss with top manager directly; junior manager use off-site opportunities to speak directly to junior manager; top manager goes directly to those junior managers on the same floor when he need to quickly check some information; TM suggests possible new hires of junior managers to his senior managers; top manager and junior manager meet socially outside work. In the Private Client Group, a site far from head office, and far from the TM, the exposure to TM was rather reduced, and the relationships between junior and senior managers were more relaxed and informal. In these locations it was more difficult for Free One-to-One skip level leadership to take place. TM's reciprocal leadership relationships with junior managers (JM1, JM4 and JM7) all happened in the head quarter, and all working on the same floor as TM.

#### Informal Conversation:

Managers speak about approaching their boss' boss on occasions. They use expression as us 'you can walk up to his desk and talk to him', 'if you see him around, you can have a chat', 'I like working in this team because he is a nice manager, he is accessible', 'any one can go up and talk to him', 'I have to be careful but I can informally talk to him', 'it's not something I'll do everyday, but occasionally I can [talk to my boss'boss]'; '[TM] has a horrible memory for names, so he only goes to people in lower levels that he knows well'; 'of course I go up to him if I need to know'.

People in other location than central office are looking forward to top manager's visiting to have direct exposure to him, they use expression like: 'he is coming next week and I will try to approach him', 'we do not have direct communication, but he is coming, so will see', 'it would be much better if I was seating there, wouldn't it, but we are now in this other building'.

#### Observations and Formal Meetings:

Junior manager and top manager schedule one-to-one meetings without senior manager present; TM asks a junior manager to take minutes of GORB meeting, and therefore this JM controls what is recorded, and what is not. The top manager seats on a separate desk on one side of a huge open plan office, he does not seat in an enclosed space so everyone can approach him.

#### Casual Informal Observations:

Managers on open floor are informal in their exchanges, away from formal leadership relationships; those who sit together develop informal practices of exchange, buy coffee for each other and top manager regardless of hierarchical order.

#### Archival Data:

Some junior managers send direct emails to the top manager without copying in the senior manager in the 'cc:' field. I viewed some of these e-mails from JM1 and JM4, but then heard of these practices from others in the team. The top manager occasionally sends e-mails to junior managers without copying the senior manager in the 'cc' field. In these occasions the TM told me he expects the junior managers to keep his

### CONTROLLED SKIP LEVEL LEADERSHIP (a & b)

#### a. ONE-TO-ONE

##### Formal Interviews

'TM was out in Hong Kong a couple months ago and went to a guy that runs the team there [JMH] and started to give him all kinds of new things to do... And [JMH] called me up and said TM is telling me to do this this and this... And I said great! Do it for TM... Because TM at the end of the day is the guy that pays us. It's really important to give my guys exposure to TM because at the end of the day when we go through and we sort out the bonus pool and the ratings market is the one making the final calling, and sometimes other writers and staff.' (SM2, int.03)

'What I'm also doing is, there are other members of my team who aren't as strong as JM8 yet, but have got real potential. So, I'm gradually trying to, I'm not trying to, I'm negotiating more time for them to see TM or find excuses for them to go and talk to him about things.' (SM8, int.33)

'TM questioned what people that work for me do. [For example he questioned] JMn who works for me. I couldn't find the words to look unemotional or protective of what she does for me. Then I was doing her a disservice because people thought oh,

they are such good friends that she wants just to keep her... Then I gave JMn exposure to TM, eventually things changed” (SM1, int.36)

**Congruent Behaviour:**

I witnessed at least 3 instances in which junior managers approach the TM desk informally they did it with deference, awaiting for him to raise his gaze before talking to him, often on their way back to their desk they stopped by at the senior manager desk by telling them of the outcome. Junior manager are eager to be exposed to top manager, and they see it as a coveted reward. ‘I will spend more time with him as our relationships develop, may be when [SM2] is on holiday, he will come to ask me for information’.

**Informal Conversation:**

‘So TM would go up to Martin (JM) and ask him a question directly or there is a chap called Andrew (JM), if Martin isn’t there he would go to Andrew, um, or pick up the phone and ask lower level people, but there is a specific reason he goes to them, they don’t go via the [senior manager], but the senior manager knows because of that specific reason.’ Other informal conversation: ‘yes he comes to me, but I always check back with [SM]’, ‘ah yes once he came over, we had a chat, I told SM8 afterwards’, ‘last month when he [TM] came over, he asked me to be in charge of one small project, it was about coordinating a regulatory change for the new risk framework at local level, so I wrote all the e-mails to TM, but I was putting SM10 in cc’; ‘When he was in Asia he told them a specific thing, which got fed back to SM3, and was completely different to what she had told her people in Asia. So SM3 had to put it in writing, because he [TM] had gone there had a meeting and the told them something which was not quite right. So she sent them all an e-mail to reiterate her version [laugh]’;

**Observations and Formal Meetings:**

Senior managers send junior managers, they particularly trust, to represent them in important meetings. The junior managers are exposed to TM and other senior managers in this occasion as ambassadors or agents of the senior manager. So despite there is a direct leadership exchange TM-JMn, this is under the patronage of the senior manager. During conference calls and GORB meetings I have witnessed junior managers interventions on behalf of their senior managers. I cross-checked with the Senior managers afterward whether they knew of these interventions, and they did.

**Casual Informal Observations:**

TM is eager to speak to junior managers and influence them; he then leaves it up to each junior manager to clear the formal leadership relationship with their senior managers. In this case, most junior managers would revert back to their senior managers, to clear the leadership exchange they had with TM.

**Archival Data:**

Absent, given the informal nature of these relationships there is no documentation.

**b. COLLECTIVE**

**Formal Interview:**

**Town Hall:** ‘And that’s the Town Hall, I guess, that’s [where TM speaks directly to] the top 50 or 60 [JMs] in the function. I’m really trying to focus on them owning the change, because I think, you know, their ownership of the programme is difficult, I think... so it’s really about promoting their [JMs] role, their need to be advocates, how TM sees their mandate, what he expects from them in terms of their focus and their priorities’ (SM1, int.31)

**Exchanges:** ‘I mean, the exchange is a feedback session, so that’s bottom up. So, that should be feedback coming up from your team. (SM1, int.31).

I mean for sometime now we’re trying to engineer something that can be fed back on the way back up to the CEO et cetera, these are the Exchanges. Where I go in and listen to the lower level population that report to my [senior managers].’ (TM, int.37).

**Congruent Behaviour:**

**Town Hall:** TM prepares well in advance he rehearses the content mentally, by spending time going through the presentation at his desk. TM sees the Town Hall as a staged act, it is formal act through which he messages the strategy to a large chunk of his population globally. It is a place where he can reach a broader part of his team and envision what the operational risk function is going to be like during and after Metamorphosis. He uses high level abstract language ‘my desire is for us to spend quality time with control officers, and provide them with leadership, rather than to do their job for them’. TM uses town hall as a team building activity, he sometimes invites senior guest speakers from other departments as well, so his people can receive a direct illustration of.

**Exchanges:** TM finds exchanges frustrating, because he has to listen to people complaints without responding spontaneously: Exchanges are seen as difficult from the TM as he finds it difficult to keep quiet when he hears remarks from the lower level management. TM uses exchanges as talent spotting contests, in which he forms opinion on the emergent talent. Because of the huge exposure that junior managers have to the TM, they do not often speak freely. ‘You’re trying to get people’s voices heard. At the same time, you’re not using it as a fireside chat. So people don’t really say what they think. ‘I think exchanges are good for my people to have exposure to TM’. ‘Once I heard of this guy at the top he got so angry and frustrated during this exchange (laughs), someone said something dumb and he couldn’t just keep quiet about it’. When TM attend an exchange meeting he cannot refrain from speaking a lot and control the agenda. During Exchanges people speak positively about their managers, highlighting what a good job they have done. People tiptoe around difficult issues, there is snarling joke about the UK political landscape, which dies immediately without follow up.

**Informal Conversation:**

**Town Hall:** The Town Hall was something people were eager to join, it was considered informational. But it was also considered a bit staged, and scripted: ‘As communication manager I prepare the Town Hall, I mean- the presentation for the Town Hall, and organize what TM says, in coordination with him, of course’. ‘In July I organized a two day offsite for the level four (junior managers), where TM was giving them a speech, it was involved with the Metamorphosis, but also he was talking to them about the future, what is going to happen, what’s the plan. I did it with [communication manager], of course because she was preparing the slides.’

**Exchanges:** ‘they moved to London Bridge office now, so there is disconnect, so it is important that TM has [exchange] sessions to hear from them’; ‘He is now going down one level with the exchanges, in July they had a one day in which he went there and for one or two hours he sat down with the lower level managers’; ‘he listens to them and they speak to him’, ‘we are arranging another exchange at the end of the year as the Private Client Business is in that building in Mayfair’, ‘he wouldn’t normally meet them up, because they are in a different building so TM has to be over there’; ‘look, this was the first time this happened. I had never had A. a one to one with my global head of anything before and B. I had never sat on an open session on a town hall if you like with my global head [TM] and there isn’t, there isn’t an agenda, there isn’t somebody, he’s not there deliberately there to tell

me something.’ The presence of an authority figure like the TM makes everyone rather formal, measured, and not spontaneous in the way they interact. The most spontaneous people are the more senior junior managers.

### **Observation and Formal Meetings**

**Town Hall:** Town Hall are staged events, in which TM addresses an audience of 50-60 junior managers, additionally to his senior managers. Junior and senior managers all attend together. His presentation is scripted, and prepared in advance from the head of communication. The messaging is agreed with the different Senior Managers before it is put out. However the TM occasionally clarifies and explains things according to his personal interpretations of event, by putting things ‘in his own words’. The Senior Managers are fast in picking on these cues, and use these interpretations to integrate their own interpretations to their people. Junior managers like attending town halls (either in person or via conference call) although they consider them formal events, where only the official version of events is spoken about. Few told me that aside from the town hall they use their informal networks to understand what the ‘real story’ is.

**Exchanges:** Exchanges are formally organized meetings where the employees are supposed to feel they can speak about issues from a bottom up perspective. They are supposed to be bottom-up driven, and without an informal agenda. However from my observation the agenda develops very quickly, as the attendees respond to verbal and non verbal cues of the TM in the room. Therefore whilst Exchanges are without an ‘explicit agenda’, people in the room are always looking for the ‘implicit agenda’ of the top manager. In fact the top manager with verbal and non verbal language validates what people are saying or not saying. From my observations, one of the more junior people in the room had his line manager present, and he never spoke during the exchange. He then told me: ‘there was no need for me to say anything on that topic, because my boss was already raising these points’.

### **Casual on-site observation:**

Given the formality of these events there are not casual observations on record.

### **Archival Data:**

**Town Hall:** Meetings are very ‘formal and staged’, schedules are precise and rigid. These are the meetings when a level 2 manager faces his ‘broader manager population’. The TM follows a scripted presentation prepared by the Head of Communication. The timing is calculated clearly at different stages of the script. Town Hall presentations are designed to create consistency in top-down messaging to the broader operational risk team population.

**Exchange Rules:** HR Description of Exchange Meetings: ‘Exchange meetings are informal get-togethers amongst employees and their managers... In traditional business meetings managers do most of the talking, whilst exchanges recognize it’s just as important that managers listen, understand and learn about what matters to employees.’ ‘In Exchange meetings ... the host manager should listen with an open mind and do very little talking. Answer any questions they can and note down those they can’t. Record the key themes so they can add the discussion themes to the dedicated Exchange site following the meeting.’ ‘There are different types of exchanges. ... Skip level Exchanges - encourage leaders to host Exchanges with lower levels of employee groups’. ‘Topics/Themes are noted and the feeling around that particular topic are recorded on the Exchange Share Point Site - up to eight topics/themes can be recorded’.

**PAPER III**

**BOUNDED AUTHENTICITY IN LEADERSHIP  
DURING STRATEGIC CHANGE**

**ABSTRACT**

*Authenticity, here defined as the consistency of one's behaviour to one's beliefs, thoughts and feelings, has recently gained great attention in management studies, hailed as a positive force for leaders. Authentic leaders are seen as inspiring and motivating, capable to build greater trust in relationships, and in organizations. However, authenticity is an elusive concept especially for leaders, who often need to stick to corporate ascribed beliefs, and even to disguise their thoughts and feelings in their work relationships. Given these contrasting views I set to explore authenticity in a 33-month study of intermediate leaders, following a grounded theory approach, which takes place during a learning and development and a change programme. The analyses deliver an emergent model of bounded authenticity, whereby at organizational-, relational- and individual-level, authenticity appears both as endorsed, and limited. Bounded authenticity manifests itself as encased in organizational structures, where the capacity to be authentic is specific to hierarchical levels, and informational structures. It also appears to be relationally specific, where leaders can be authentic by contravening organizational rules, to some people, and in specific physical locations. Finally, at individual level it is a finite state, whereby leaders' ability to be authentic is limited by the emotional costs incurred in staying true to ambivalent, or even contrasting beliefs, thoughts or feelings. The model contributes to theories of authentic leadership, exposing authenticity as a backstage activity, more difficult to capture or to measure, than previously thought.*

## INTRODUCTION

“This above all: to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

(Polonius in Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3)

The quest for authenticity is a central and significant feature of modern society (Guignon, 2004; Sheldon, 2004). In organization studies, and social psychology, it has been defined as the state of knowing oneself and acting consistently with one's beliefs, thoughts or feelings (Erickson, 1995; Kernis & Goldman, 2006, Lehman, O'Connor, Kovacs, Newman, 2018), it has been associated to many positive outcomes. People who are authentic at work are poised to thrive by being self-motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and to fulfil their potential (Rogers, 1963). Likewise, the inability to reach authenticity is said to suppress one's voice (Harter, Waters, Whitesel, 1997), to generate conflict, dissonance, and stress (Roberts, Cha, Hewlin, Settles, 2009), and to lead employees to become disengaged from their organizations (Kahn, 1992). But authenticity does not end within individuals, it has a social, relational dimension of being true towards others too. As described by Polonius, a character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (in the opening quote) if one is authentic to oneself, “thou canst not then be false to any man” (Guinot, 2004). By incorporating concepts of integrity and relational orientation, authenticity is an appealing concept for social scientists studying organizations (Erickson, 1995; Cameron, Dutton, Quinn, & Wrzesniewski, 2003). This is epitomized by the rise of the concept of authentic leadership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008; Avolio, Wernsing, Gardner, 2018), which mirrors the conceptualization of authenticity of Kernis and Goldman (2006), and has been hailed as a ‘new type of genuine and values-based leadership’ (for a

review see Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, Dickens, 2011: 1120). Authentic leadership satisfies the current ‘public need for accountability, integrity, courage and transparency’ (Diddams & Chang, 2012: 594) in a corporate landscape ridden by scandals (Caza & Jackson, 2011), and it has been associated with a wide range of positive outcomes in organizations (for a review see Gill & Caza, 2018)

However authenticity seems to be an elusive concept, *especially* for organizational leaders. Far from the idealistic quote from Polonius, being authentic sometimes is not just impossible but can backfire. Pfeffer (2015) tells us that leaders are often under the pressure to be authentic not to their true selves, but to the selves the organization needs; and that often they must project more optimism and confidence than they feel. Unsurprisingly, some leaders need to ‘tone down’ their authenticity in order to be perceived as good leaders (Eagly, 2005; Nyberg & Svenningson, 2014) or to progress in their career (Ibarra, 2015). And we know that at in certain jobs all levels of an organization faking emotions to fit a role can have survival value (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989), especially in the service industry, where individuals’ expressions of thoughts and feelings are subordinated to organizational goals (Munby & Putnam, 1992). In fact, from an interactionist perspective (Goffman, 1959), authenticity can be seen as a staged activity (MacCannell, 1973), enacted by leaders through embodied performances (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010), adapted to different audiences (Gardner, Fisher & Hunt, 2009).

Such an inconsistency between the ideal of authenticity, and how authentic behaviour takes place in organizations persists for two main reasons. First, because of the predominantly normative, and extremely positive meaning associated to the modern conception of authenticity in organizations, rooted in positive psychology (Rogers, 1963; Kernis, 2003), which sees authenticity as an aspirational goal. Thus

often an authentic leader is idealised as a super-being who is ‘confident, optimistic, resilient, moral/ethical, future-oriented, and gives priority to developing associates to be leaders’ (Luthans & Avolio, 2003: 243). Second, because of a gap in our *empirical* understanding of authentic leadership’s multilevel boundaries (organizational, relational and individual; Yammarino, Dionne, Schriesheim, Dansereau, 2008; Gardner et al., 2011). What we know so far is mostly based on theoretical, sometimes intuitive ideas: at an organizational level authentic leadership is more likely to occur in positive organizations (Luthan & Avolio, 2003), with a collaborative culture, and low emotional labour (Gardner & al., 2009); at an individual level we are told it is more likely for some people to be authentic than others, especially for those who have high psychological capacity and capital (Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Gardner & al., 2011), self-awareness (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, Walumbwa, 2005), emotional intelligence (Gardner, & al., 2009), or self-knowledge and self-consistency (only empirical study, Peus, Wesche, Steicher, Braun, Frey, 2012). Understanding the boundaries within which authentic leadership can take place is important for practical and theoretical reasons. In practice, there is wide interest to increase levels of authenticity and integrity in organizations, especially in the presence of corporate scandals. Theoretically, the poor understanding of the conditions under which authenticity thrives perpetuates an excessively romanticised view, suggesting it is simplistic (Ibarra, 2015), idealistic (Pfeffer, 2015) and often misapplied (Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014). Therefore this study explores authenticity in practice, in order to enrich our theoretical understanding, starting from the question: how do organizational, relational, and individual level phenomena facilitate or hinder leaders’ authenticity in complex organizational contexts?

Responding for calls for more ‘extensive use of qualitative methods to provide thick narrative descriptions of leadership processes and contexts’ (Gardner et al., 2011: 1141; Conger, 1998), this paper is based on a 33-month long inductive qualitative study in a financial organization. It investigates: (i) how authenticity is endorsed and designed, (ii) how authenticity is limited, and (iii) how it manifests itself as *bounded*. The investigation follows the methodology of grounded theory (Corbin & Struss, 1990; Corbin, Strauss & Staruss, 2014; Corley & Gioia, 2004), and it takes place during the implementation of strategic change. By recognising that authenticity is influenced by multilevel and relational dynamics (Yammarino et al., 2008) the study focuses on intermediate leaders (Jaser, 2017), those who connect different levels of an organizations. They constitute a particularly fertile area of exploration because they are involved in multilevel leadership relationships, with their reports, (from the perspective of a leader), and with their own bosses (from the perspective of a follower). This study takes place at the headquarter of PrivBank (part of a larger financial institution in the UK, hereafter called Bank) comprising 2,000 employees at the time of the study. It focuses on two longitudinal events. The first is the design and roll out of a learning and development (L&D) programme in which the researcher acts as a participant observer. And the second is the design and rollout of a strategic change programme, which results in some layoffs, where the researcher is involved as an external observer.

This study provides an empirically grounded holistic picture of how organizational practices, relational dynamics, and individual-level elements work concertedly in favour or against the development of authenticity, and seeks to reframe our understanding of authenticity under these conditions. The theoretical sample constituted by intermediate leaders during strategic change provides a fertile



environment for this exploration, where the need and the difficulty of being authentic coexist, side by side. On one hand, intermediate leaders' authenticity is needed as a motivational force for followers, especially at challenging times like during organizational change (Norman, Avolio, Luthans, 2010). On the other, strategic change is marked by uncertainty about the future, and therefore it is a time in which it is difficult to be authentic amidst ambivalent (Pideritt, 2000) cognitive (Balogun & Johnson 2004) and emotional (Huy, 2002) choices, especially for intermediate leaders connecting layers of organizations.

The remainder of this paper will first provide a conceptual background to authenticity in leadership, it will then develop a detailed methodological section, followed by the findings represented, according to the traditions of grounded theory, through a dynamic model. Finally, a discussion connecting the findings to the theory will ensue, highlighting the theoretical and practical contributions.

## **AUTHENTICITY IN LEADERSHIP**

### **Origin of the Concept and Evolution of the Literature**

Whilst the origin of the idea of authenticity is often attributed to Greek philosophers (Varga, Somogy, Guignon, Charles, 2017), and in particular the words 'to know thyself' are attributed to Socrates (Guignon, 2004), in its current meaning authenticity is 'characterized as reflecting the unobstructed operation of one's ... core self, in one's daily enterprise' (Kernis, 2003: 13). This definition is grounded in several assumptions. The most prominent one is that we have an inner 'core self', and a manifested, public, outer self. The second is that each one's self is conscious of the

other, so it can tune into it, and act in accordance with or discordance to it. In this form authenticity rests on ontological assumptions conducive to Cartesian's subjectivity, which implies a 'formal subjective process of consciousness constructed by reason' (Kernis and Goldman, 2006: 286). If that process of consciousness is then turned on one's 'self', it can be implied that there are two different selves, an internal one, and an external one (Guignon, 2004). The state of being authentic is then reached when there is *consistency*<sup>10</sup> (Lehman et al., 2018) between the two, or when 'one's expressions are aligned with one's internal experiences' (Roberts, Cha, Hewlin, Settles, 2009: 158). The applications of this view of authenticity to organizations rest on theoretical assumptions connected to positive psychology (Rogers, 1963) and positive scholarship (Cameron, et al. 2003), which see the congruence of the two selves as associated to greater wellbeing and self-actualization (Maslow, 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Kernis, 2003). In this sense authenticity emerges as a desirable and aspirational, self-developmental *state*. By operating on these assumption Kernis (2003) and Kernis and Goldman (2006: 302) break down authenticity in four components: (i) an individual-level component of *awareness*, so that authentic individuals have the ability to know themselves, their motives and feelings; (ii) a decision-making component, *unbiased processing*, which concerns the ability to appraise information about the self and about the environment objectively (i.e. without distortion and exaggeration); (iii) a value-led behavioural component (called *behaviour*), through which an individual acts according to his/her values rather than merely to please others; and finally (iv) a relational component, *relational orientation*,

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<sup>10</sup> The meaning attributed to authenticity varies in the wider field of management studies. In a recent review Lehman and colleagues (2018) see authenticity as assuming three possible meanings, one of *consistency* (where an entity is authentic when internal values and beliefs, and external expression are consistent to each other), one of *conformity* (where an entity conforms to the expected characteristics of its social category) and one of *connection* (where an entity is connected to a particular person, place or time as claimed). For the purpose of this paper, studying individuals in organizations, I adopt the consistency view.

through which an individual strives to achieve openness and truthfulness in close relationships and to discuss aspects of shadowy self. In organizations this conception of authenticity has been highlighted particularly as an important feature of leaders, incarnating in the construct of authentic leadership<sup>11</sup> (see Walumbwa, et al., 2008:95-96; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, et al., 2018). There is no doubt that the concept of authentic leadership, has amplified the interest in researching authenticity in organizations, especially after the premature loss of Michael Kernis, its initial advocate in this form, in 2009. Authentic leadership is increasingly becoming an appealing construct for practitioners (George, 2000, 2003; George, Sims, Mclean, Mayer, 2007; Goffee and Jones, 2005) and academic alike (for a review see Gardner et al., 2011). It has been upheld as the path to create ‘positive ethical climates’ (Gardner et al., 2005:344) as well as to improve the ‘meaningfulness of employees’ lives’ (Ilies, Morgeson, Nahrang, 2005:374). Recently a number of empirical studies (for a review see Gill & Caza, 2018) have highlighted the positive impact that authentic leaders have on organizations, on followers (like promotion of positive social exchanges, Wang et al., 2014; job satisfaction, Azanza Moriano & Melero, 2013; positive states, Rego, et al., 2012, 2013, 2014) or on groups (like empowerment and trust in leader, Clap-Smith, Volgegesang, Avey, 2009; positive mood, Hsiung, 2012; collective efficacy, Ozkan & Ceylan, 2012).

Nonetheless, authenticity is elusive in organizations, especially for leaders. In recognising that leaders find it difficult or even damaging to be authentic, some scholars have recently claimed that we often look at authenticity in ways which are

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<sup>11</sup> Authentic leadership is explicitly derived from Kernis’ (2003) work on authenticity, therefore it rests on the same theoretical grounds described so far. It is also divided in the same four components, broadly equal in substance, with minor semantic variations, as those described by Kernis and colleagues (2003; Kernis and Goldman, 2006). Because of the ontological and conceptual congruence of the two notions, this paper will treat authenticity and authentic leadership as equivalent, and interchangeable.

idealizing, naive and romanticised (Pfeffer, 2015; Nygard & Svenningson, 2014; Ford & Harding, 2011; Ladkyn & Taylor, 2010). They recognize that our understanding of authenticity in leadership is partial and skewed towards an overly positive, normative understanding of the phenomenon, as a decontextualized universal solution to many leadership and organizational problems. By expanding on this literature this paper wants to contribute to a wider understanding of authenticity in leadership and organizations by reframing and redefining it through an empirical investigation that takes into account its limitations at organizational, relational and individual level.

### **Gaps in the Understanding of Authenticity in Leadership**

Before delving into the empirical data, however, this paper presents theoretical gaps in our understanding of authenticity in leadership by ‘identifying and challenging the assumptions underlying’ its current definitions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011: 247). The current idea of authenticity for leaders rests on two core actions: (i) the ‘tasks of pulling yourself back from your entanglements in social game-playing’ and get in touch with core feelings, thoughts and beliefs through ‘self-inspection’; (ii) the task of ‘living in such a way that in all your actions you express’ those thoughts and feelings (Guinot, 2004: 75). This paragraph uses these two assumptions to reveal gaps in our understanding of authenticity for leaders.

Firstly, the ability to distance oneself from the social settings, in order to get in touch with an inner dimension cannot be taken for granted. For example, at organizational level, institutional theory tells us that individuals are sometimes trapped in ‘social game-playing’, represented by institutionalized norms and logics (DiMaggio 1982; 1988; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), bureaucratic routines (Weber,

Behr, Wells, 2002), and unable to pull themselves out of them. Similarly, the structure-agency theoretical lens sees individuals as encased by organizational systems, limiting their agency, in highly structured environments (Giddens, 1979). However, even if the literature on authentic leadership recognises that certain organizational characteristics favour the development of authenticity (e.g. more positive, collaborative, organizations with softer structures, Gardner et al., 2009:477-478; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), we do not have empirical evidence on how exactly organizational structures limit authenticity. Similarly, we know that, at a relational level, people are trapped in reciprocal role expectations (Katz & Khan, 1978; Ashforth, Kreiner, Fugate, 2000), and often do not have the freedom to say or behave always according to their inner selves. In fact, it is theorized that leaders have a tendency to be not equally authentic to all, but mostly those they trust the most (Gardner, et al., 2009), perpetuating authenticity as a selective, relational specific state (Pfeffer, 2015). Yet we have so far little empirical evidence of how authenticity and role expectations interplay with each other, and how authenticity manifests itself selectively depending on the audience a leader is facing. Further, at individual level, it might not always be possible for individuals to stop in the midst of action and engage in ‘self-inspection’, simply because ‘people have efficient but limited cognitive abilities’ (Diddams & Chang, 2102:295; Fiske & Taylor, 1984) which make some emotions and judgements unavoidable (Damasio, 2006). For these reasons, authenticity, has been defined as ‘relative’ (Erickson, 1995), and Heidegger (1962) recognises that it is not an either/or condition. Instead people might ‘more accurately be described as achieving levels of authenticity’ (Avolio & Gardner, 2005:320; Gardner et. al., 2011). However, we do not know much about how individuals

manage the tensions between being or not being authentic, to different degrees, to different audiences.

Secondly, task two, concerning adhering to a ‘true’ self, has been the main focus of critiques to the prevailing definitions of authenticity and authentic leadership. The definition of what is the ‘true’ self is possibly one of the big existential questions that underpin the search for authenticity, with wide paradigmatic differences. Although this debate is far too wide to be tackled in this theoretical section, it is worth to take into account two contrasting positions as an example. On one hand, constructionists define the true self as socially constructed in exchanges with others (Berger & Luckman, 1966, 1991) and existentialists an ‘empty place of mirrors’ (Sartre, in Boule, 2005: 27). On the other, positivist psychologists see it as a stable set of characteristics for us to ‘discover’ within ourselves (Jung, 1959, 2013). Because of its conceptual malleability, some of the main critiques of current views of authenticity come from observations that companies want employees to be authentic to ‘selves’ aligned with organizational goals, or personas that one is required to embody in the interest of the company (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010), rather than to selves that reflect one’s beliefs, thoughts and feelings. In this sense some scholars have described the promotion of authenticity in organizations as a means to control managers and workers, and ensure they align with organizational objectives (Ford & Harding, 2011). Some others have described it as the ability to act in accordance to ‘working selves’ (Lord & Brown, 2004) chosen amongst ‘possible selves’ (Shamir and Eilam, 2005; Markus & Nurius, 1986). When speaking about authenticity in this guise, the argument shifts to how leaders chose what self to be true to, given the complexities of organizational life, marked by uncertainty, and ambivalence (Pideritt, 2000; Pratt, 2000).

Given these gaps in our understanding of how authenticity manifests itself in leadership, this paper attempts to illuminate the phenomenon by exploring the perspectives of the individuals living the experience: intermediate leaders, their bosses and their team members. The study adopts interpretative, qualitative investigation methods, responding to current demand for more inductive research in authentic leadership (Conger, 1998; Gardner et al, 2009; Gardner et al., 2011). The grounded model that arises from this study of a strategic change programme at PrivBank, reveals the emergent concept of *bounded authenticity in leadership*. A limited state wherein leaders find themselves struggling to stay authentic amidst organizational, relational and individual level barriers, on one side, and amidst endorsements of authenticity, on the other. The study provides insights into the mechanisms through which bounded authenticity is perpetuated, whereby on one side the organizations declares authenticity as an important state to be embodied by leaders, incorporates it in its explicit values, and encourages through leadership development practices; on the other, it limits it through bureaucratic and hierarchical barriers, but also by segregating information between levels, so that being authentic in organizations is not straightforward, but it means navigating complex ambivalent cognitive, and emotional choices. The research process is described in detail in the following section, and the findings and discussion in the subsequent ones.

## METHODS

### Empirical Settings Selection

This study took place during a 33 months period (May 2015 – Dec 2017), in a major bank (*Bank* hereafter) in London, UK, which was a member of the FTSE350 at the time of the research. The research project concentrated on the part of the bank dedicated to the provision of financial services to high net-worth individuals, a subsidiary, called hereafter *PrivBank*. *PrivBank* had approximately 2,000 employees, managing more than £15bn (approx. \$19bn) of clients' assets at the time of the study, and contributed more than 10% of *Bank*'s income<sup>12</sup>. In order to protect confidentiality all names (organizations, people and teams) are reported in pseudonym form, and the dates of events have been changed (albeit maintaining chronological sequencing consistent with the original events). At the time of the research *PrivBank* was headquartered in London but had a number of local branches around the UK, as well as subsidiaries in Switzerland, Hong Kong and Dubai. This research initially spanned across *PrivBank*, but in the last 18 months concentrated on a department covering a specific geographical area in the UK, which will be called *the Department*, and comprised approximately 500 people.

***Sample Selection.*** In choosing the settings I was guided by theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At the industry level, financial services are amongst the most bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations (Knorr, Cetina and Preda, 2005) where the authenticity of exchanges might be limited by the rigidity of the organizational structure and the excessive competitive environment (Gardner et al.,

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<sup>12</sup> Investor Presentations and Annual Reports



2005). Further it is also recognized that in the services industry there is a front stage/back stage logic (Goffman, 1959), which underpins a certain type of emotional labour (Munby & Puttnam, 1992), at the expenses of authenticity (Gardner et al., 2005). The research followed closely the planning and execution of a strategic change project, which culminated in the closure of some regional offices, and employees' layoffs in May 2017. Therefore the study progressively focused on key informants in the department, who were touched by the programme. The informants' structure can be seen in figure 1. In this sample both the Market Leaders (Senior Leaders, *SLn*) and the Team Leaders (Junior Leaders, *JLn*), were intermediate leaders, embodying concurrently the roles of leader and follower (Jaser, 2017). Some Junior Leaders importantly were also advisors to clients, as well as managers to their teams. The sample's multilevel characteristics made it particularly suited for the study of authenticity across organizational levels.

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 Insert Figure 1 about here  
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***Learning & Development and Strategic Change.*** The study was carried out in two stages. The first stage (May-Dec 2015) effected a broad observation of PrivBank and its culture during the design and implementation of a leadership training attended by all SLs and JLS. At this time I assumed a participant researcher role<sup>13</sup>. In total the training program comprised 6 training events, of 2.5 days each, mostly concentrated in Nov-Dec 2015. The leadership training took places in business schools in Europe,

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<sup>13</sup> I was asked to work as a consultant involved in the diagnostic phase, interviewing and observing bankers and then briefing members of the L&D faculty on my findings, so they could design the programme. Further, on the roll-out phase, I was asked to ensure the L&D participants experience was consistent with the needs diagnosed on the ground. This role allowed me to have full access to the thought process behind the design. However, I was not an active part of the design team, and as such I did not make key decisions on the design of the programme. This was negotiated by more senior members of the consultancy team, with the Head of L&D at PrivBank. Therefore, despite being a participant researcher, I was able to keep some distance from the decision-making process, and to assume a role of insider/outsider.

and in UK. The second stage of the study (Aug 2016 – Dec 2017) took place during a program of strategic change named ‘Right Segment, Right Client, Right Advisor’, for brevity hereafter *project Right*. PrivBank’s strategy for growth focused on deepening relationships in the high net-worth and ultra-high net-worth client segment, whilst reducing the cost of serving affluent clients, those with investible assets lower than £1m (\$1.34m). In order to do so Project Right comprised a programme of client segmentation, a common strategy amongst wealth management companies to reduce costs. By moving affluent clients out of the scope of the Department’s advisors, PrivBank was able to make redundant some client advisors’ jobs, whilst increasing the quantity of clients’ assets per individual advisor left. In doing so the cost-to-serve was reduced, whilst retaining the majority of assets under management. The broad line of this strategy had been defined in the summer/autumn of 2016, and the execution of the change varied across different teams in the Department. In two of the teams (Sport and South) the change materialized in a number of layoffs, and the closure of some branches in May-Sep 2017. Therefore, from Nov 2016 (Project Right announced) to May 2017 (Project Right executed) the SLs and JLs in these two teams lived through an intense period of uncertainty. The timeline of the change and of the research is represented in figure 2.

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Insert Figure 2 about here  
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### **Sources of Data**

This study includes real time and retrospective data, collected in two stages: during Time 1 (T1; May-Dec 2015, L&D programme) and during Time 2 (T2; Aug

2016 - Dec 2017, project Right), see detailed timeline in figure 2. I used three data sources: interviews, observations and archival data.

**Interviews.** I conducted 7 formal interviews during T1, and 53 formal interviews during T2 (the individuals interviewed are reported in figure 1). Formal meaning minimum one hour long, recorded and transcribed. Additionally during T1 and T2 I had many informal (i.e. non-recorded, or occasional) conversations totalling more than 800. Informal conversations during T1 were noted in diagnostic notes gathered during the diagnostic phase of the training programme, and during its roll-out (in notes for the post-training debrief). During T2 they were noted down in a research diary and in observation memos. The majority of the interviews during T2 occurred between Sep 2016 and Dec 2017. In this period every month I spent several days interviewing and observing, with the exception of August 2017. Initially the interviews focused on exploring the multilevel leadership relationship of individuals, but, as project Right progressed, they became more about tensions and uncertainty caused by the segregation of information and by the change processes.

**Observations.** During T1, I spent several days at PrivBank gathering diagnostic data for the design team of the learning and development intervention. This entailed interviewing executives and familiarizing myself with the work of client advisors. I also interviewed and filmed (with a crew) some key executives to document best practices and build testimonials to use during the L&D programme. The second part of T1 was spent rolling out the training itself. Whilst the instructors in the room where academics from top US and UK business schools, I acted as a coordinator behind the scenes. This gave me the opportunity to spend about two weeks off-site with the bankers, during the six rollouts. In these days I spent time with senior and junior leaders increasing the opportunities for informal socialization and

development of trust-based relationships, which became fundamental in facilitating access to the organization for a subsequent research project during T2. After the training programme I made contact with one of the top executives who granted me access to study leaders at both junior and senior level, during an upcoming change programme. When access was granted, during T2 I spent several ethnographic days, sitting at PrivBank in open office spaces. In these occasions I attended several team meetings for all employees of the Sport team (providing financial advice to sport professionals), and some exclusive ‘Team Leaders’ meetings only for the Head of Sport and his Junior Leaders. This privileged access provided me with insights about the formal and informal roll-out of project Right, both openly and behind closed doors. Further, at the end of some of these days I socialized with my informants, by attending work functions, and colleagues’ drinks. This gave me the opportunity to gain insights beyond those gathered during the formal interviews, to build relationships of trust and gather information through informal conversations.

*Archival data.* During T1, in my position as subject matter expert I was the liaison between the learning and development consultancy designing the training, and the bankers. In this privileged position I gathered 249 items of archival data, including (in chronological order): pitching documents to procure the programme, learning needs reports, different drafts of the training design, minutes of meetings with PrivBank executives, transcripts of video interviews, progress reports documenting the programme development, journals for training participants, training module slides. Further I familiarized myself with thousands of pages of documents underpinning the client advisory model (e.g. client advisors handbooks, advisory process models, client segmentations strategic reports etc.), and with books that the executives and the leaders used as models to build relationships with their clients like ‘The Trusted

Advisor’ (Maister, Green, Galford, 2000) and ‘The Challenger’ (Dixon & Adamson, 2011). I further gathered access to Annual Reports, and in T2 to investor presentations detailing the cost cutting strategies. Further I accessed more than a dozen press articles on the organization, detailing changes, hiring and firing of executives. I also gained on-line access to more than 40 employees’ reviews of life at the company from 2014 to 2017. I had access to Trade Unions job security agreements, which were instrumental to understand the implications of the redundancy negotiations. I familiarized myself with several industry reports about ‘client segmentation’ to understand what it entailed, this allowed me to triangulate what my informants were telling me. Further, despite the fact that the confidentiality of the change programme made it difficult for me to access change-related archival material, I was able to see a number of change Gantt-charts, memos, as well as to gain detailed insights of internal change related communication plans.

### **Data Analysis**

In analyzing the data, I used a theory-building approach that involved moving from a highly personalized account, that primarily consisted of ‘thick description’, to one that was more abstract and analytical, and was integrated with the theory (Van Maanen, 1979). I also used the iterative process of progressive integration of data with theory as depicted by Corbin and Strauss (1990). The data during T1 was analysed retrospectively. However, because of the large amount of archival material available I could write a thick description (Langley, 1999) of the events during the L&D program, by reviewing documents, presentations, emails, interview scripts and training documents. During this process of retrospective analysis I compared research

notes, interpretations, and codes with research peers who could independently validate my interpretations. The retrospective data analysis was closely circumscribed to the concept of authenticity, which had emerged from my research during T2. So when I went back to analyse data from T1 my inquiry was already steeped in theory, I coded for authenticity and the tensions surrounding it, and I engaged my research peers specifically on the validation of these codes. Differently, and more traditionally in line with the methods of grounded theory (Gioia & Chittipedi, 1991; Corley & Gioia, 2004;) the data at T2 was iteratively analysed as I was collecting it. Here I wrote a diary of research as I was collecting and analysing the data, going from data to theory iteratively. Concepts pertaining to authenticity emerged strongly from the data at the beginning of 2017, several months into T2, coinciding with a more active phase of implementation of Project Right. The more I explored the relational dynamics between intermediate leaders, their bosses and their followers during the implementation phase of strategic change, the more I started noticing issues concerning all the four components of authenticity: lack of relational transparency, biased processing, lack of self-awareness, and confusion about value-led behaviour (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). So, the first coding focused on noticing when authenticity was problematic, and on unpacking what I called ‘barriers’ to the existence of authenticity at different levels. This first coding was the catalyst to this entire research on authenticity. It was after this coding that I remembered that authenticity was encouraged as well. At that point I went back to explore how authenticity was endorsed at PrivBank and went back to code all the data I had gathered during T1. From here as well I noticed that issues of ambivalence and emotional compartmentalisation became more prominent the greater the uncertainty caused by the strategic change process. The data structure is reported in figure 3, the headlining

main themes represent the three paragraphs in the next section of this paper. The supporting codes to this data structure are showcased in table 1.

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Insert Figure 3 About Here  
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Insert Table 1 About Here  
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## **FINDINGS**

The data told a substantial story about authenticity as both endorsed by the organization and its leaders, and also as limited by the same actors. This gave rise to an emergent model of bounded authenticity highlighted in figure 4. The model represents a multilevel view of bounded authenticity. The horizontal arrows converging on the bounded authenticity boxes, from the two sides, represent the boundaries of authenticity, at organizational, relational and individual level. The descending arrows represent the effects that the limits of authenticity at a higher levels have on levels below. The looping arrows that go from bounded authenticity back to the endorsement of authenticity represent how the ‘imperfect’ manifestation of authenticity feeds the need for interventions to endorse and attempt to shape authenticity at all levels. The remaining part of this paper will delve into each theme and reveal how it emerged from the data.

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## **Endorsing Authenticity**

Authenticity was endorsed at multiple levels, as articulated below: (i) it was considered important for the organization, to promote their agenda of integrity in conduct, and inclusive behaviours; (ii) it was taught at relational level as a performative activity that can help improve relationships; (iii) and finally, at individual level, it was ascribed to individual performance goals, so that being more authentic would lead to a more empowered work force, or to more profitable client relationships.

***Instrumentality to Organizational Values.*** After the 2008 financial crisis, financial regulators worldwide emphasized the importance of ‘conduct’, intended as the behaviours and activities within firms in the financial industry. In the UK this culminated with the regulator’s change of name from Financial Service Authority (FSA) to Financial Conduct Authority (FCA). The FCA instituted a set of principles for conduct, the first of which was ‘acting with integrity’<sup>14</sup>, i.e. acting in line with ‘the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles’ (Cambridge Dictionary). The setting of this principle, as the foremost norm underpinning behaviour in the industry, put in motion a spur of initiatives aimed at reinforcing a culture of integrity. On one hand firms set to lay out new values and codes of conduct, and on the other, they started to implement these through company-wide L&D interventions. Signs of these codes of conducts emerged throughout Bank and PrivBank documents, as these organizations aimed at creating a company-wide narrative of value-driven behaviours,

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<sup>14</sup> ‘A firm must conduct its business with integrity’ FCA Handbook, Paragraph 2.1, as retrieved on 25 June 2018 (<https://www.handbook.fca.org.uk/handbook/PRIN.pdf>)



intended to reinforce trust with clients and society at large. Authenticity often came to epitomize the way leaders should behave in the industry:

Leaders ... engage and inspire their teams in a long-term vision and strategy. Uphold the ethics and values of the organisation and operate with high personal integrity and lead authentically, walking the talk (L&D Bank's Core Value Document Doc 23, p.16)

In this contextual landscape, authenticity became almost a buzz word, signalling the ability of leaders to 'walk the talk', i.e. to conduct themselves with integrity in accordance with inner and organizational principles; or even reflecting their ability to 'understand themselves and their people and foster openness in their working relationships' (Bank Career Document, 2016). These new norms reflected the individual, the relational, the processual, and the value-led behavioural components of authenticity as depicted in the literature (Kernis & Goldman, 2006: 302; Walumbwa et al., 2008: 95-96). At PrivBank the CEO emphasized repeatedly (press interviews, the handbook to advisors, interview for L&D) the importance of integrity, transparency and value-led behaviour, typical words associated with authenticity (behaviour component, Kernis & Goldman, 2006: 302). In the Handbook to advisors, designed to comply with the FCA conduct requirements, he laid out clearly wording like 'our client trust is built on reliability and sincerity' (e.g. relational authenticity, Kernis & Goldman, 2006), or 'our advice is appropriate for each client', 'our language [which] is plain and clear at all times' (e.g. 'unbiased processing', Kernis & Goldman, 2006 or 'balanced processing', Walumbwa et al., 2008). Unsurprisingly, a series of L&D interventions emerged with the key purpose to re-energise organizational growth goals within the confines of the norms of conduct of integrity. Here authenticity emerged at the top of the agenda for the implementation of a new conduct strategy, taking a prominent position in two company-wide L&D programmes. In mid 2015, PrivBank decided to use their L&D Budget (approx.

£300,000) to roll out *The Academy*, a 2.5 day mandatory programme, sponsored by its CEO to be extended to the totality of PrivBank 160 Team Leaders (Senior and Junior Leaders) and 400 Advisor (usually client-facing senior Employees, at Director level, sometimes with leadership functions). It was rolled between the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016, in groups of 50-75 participants. At the end of 2015, unintentionally overlapping The Academy, Bank launched *Resolute to Lead*, a Bank-wide mandatory programme rolled out mainly in 2016, sponsored directly by Bank's CEO and attended by 21,000 leaders. Both programmes, accidentally and independently, placed a great emphasis on authenticity.

The programme, known as '*Resolute to Lead*', is designed to instill a common approach and language to problem solving and leadership – a process which ... is helping to promote authenticity in our leaders. (Bank Career Document, 2016)

Resolute to Lead aimed at developing leaders who 'by being authentic' were able to achieve 'openness in their working relationships' and attract, motivate and retain a diverse workforce.

The Academy also became centred on honing authenticity. Of the 249 documents I collected during the design and roll out of the Academy, more than 20% (approximately 50) explicitly mentioned the word 'authenticity'. What's more important is that whilst throughout the 3 months of negotiation about the content for the Academy many ideas were dropped, and not approved by PrivBank's Head of L&D, authenticity did make it through. It became an overarching theme, in both the Team Leader, and the Advisor programme, with one entire day out of 2.5 days fully dedicated to the development of 'authenticity':

Combined with the Advisor programme these two courses [Team Leader & Advisor Programmes] have an overarching theme of authenticity and integrity. Being true to oneself and the principles and values that underpin [PrivBank] is essential to top performance. (*The Academy* Team Leader and Advisor Programme, Doc 1 p.24)

To sum up, the data showed the emergence of systemic endorsement of authenticity across the industry, across the entire organization (Bank), and across the part of the organization where the research focused more closely (PrivBank).

***Relational Presentation as Dramaturgical.*** An important question at this point pertains to how authenticity was taught. The teaching relied on the theoretical understanding that there are two different selves, an internal one, and an external one. Classroom presentations, and facilitator notes reveal that authenticity was taught in line with established methods. Participants were first encouraged to ‘reflect’ about themselves (Eriksen, 2009: 748), and in so doing invited to find their ‘inner self’, and their values; second, through ‘self-awareness’, they were encouraged to tune into them, and behave in accordance (Gardner, et al., 2009). However, in The Academy these two steps were delivered with a twist. First, the participants inner self was called in layman terms ‘personal brand essence’, confirming the idea that the self the advisors were asked to be true to was an organizational ascribed self (Ford & Harding, 2011; Pfeffer, 2015). Participants were asked to understand their ‘brand essence’ through self-reflective practices. On Day 1 of the programme, they were provided with a journal to write reflections and thoughts. On the same page the journal included a ‘Team Leader’ and an ‘Advisor Profile’, designed by the Head of L&D at PrivBank, and participants were asked to compare themselves to the profile, and to attempt to become more like this ‘ideal’ persona:

Why this matters to you: If you are to be authentic, you must be self-aware. Understanding where you sit with respect to the Profile is essential in developing to your potential. (*The Academy* Team Advisor Programme Slides, Doc3 p.36)

Second, they were asked to reveal their inner self, ‘brand essence’, to their colleagues and clients, by behaving authentically:

Successful people typically understand their brand. Your brand must live in the minds of the colleagues and clients that you work with. Therefore your brand essence and values must be

translatable into frontline behaviours. (*The Academy* Team Advisor Programme Slides, Doc3 p.63)

Authenticity as a 'performative' activity was often defined as a learnt, and staged 'behaviour' or a 'skill', whereby team leaders and advisors were invited to learn authenticity by 'rehearsing', and 'perfecting' it. Being authentic meant mastering the dramaturgical art of *acting authentic*. As a matter of fact, when the bankers started roleplaying authenticity with each other, the effectiveness of the learning process was not always convincing. For example, in one of the exercises to 'perfect' authenticity advisors were asked to role-play in groups of three, where: one advisor was 'pitching PrivBank authentically'; another was playing a role of a 'prospect client'; the third one was assessing to what extent the 'pitch' looked and felt authentic. As an observer I could see that acting authentically was problematic. Some bankers giggled, laughed, and not all of them could tune into deep acting, looking fake; those who really tried deep acting at times looked hyper professional, almost cynical, in the attempt to be authentic to reach an audience specific goal through impression management (Goffman, 1959). This empirical finding matched previous theoretical conclusions on the backlash of leaders' attempts to act authentically (Gardner et al., 2009). In another instance Team Leaders were taught to use 'authentic communication' to become good coaches of their team members and were asked to role play 'coaching with authenticity' with each other. An entire afternoon was spent on learning how to coach with authenticity. Again, coaching with authenticity demanded the use of empathy. What's more, the authentic performance was designed to be continued once back at work through experts available on Skype and telephone support, for Team Leaders, and on-line for Advisors. So that both groups were supervised and supported in their practice in the 2-4 months after the training programme.

On one hand, the above dramaturgic presentation of authenticity reiterates the construct's relational component, where authenticity promotes trust and strengthens relationships (Walumbwa, et al., 2008: 96; Kernis & Godman, 2006). Hence, Team Leaders were encouraged to be authentic to 'motivate', 'empower' and 'support' the Advisors towards better performance, and Advisors were encouraged to be authentic in 'pitching' PrivBank, and 'positioning' their advice, to 'achieve trust' with their clients, all to increase Privbank's profit. On the other hand, by resting on these external motives, dramaturgic authenticity distanced itself from the original definition of authenticity as 'acting in accord with one's values, preferences, and needs as opposed to acting merely to please others or to attain rewards or avoid punishments' (Kernis, 2003: 14).

***Ascription to Individual Performance Goals.*** For this performance to be perceived as 'authentic' it required being seen as the embodiment in action of what the bankers *felt* authentic to (Erickson, 1995). So that 'enacting the external manifestations and having the interior experiences that result in those external manifestations' could be key to authentic leadership (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010:65). The presence of authentically felt emotions associated to the personal brand was explicitly made by the Head of Department during a diagnostic interview ahead of the design of The Academy:

With it, it goes that your personal brand, who you are with your colleagues and with your clients, is very important... [But] unless they do not learn to engage emotionally with clients we cannot take them with us, and speak about their needs. (HD L&D Diagnostic Interview)

For example, Team Leaders were trained to coach by 'empathizing' with the Advisors, or Advisors were encouraged to 'connect with the client emotional side to justify the explicit charge for advice' (L&D Diagnostic, COO). The emotional connection, through empathy (from ancient Greek *em* 'in', and *phatos* 'feeling'), would signal internalisation of the feelings of the relational partner (client or

colleague). This capacity of feeling others' feelings, usually stemming from self-awareness (Hall, 2004), would have a positive effect on trust (Kernis, 2003) allowing them to achieve organizational objectives (performance or profit) more effectively. Team leaders and advisors could be acting authentic only by 'modifying their inner feelings' (Gardner et al, 2009: 471; Erickson, 1995; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010).

'Emotion' was indeed a frequent term emerging from The Academy archival evidence, with 97 out of 249 documents containing the word 'emotion-'. However, through a close screening most of these appeared to be working documents, like early pitches highlighting the 'importance of emotional intelligence', or diagnostic interviews in which executives demanded for the programme to address the lack of emotional intelligence:

Some people lack Emotional Intelligence, they lack the ability to read the situation with their clients, they cannot unearth what's interesting for the client - what makes the client tick (L&D Diagnostic HD)

Unfortunately, learning about 'emotions' or 'emotional intelligence' never made it in the classroom, it was rejected by the Head of L&D as less urgent, and was moved to a second follow up programme, which never took place as PrivBank's L&D budget was not renewed. However, similarly to previous literature, which highlights emotions as ascribed to organizational goals (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989; Morris & Feldman, 1996) emotions were at the core of selling techniques, taught especially during the advisors' programme, at The Academy. For example, before the start of The Academy, as mandatory pre-work, team leaders and advisors were given some books to read, two which had already been extensively used for years, and could be seen on some desks: *The Trusted Advisor* (Maister et al., 2000) and *The Challenger Sale* (Dixon and Adamson, 2011). They served as basis for the teaching of advisory models. Both books used emotions as tools to increase sales. The first book dedicated

an entire chapter, 'The Rules of Romance: Relationship Building', to the metaphor of romance, in order to describe the client-advisor relationship.

To build a strong relationship, you try to be understanding, thoughtful, considerate, sensitive to feelings, and supportive. All of these adjectives apply equally well to what is needed to build strong business relationship. (Maister et al.2000:37)

Similar, albeit less sentimental language, was used in the second book, where 'building credibility' with clients required 'reading their mind, by demonstrating empathy' or creating 'emotional impact' by 'humanizing the [client's] problem' (Dixon & Adamson, 2011:66). Here emotional techniques were used expressly first to create a situation in which the client would feel as if 'drowning' (p.70), and second to create a situation in which the client would feel 'relieved' (p.72).

The retrospective study of authenticity in The Academy leaves us with the question of how then authenticity manifested itself in the organization, once back at work.

### **Limiting Authenticity**

I re-entered the organization in Jun 2016, with the prime goal of running a qualitative study on intermediate leaders, represented, in my theoretical sample (figure 1), by Junior and Senior Leaders. Most Senior Leaders and some Junior Leaders had participated in The Academy in the Team Leaders programme, and some Junior Leaders, and most employees in the Advisors' programme. As explained, at this stage authenticity was not on my research agenda, however it emerged progressively more neatly along the execution of the changes that came with Project Right. In particular it became a main theme in Feb of 2017, during the Regional

Offices closures<sup>15</sup>. By this time the difficulty in preserving transparency in exchanges, at the same time as staying true to one's beliefs and to one's feelings (all components of authenticity) was emerging as a theoretically important theme, as the implications of Project Right became more tangible for my informants. At this stage issues regarding segregation, distortion or partiality of information, and rigid hierarchical structure, became central to the interactions of intermediate leaders with their bosses and their reportees. In particular I witnessed the Junior Leaders' finding progressively more difficult to behave authentically, i.e. in line with their thoughts and beliefs about change, as their role in the change programme became more active, and they gained access to an increasing amount of confidential information. As I explored and reviewed the literature on authenticity and authentic leadership I realised that our understanding of the contextual and relational specific complexities of authenticity was underdeveloped. I couldn't see authenticity as the positive force as described in the literature, but as a problematic state, amidst the confidentiality of the change programme. This represented an opportunity for me to explore authenticity as contextualised, and contingent to a particular situations. Henceforth I will present the 'barriers' to authenticity, as they emerged from the data, at organizational, relational, and individual level.

***Organizational Barriers.*** The importance of authenticity, and the tensions surrounding it were summarised by JL3, the head of a team of nine. She was a cheerful, spontaneous, but professionally spoken woman in her thirties, next to whom I had sat on a few occasions in the open office floor. During one of our last formal interviews she said:

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<sup>15</sup> By then it had been 18 months since I had stopped my work at The Academy, so I had forgotten about the content of the programme.



I think that you should always be authentic and real and give your version, and show empathy, sympathy, all these things, but you need to, we need to remember that we're working for a, uh-, a-, a company, [and this is not always possible]. (JL3, int.3)

The change of personal pronoun from 'you' (which here is the colloquial form of the impersonal 'one') to 'we' here signals a shift of thought process from individual to collective. Even if at individual level people wanted to be authentic, the mere fact of adhering to, and respecting the structure of the hierarchical system of which organizations are composed (Cyert & March, 1963, 2003) was a necessity that had to be prioritized. In this sense issues of authenticity at organizational level can be attributed to agency-structure tensions (Giddens, 1979). Junior and senior leaders, situated at structural points of junctions as head of 'markets' and of teams, worked as intermediaries of strategic information between one layer and the other (Likert, 1961, 1967; Katz and Khan, 1978). Issues of lack of authenticity emerged mainly from (i) segregation of information across hierarchical level, and (ii) fragmented and unclear processes, impairing individuals' ability to build trust with the organization, and build transparent relationships.

Segregation of information amongst hierarchical levels and amongst groups of employees emerged clearly from my interview with SL10, the head of one of the regional offices, an ex-military man, strategically minded and sharp in his talking. He expressed how information was compartmentalised between level, and sometimes there was little time to discuss, or understand the real purpose behind decisions. As he told me:

Because we're all time pressured, it's very easy to go from [CEO]'s meeting to [Head of Department]'s meeting, to my meeting. No-one-, no-one puts any input into it themselves and it's just passing on messages. (SL10)

In the spirit of this compartmentalization, the decision-making process underpinning the redundancies that came with Project Right was a fertile terrain of observation. In its first phase (Dec 2016 – Mar 2017) this process was confined to the

upper levels of management, the Head of Department, Head of Change, and the Head of Markets (Senior Leaders) by a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA). Entire hierarchical layers, all the Team Leaders and the Employees, were left second guessing about their future in the company for months. Intermediate leaders like Junior Leaders were expected by the people below to provide transparency and a balanced understanding of the change processes, but they were not able to do so, as they were not privy to key information. Soon this segregation of information started to backfire. The Head of Change, an experienced project manager, said that ‘they looked at preselection’ to choose 7 people to be made redundant by ‘in effect, scoring them against a number’. At this point there was a need to involve ‘[junior] management team ... into the fold of the project, because it was just unmanageable at [the senior management] level, ...to assess every single member of their staff in a competent and coherent way’. Involving the Junior Leaders, also meant that they were out of scope for the redundancies: how could they make a decision to make each other redundant? So Junior Leaders signed the NDA at the end of March 2017, and started to have ‘life-or-death’ conversations about their employees. Predictably, the selection of these 7 people was turned down by HR and deemed ‘too harsh’ (Head of Change), and not compliant with the Trade Unions job security agreement (archival document). After several negotiations with the Unions a compromise was reached: in order to keep the Team Leaders (Junior Managers) out of the scope of the redundancies, it was agreed that voluntary redundancy be offered to all Advisors with the grade of ‘Director’, in the hope that those who would take voluntary redundancy would coincide with the 7 pre-selected.

In this extended period of more than 6 months, the uncertainty was such that the prevalent discourse was centred on the perceptions of confused and fragmented

information and processes, as it emerged from the informants: ‘I know half the story’, ‘he is a mailbox manager [not telling what is going on just forwarding emails]’, ‘keeping people in the dark’, ‘don’t know what’s going on’, ‘you can interview me, if I am going to be around next [laugh]’ (from observations). By virtue of the prevailing tendency to personify organizations (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986), the impression of lack of authenticity extended to the overall institution: ‘this *one* organisation, as we’re trying sort of promote it, it’s very fragmented. Communication is, is, confused.’ (EY1), where fragmented is opposed to ‘thorough’, and confused to ‘clear’, adjectives pertaining to authentic communication (Kernis, 2003). It also created an atmosphere in which people felt deceived, and became suspicious that games had been played behind their back. The case of EY1, a seasoned client advisor is representative of this feeling. I had been told to speak to him by both SL2 (Head of Sport) and JL4, as he was one of the 7 initially shortlisted for compulsory redundancy. A man in his late 50s, who had spent more than 30 years at Bank, EY1 was very angry, because, although he had still been debating whether to put forward his own name for voluntary redundancy, he had already received an email, from a Bank-wide HR initiative, about a career fair for people who had taken up redundancy:

What the hell is this all about, this is the first I’ve heard about it, I haven’t agreed to attend any careers fair, this is completely out of the blue, who’s put my name forward and who’s actually accepted my attendance in my behalf? (EY1)

EY1 thought that decisions about his destiny at PrivBank had already been made behind his back. An impression not too far from the reality considering that: (i) he had already been initially shortlisted for compulsory redundancy in the initial process then dismissed by HR; (ii) the Head of Sport had planned the consultation meetings so as to be the one delivering the announcement personally to EY1, rather than letting JLY

deliver it, in order to be able to influence the process personally to make sure that EY1 would volunteer for redundancy. Hence, at organizational level, authenticity for PrivBank leaders was challenged by the hierarchical structure, by bureaucracy (NDAs, HR, Trade Unions), and the consequent non-transparent change process.

**Relational Barriers.** This tightly organized system, deeply influenced the way people related to each other, by creating strong clearly divided roles, with defined ‘scripted’ role descriptions (Katz & Khan, 1966). Relational barriers to authenticity stemmed from: (i) how information was controlled, through the presence of physical scripts (during Project Right), and (ii) through the ‘impersonation’ of unspoken role-specific psycho-cognitive scripts (role schema; Ashforth, Kreiner Fugate, 2000), as illustrated below.

Authenticity occurs when the self-as-presented has a certain level of congruence with the self-as-experienced (Erickson, 1995). Whilst this effort is difficult at best, in some situations in PrivBank this was virtually impossible, as individuals were requested literally to read from scripted text. This had a negative effect on relational transparency. E3, a young and ambitious assistant, told me in our second interview, after the volunteer redundancy announcements:

It was more like [Head of Department] read from a script sort of thing, like- Um, it felt like, yeah. Then if he actually, you know- he probably was, you know? Reading from a script. Because I can imagine everyone’s looking for him to slip up so that they could sue him or something like that. (E3, int.2)

E3 was right, the Head of Change had provided everyone with a script. The Head of Sport confirmed as well, adding further details on the ‘consultation meetings’ choreography:

So this is gonna happen tomorrow Thursday and, um, uh, people have two weeks to come back and say if they want to work through or not. So, um, there's gonna be no questions. So I'm taking *my people* to this presentation room and I will be reading my script, it feels insane. (SM2, int.3)

‘My people’ signalled the seven people who had previously been handpicked for redundancy, so he could influence them – tacitly – to volunteer for redundancy. Scripts didn’t just concern the announcements, but every communication during Project Right. All the Junior Leaders had been sent to a training on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April to learn how to choreograph the ‘consultation meetings’, i.e. the meetings during which people at risk were going to be told on a one to one basis about their eligibility for volunteer redundancy. During this training, participants had been asked to role play with each other. Scripts were a norm, for example the Senior and Junior Leaders were provided with a Q&A list compiled for them by HR, to which they were supposed to refer in case there were any questions. All in all, the roll-out of the redundancy programme was highly choreographed, by the Head of Change, and the Head of Sport, to ensure that the outcome was aligned with expectations.

Scripts were not just physical, but also cognitive and psychological, pertaining to one’s role identity. Ashforth and colleagues (Ashforth, Kreiner, Fugate, 2000: 485) help us understand the concept of role-script, or schema, as a ‘cognitive structure that specifies the typical (descriptive) or appropriate (normative) sequence of behaviours and events in a given goal-oriented situation or process’. In this sense the data provides clear examples of how the choice of one role schema over another might influence authenticity. In particular, this is the case for JLY, who was a very close friend of EY3’s. JLY and EY3 had multiplex relationships, i.e. based on different sets of roles (Ashforth et al., 2000): their roles of leader-follower, and the ones of friends. JLY’s confidence in articulating his choice of script is revealing of the fact that, in case of role blurring, he had clear tactics to choose one script versus another:

I think it goes down without saying, that when you’re a line manager, and when you’re managing relationships with clients, is that, you know, it’s a similar thing, that all of my clients I’ve got, I’m quite friendly with a lot of my clients. I do a lot of things sometimes outside of work, where the wives meet, we do this, that and the other. But, a client knows that

the client-banker relationship trumps the friend relationship. Yeah? And I think that's the same thing as if you are a line manager and friends. (JL4)

The awareness of the co-existence of these multiple roles was clear and present in the words of my informants. It was consistent for them to prioritize the work relationship, dependent on process, above any other softer kind of relationship, dependent on more spontaneous and trust-based exchanges: the banker-client, or leader-follower relationship would always 'trump' the friendship. The governing script was the harder one, the one reliant on the hard structures that so deeply influenced the development of transparent, value driven relationships, as seen above, and constituted an organizational barrier to authenticity. In conclusion, the mere existence of different scripts, and the predominance of harder scripts, affected negatively the capacity to be authentic, creating relational barriers to authenticity.

***Individual Barriers.*** Being authentic at PrivBank meant navigating a series of structural and relational barriers. For intermediate leaders caught between multiple audiences being authentic was a very complex exercise. Individual level barriers emerged in two categories. On one hand, not everyone had the psycho-cognitive abilities to navigate this complexity and at the same to stay true to themselves. On the other hand, some found it very difficult to engage in the deep acting demanded by the choreographed change, which required the capacity to tap into felt (not acted) emotions. On the day of the announcements, this was clear to the Personal Assistant of the Head of the Department, a woman in her 50s in the grade of Associate Director, who, thanks to her privileged position, had a bird-eye view of all the senior and junior leaders across the department:

When it actually comes to the point that you're actually saying you are responsible for this [redundancy announcement] um, and you will be delivering this, and you know these words are going to be coming out of your mouth, they [the Junior Leaders], they're not comfortable

with it at all. So although they think they want to be, you know, senior, and in the loop, and know everything, when they actually know everything but they have to act on it, um, and they have to take ownership for it, um it's almost like they lose, lose you know, they're losing their comfort zone there, their comfort blanket. (PA to Head of Dept, int. 2)

Some leaders have been theorized to find it easier to be authentic: those with high positive psychological capital (Luthan & Avolio, 2003), high emotional intelligence (Gardner, et al., 2009), self-awareness (Gardner et al., 2005), or a personal history marked by trustworthiness and integrity (Gardner et al., 2005, 2009). My findings connect the ability to be authentic also to the degree of knowledge that comes with occupying different positions in the management structure. For example PA brought me the example of JMY:

So I think um, so JMY who is the team leader for the banking side of Head of Sport's world. Um, I would say he is less strategically aware so [he] tends to have less emotional intelligence with employees.

In other words, not everyone had enough information to engage convincingly in the deep acting required (Gardner et al., 2009; Ladkin and Taylor, 2010) to appear authentic in this very controlled environment. Whether it was because of lack of a personal ability, or lack of information, the Head of Change considered the incapacity of deep acting to be one of the main risks in the successful delivery of the redundancy announcements through scripts:

[Some managers think:] "Oh, if I just forward it on to my team, that means I've discharged my responsibility effectively." So, um, I mean, obviously from a change programme, that just simply does not work. You know, I need to be able to get across to people. I need to be able to look at them and say "You're about to go represent the brand, and here you're gonna be seen in front of people you're gonna make redundant. [I ask myself] am I comfortable that you're the right person from my organisation to do that? If not, I will make some tough calls about that. I really will. I assess as I watch [during the consultation training]. (HC)

So, individual barriers were represented by the personal psycho-cognitive limits, and the capacity of deep acting (given imperfect strategic understanding) of individual leaders. The question that remains to be answered is how intermediate leaders managed the tension between being pushed to embrace authenticity, and being limited

in their capacity to be authentic. What did bounded authenticity look like in this complex environment?

### **Bounded Authenticity in Leadership**

As seen above at PrivBank, authenticity was both endorsed and limited, at organizational, relational, and individual level, that means that intermediate leaders could not be authentic all the times, with everyone, in all places (Pfeffer, 2015), but rather were authentic in specific circumstances. The data provides the picture of a contingent space, where authenticity could only manifest itself as *bounded* to a particular situation, at a particular time, in a particular relationship. Bounded Authenticity emerged as having six characteristics (identified below and in figure 4 by roman numbers i-vi), at organizational level (inter-level specificity, hierarchical variance,), at relational level (search for transparency, interstitial occurrence), and at individual level (ambivalent choice, emotional cost).

***Authenticity Encased in Structure.*** As seen above, on one hand authenticity was endorsed by the organization through artefacts (like published values, handbooks, presentations, executive speeches), and on the other limited by the hierarchical structures, and segregation of information (NDAs, scripts, HR confidentiality, confidential conversations with Trade Unions).

(i) *Inter-level specificity* subsisted within the contingent discrete environments delimited by organizational structures, where the extent of each individual's authenticity was limited by their belonging to a certain level. The capacity of being authentic by constructing relational transparency, and presenting balanced decision-



making processes, was information dependent. As articulated by JL4, a tall, softly-spoken, smiley man, in his late 40s in charge of Pension and Insurance advice, in our first formal interview in Mar 2017:

I try and articulate [what's changing] to the people reporting to me...because I'm at that level where I'm between [the Head of Sport] and the people that report in to me. I mean you'r privy to some of the information. So, you can only go back to them with half of the story. Which, I think sometimes is a little bit vague ... people are back in the dark and don't know what to expect. (JL4, int.1)

In this sense the organizational structures created level-specific chambers of authenticity, where it was easier to be authentic between peers, that with one's followers. And access to information diminished lower in the hierarchical structure.

(ii) *Hierarchical variance* was a characteristic of authenticity that defined how the ability to be authentic for intermediate leaders changed at different levels, diminishing the lower their position in the organizational structure. As the Head of Department described to me:

I think you've got less space in maneuvering when you're- when you're further down the organization. Haven't you? Because you're- you received the third-fourth message, and you're sometimes delivering a very tough message to the ground. (HD int.2)

For example, as far as Project Right was concerned, it was much easier to buy into change, and to be authentic in endorsing it, for those managers that played an active role in designing that change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Hence, lower level intermediate leaders (like Junior Leaders) were less able to communicate about change by constructing meanings that were aligned with their own beliefs, and therefore less able to be transparent, clear, and in general to be credible in the face of their own followers. For example, EY1 described JLY as 'just a message giver and a message taker', in trying to 'juggle different bosses like the Head of Sport, and the Head of Department', and try 'to keep them happy'. Along this same line of thinking JL4 introduced me in our first interview to the concept of 'mailbox manager', who was an intermediate leader who would only forward messages without personal

conviction. This was also highlighted by the Head of Change who was weary of those Junior Leaders who would only ‘forward it on to [their] team’ and in so doing ‘discharged [their] responsibility effectively’. And also confirmed by JL8 who said that sending a message without conviction depends on ‘how much power and autonomy that you have... as part of a, you know, a big corporation like this’. In short, bounded authenticity had the characteristic of being more diluted the lower in the hierarchy the leader. The hierarchical structure, the compartmentalization of information, and distance from the decision-making rooms, diluted the ability for leaders to be transparent in their relationships, and to endorse the strategic process in a balanced way, compromising their degree of authenticity. The perception of this difficulty in being authentic fuelled a need to reinforce the importance of authenticity, and the organizational endorsement of authenticity. Thus creating a loop, whereby authenticity was endorsed by documents, handbooks, and presentations, as demonstrated in the diagram on figure 4, and illustrated in previous paragraphs.

***Audience Specific Authenticity.*** At relational level, authenticity was ascribed to dramaturgic behaviour, on one hand encouraged through L&D interventions as a performative activity, characterised by emotion-laden, skilful deep acting; on the other, limited by the endorsement of physical scripts, and role-specific scripts. This dependency on dramaturgy, paired with the hierarchical pockets of authenticity at different levels, created an environment where relational authenticity was highly audience specific. And so, bounded authenticity emerged as having two characteristics: a constant search for transparency, and an interstitial presence.

(iii) *Open Enquiry* is the name for the creation of authenticity driven by granting greater access to upper information. Because of the hierarchical segregation

of information Junior Leaders and employees looked for clarity up the hierarchical chain. Authenticity manifested itself when intermediate leaders met these requests with openness, rather than with defensiveness, perhaps by admitting divergence of opinion, or ignorance, or even confidentiality. The search for upper information was a common feature at PrivBank, especially during Project Right. As E2 told me, he wanted to have occasional exposure to SM2 because ‘it is hard enough working for one person without having to think about what the person above him wants all the time’, similarly E3 and E5 were keen to know about SL3 and SL5 thoughts and beliefs. It was then up to JL2, JL3, and JL5 to ensure this exploration was granted. It was important for lower level leaders to be able to send their own people to their superiors, and in doing so to ‘break’ the inter-level segregation of information. Guiding people to look for information upward was indeed a sign of authenticity, because it meant first, a non-defensive admission of lack of information and, second, an empathic understanding of the other’s need to know. Non-defensiveness and empathy, are typical behaviours associated with authenticity (Kernis, 2003). The most interesting vignette appeared from E4, when I asked about a positive example of JL4 behaviour, at a time in which JL4 didn’t believe in a decision from the top:

JL4 seems to encourage me to go to- to Head of Sport. So, example being my end of year review last year. Grading system, is 1-5, three being middle, four being above average and, um, because I was promoted I was given a three, which has happened three years in a row. And, um, so I had that discussion with JL4 and he, he was like: ‘I really disagree with it, but I’ve got to give you a three’ and, um, then he was like: ‘You should definitely talk to Head of Sport about this’. So then I went to speak to Head of Sport about it and he was like: ‘I completely agree with why you’re dissatisfied, you should deserve a four but I had to give you a three’ and he was really open and honest about it and then also he was just like: ‘I don’t, I don’t, I didn’t give you a three I gave you a four, um, it was from, a directive from CEO that said anyone who’s promoted had to be given a three’, and then he even said: ‘You know, you should mention it to HD, just, you know, to show that you are, you know, not hard done by about that’ (E4)

The process of open enquiry embodied authentic leadership, and encouraged authenticity in the followers too, creating an overall a greater sense of relational transparency (Kernis & Goodman, 2006; Walumbwa et al., 2008). It also meant the

empowerment of more junior resources by providing them with access to higher hierarchical levels, breaking the inter-level specificity of authenticity.

(iv) *Interstitial Occurrence* of authenticity happened when, in this rather controlled environment, people behaved authentically by deviating from the main processes and scripts. Going beyond the deep acting and the scripts meant breaking organizational behavioural models, or, more starkly, organizational rules. Therefore, this form of unscripted authenticity often happened in surreptitious, quasi clandestine ways. In a sense it occurred in interstitial spaces (Furnari, 2014), ‘gaps’ in the structure, where at a given time, in a given place, the rules of the organization were suspended, or softened. Interstitial spaces in this sense could be internal to the organization (e.g. in front of the coffee machine, behind closed doors in a meeting room, a brief encounter in the corridor), or external (e.g. out for drinks in the evening, at lunch break in a café). Interstitial authenticity is epitomized by this sentence, by SL1, a high ranking, experienced manager in charge of Marketing, who said: ‘I always have hearty conversations with people *behind closed doors*’. Interstitial authenticity was foremost relation-specific, and never public. In these instances, people could be discreetly authentic, and unguarded, letting their external expressions match their internal thoughts or emotional process, without sticking to the scripts. The data brings an array of instances. For example, the Head of Sport told me about the instance in which he took one of his employees out for a coffee, to reassure her that she was appreciated, and it would have been great if she didn’t volunteer for redundancy, contravening the agreement with the Trade Unions:

She could have thought: ‘oh, actually if the jobs are gonna be reduced, then maybe I should be on my way’. Um, but, but she’s valued, you know, and I do think she’s, very good, yeah... But I’m, I’m not sure, um, how much I should disclose [in this interview], you know. It was just a gentle conversation. Holiday, how are you getting on, you know, this call [about redundancies] is coming don’t have to-, need to worry about it. (Head of Sport, int. 2)

This was rare to capture during the interviews, as my informants would not all admit to contravening organizational rules or role-scripts. However, it also emerged clearly from my observations. For example, at the end of a Team Leader meeting I attended, three people stayed behind: Head of Sport, JLY, and JLYa. As soon as I switched off my recorder they started talking to each other about EY3, discussing the best way to approach him to explain that it was in his best interest to take up voluntary redundancy. In doing so they broke the NDAs rules, and the agreement with the Trade Unions, stating that *voluntary* redundancies must remain uninfluenced choices. After the redundancy process was over, I triangulated this with JLY, who confirmed that indeed he had had a quiet conversation with EY3. Again, other instances popped up with Head of Sport taking E2 out for lunch to explain to him that he wouldn't promote him to the grade of Director in December 2016, because he expected the reduction of jobs coming in 2017 to occur at Director level. This tacit and hidden breach of scripts, paired up with the continued search for greater transparency from the upper executives, prompted the requests for the L&D programme to teach senior and junior leaders to become better at acting authentically. This loop is explained by the arrow that links the 'Audience Specific Authenticity' box, to the "Presentation as Dramaturgy' box.

***Authenticity as a Finite State.*** On one hand at individual level being authentic was promoted as important to achieve organizational and individual performance objectives, on the other, it was limited by individuals' personal capacity for being authentic whilst dealing with the complexity of the highly choreographed and scripted exchanges. In these settings, bounded authenticity at individual level presented itself with two characteristics: cognitive ambivalence, and emotional cost.

(v) *Ambivalent choices* arose because of the way in which people approached the discrepancy between how they experienced the change, through thoughts and feelings, and how they expressed themselves about change through scripts. Ambivalence subsisted where the two alternative perspectives (internal experience, and external display) were both strongly felt (Piderit, 2000; Pratt, 2000). As Piderit, in her seminal paper on ambivalence and change, tells us ‘the simplest case of ambivalence to imagine is the case in which an individual's cognitive response to a proposed change is in conflict with his or her emotional response to the proposal’ (Piderit, 2000: 787). Hence in order to be authentic, even by deep acting, leaders needed to grapple with this ambivalence. A good example emerged when JL4 described to me a meeting amongst junior leaders, in which they had to rank the entire population in the Sport Team, in order to decide who to make redundant. In this situation JL4 and his colleagues were grappling with ambivalence, on one side they wanted to complete the selection in the most professional and efficient way, on the other they felt sorry for those that might potentially lose their jobs. As he told me during our second formal interview, in May 2017:

We’d all say, well, this person got a three [performance grade] here, this person got a three there. You know, it’s so difficult with people’s lives that you’re rating and playing around with, um, and then at the same time there’s a bit of banter as well. Because it’s almost like black humour, you know, a situation you never want to find yourself in, really (JL4, int.2)

Humour is recognized to be a device used in difficult situations where contradictory emotions coexist, and cannot be expressed (Jarzabkowski & Le, 2017). Individuals involved in the redundancy process used words that reflected ambivalence like: on one hand ‘it wasn’t awkward’, but on the other it ‘was awkward’ referring to the consultation meeting (EY2); or on one hand ‘having feelings towards this people’, but on the other ‘make sure things happen at work’ (JL2). In short, to be authentic, intermediate leaders had to balance their cognitive and emotional processes in order

to project empathy and emotional transparency, notwithstanding the ambivalence they experienced.

(vi) *Emotional Costs* were incurred because of the above described constant balancing effort. Expressing ambivalent emotions was not seen as appropriate, because it was recognised that it could have a detrimental effect on their team's motivation, as well expressed by JL2:

I guess the emotional side, continue changes are tiring, I feel continuously responsible not to bring on the subject too much. And it is an energy zapper, isn't it, ... At times it can really be quite lonely. (JL2)

The inability to have clarity on what to say and what not to say, stifled one's voice (Harter et al., 1997), generating states of emotional dissonance and stress (Roberts, et al., 2009). Moreover, this effort of keeping up the appearance, and display positive emotions complied with what was taught at The Academy, where emotions were seen as ascribed to individual (revenue) and organizational (change implementation) goals, reflecting the logic of emotional labour (Horschild, 1983; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989; Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Morris & Feldman, 1996). Therefore, although in the L&D programme individuals were encouraged to display emotions to increase authenticity, the same use of organizationally-useful emotions ended up limiting the expression of authentic ones. The negative relation between emotional labour and authenticity emerges from previous theoretical findings (Gardner, et al., 2009), . This paper illustrates this empirically and connects it to ambivalence. In the midst of the endless ambivalent decision-making process during Project Right, the logic of emotional labour would push people to 'dim down', 'switch off', or 'tune down' felt emotions. In order to avoid emotional costs, better to mute feelings altogether. This is illustrated by JMY, in his account of the meeting with EY3, a friend, as well as a colleague, with whom he had shared numerous holidays with the respective families:

I need to switch off- it's almost- your emotions. You've got to think, you know, you've got to have that, right, why am I doing it? Yep, okay. What am I, what's the situation on, um, if I get emotionally charged about this ... at the end of the day, is the, the bank is going through the restructure. This person ... I have then taken away EY3 as a human being, yep. He's a resource, okay, and I've got to go, right, this resource is no longer required, yeah? (JLY)

Therefore, especially at junior leader level, down the hierarchy, intermediate leaders felt they had to thread carefully the line between disclosing too much, or too little of how they felt. They had to make continuous audience-specific choices. It was this constant authenticity 'work', both cognitive (ambivalent choices) and emotional (emotional cost), that really made the state of authenticity finite.

This paper contributes to theory by defining the above-described six components of bounded authenticity, and by identifying an empirically grounded holistic model of how organizational, relational, and individual-level elements, work concertedly in favour or against the development of authenticity. Further insights on these contributions are provided below.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The main purpose of this study was better to understand how authenticity manifests itself in leadership, during strategic change, in complex organizational settings. From this empirical exploration authenticity in leadership emerges as an elusive state. Whilst its motivational appeal is greater in highly structured work places, where information is hierarchically compartmentalized (Gardner et al., 2009), and during strategic change where uncertainty is pervasive (Norman et al., 2010), and beliefs and feelings ambivalent (Pideritt, 2000), it is precisely at these times that barriers to authenticity are high. Organizational structure creates compartmentalization of information and highly scripted relational exchanges, and



strategic change creates ambiguity in the sense of self (Corley Gioia, 2004), the same self on which authenticity is based (Kernis, 2003). Further, it is in these contexts that organizations rally to endorse authenticity as a force for good, promoting it in their corporate values, and professing it as a magical leadership ingredient: requesting leaders to learn, rehearse, and act ‘authentic performances’, thus creating forms of authenticity aligned with organizational objectives, rather than to one’s beliefs, thoughts and values.

This paper redefines authenticity as bounded especially for intermediate leaders, caught between hierarchically tight chambers, facing two main interlocutors: their bosses and their reportees. On one hand, as followers, with their bosses they form and shape strategic change, which influences their beliefs, thoughts and emotions (Huy, 2002; Balogun & Johnson, 2004). On the other hand, with their team members, as leaders, they need to disguise their thoughts, beliefs, and often emotions (Burgelman, 1983; Huy, 2002), until the strategic change has not been formalised and choreographed, and turned into scripted, approved communication (Balogun, Bartunek & Do, 2015). This paper uses the term of *bounded authenticity in leadership*, defining authenticity not just as a pure, pervasive state, albeit present in different degrees (Erickson, 1995) along an imaginary spectrum, but as a phenomenon that is physically and temporal specific. The attribute of boundedness in mathematics describes an entity contained within a range of values. In organizational studies the term ‘bounded’ has been used to describe bounded rationality (Simon, 1976), as a critique of pure rationality, and bounded emotionality (Mumby & Putnam, 1992), referring to the control of expressed emotions at work. In sociology, the term bounded authenticity, first used by sociologist Elisabeth Bernstein (2007) in a study of sex workers, denoted that occasional sexual exchanges were not as inauthentic as

previously thought, but they were lived as authentic - albeit physically, emotionally and temporarily bounded - instances (Bernstein, 2007)<sup>16</sup>.

Similarly, this paper, by exploring authenticity in leadership as embedded in context- and time-specific contingencies, contributes to the theory in at least three ways. First, it moves beyond thinking of authenticity as an individual-level phenomenon, but it shows it as a multilevel phenomenon, highlighting how dynamics at organizational, relational and individual level influence each other to bound authenticity. Second, and similarly, this research bypasses idealized normative visions of authenticity and describes empirically emergent, pragmatic practices and tactics. Thirdly, by investigating authenticity from the perspective of intermediate leaders, this paper highlights that being authentic manifests itself in more irregular patterns than previously thought.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

*A Multilevel Dynamic Model of Bounded Authenticity.* Previous theoretical literature has highlighted the importance of context in the mechanisms leading to authenticity (e.g. competitive vs collaborative culture or rigid vs flexible structure, Gardner et al., 2009; Gardner & al., 2011) with only one empirical study echoing the impact of processes (e.g. reward system, Endrissat et al., 2007). This paper adds to the concept of authenticity by identifying a dynamic model (figure 4) describing the

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<sup>16</sup> Bernstein's conception of bounded authenticity is different, as it is based on postmodern logics of liquid consumption (Bauman, 1998), where the temporality of the experience shouldn't detract from the authenticity experienced by the actors, in that moment. She also made connections to previous work by MacCannell (1973) who observed 'staged authenticity' in the tourist industry, where 'in a world in which capitalism is perceived to have rendered more and more quarters of social life "artificial" ... the pursuit of "the authentic" in consumption ... provides consumers with a sense of distinction ... accessible to only a few' (Bernstein, 2007: 103).

mechanisms through which authenticity is endorsed, as well as limited, and therefore bounded in its nature.

*Authenticity is encased by structure.* At organizational level, the arrows converging to the bounded authenticity boxes indicate that, on one side, authenticity is *instrumental to organizational values*, endorsed by the organization as a core principle of conduct for leaders, and included in L&D interventions addressed to all leaders in the organization. Leaders know there is an expectation for them to be authentic from the very top of the organization, and even from the regulator. On the other hand, it is limited by *organizational barriers*, like hierarchical structures, the segregation of information in hierarchical chamber, and the fragmentation of information across departments. These elements make it difficult for leaders to achieve relational transparency. Therefore at an organizational level the characteristics of bounded authenticity are (i) *inter-level specificity*, by which it is more difficult for intermediate leaders to be authentic with their followers than with their peers, this implies that authentic leadership's motivational potential towards followers is more difficult to be fulfilled than previously stated in the literature; and (ii) *hierarchical variance*, so that it is easier for more senior leaders to be authentic, as they feel their thoughts, beliefs and feelings are more aligned with the strategic objectives of the organization, because they have played a greater role than more junior leaders in defining them (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Balogun et al., 2015). So, more junior leaders find it more difficult to be authentic, as they 'have less space of manoeuvring' having received the 'third-fourth message'. Hence the existence of hierarchical information chambers, and the different access to information have huge implications on the capacity of leaders to be authentic, and to motivate their followers through authenticity. Therefore, the organization feels compelled to reinforce

authenticity as a required state of conduct by emphasizing authenticity throughout corporate communication (e.g. value pages, career pages, diversity & inclusion pages, etc.), and renovating its inclusion in training programmes. In figure 4 this reinforcing loop is represented by the arrow connecting the bounded authenticity boxes with the endorsement boxes, on the left of the model.

*Authenticity is specific to an audience.* Again, whilst we know about the importance that authenticity plays in the formation of relationships (especially between leader and followers, Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Avolio & Gardner, 2005), this study provides a detailed picture of the relational elements that hinder one's capacity for acting authentically with others. On one hand, in order to fulfil organizational requirements, authenticity is *presented as a dramaturgic performance* of one's organizationally-designed personal brand during the L&D programme; authenticity is learnt by rehearsing behaviours, and by constructing a persona aligned with the goals of the organization. On the other hand, the same organizational structures contribute to the formation of *relational barriers to authenticity*, this connection is indicated by the arrows descending from the organizational barriers. Relational barriers are defined by the presence of scripts, both physical (e.g. documents to be read during the communication of redundancies), and behavioural role-specific ones (e.g. role expectations of intermediate leaders). Both relational elements, of endorsement and limitation, distance the organizationally promoted concept of authenticity from the original definition of authenticity as 'acting in accord with one's values, preferences, and needs' (Kernis, 2003: 14). This confirms previous observations that authenticity in organizations is characterised by deep acting (Ladkyn & Taylor, 2011; Garner et al., 2009) of selves instrumental to the organization (Ford & Harding, 2011; Nyberg & Svenningson, 2014; Pfeffer, 2015).

However this study adds by illustrating tactics of bounded authenticity, used by leaders to create relational transparency. (iii) First, through the practice of *open enquiry*, intermediate leaders, at their own discretion, allow followers to enquire about and access information coming from above, unlocking hierarchical chambers. In doing so they break audience specificity and let individuals in lower levels of the organization access thoughts, beliefs and feelings of leaders at higher levels. (iv) Further, bounded authenticity at relational level takes the form of *interstitial occurrences*, in fissures between organizational structures and processes (Furnari, 2014), often in breach of scripts or even organizational rules. In this case intermediate leaders sometimes, engineer opportunities for authenticity in ‘protected’ back-stage places, where they can drop their role-specific mask, and speak openly to some team members (e.g. by taking them out for a coffee, for lunch, or even behind the closed doors of a meeting room). Again, top leaders detect this difficulty in being relationally authentic and they respond by reinforcing the importance of ‘acting’ authentic, or demonstrating ‘authentic emotions’ through training programmes, as suggested by the looping arrow that goes back to the column of endorsement of authenticity. Authenticity therefore is bounded not only by the presence of scripts that govern organizational relationships between leaders and followers, but also by the way in which it is presented as a performative, dramaturgic, activity.

*Authenticity as a finite state.* At individual level authenticity is encouraged as an ‘acting’ tool *ascribed to individual performance goals*, so that leaders are taught to act authentically (e.g. L&D programme, and role-play, sales technique books) with clients and with their followers in order to sell more products, or to help their followers sell more products. This is reminiscent of emotional labour, where emotions become subservient to the achievement of performance goals (Horschild, 1983; Van

Maanen & Kunda, 1989; Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Morris & Feldman, 1996). At the same time *individual level barriers* create variance in the capacity to be authentic in the midst of complexity, with some leaders more self-aware, or emotionally intelligent than others, as discussed by previous literature (Gradner et al, 2005; 2009). *Authenticity* presents itself *as a finite state*. In this sense the individual boundaries of authenticity become salient especially in two cases. First, when leaders are faced with (v) *ambivalent choices*, a by-product of the uncertainty generated by strategic change (Pideritt, 2000), so they feel strongly about two contradictory perspectives (e.g. being professional in compiling a list for redundancy, but also feeling sorry for their followers at the top of the redundancy list; or complying with the non-disclosure agreement, but also wanting to reveal key information to retain key followers), to the point of developing in some cases an ambivalent sense of self (Pratt, 2000). In these cases, being authentic means adopting contradictory behaviours, something which is considered as the antithesis of authenticity, and more aligned with hypocrisy, or lack of integrity. The difficulty in handling incongruous feelings was revealed by that same manager using black humour, recognised as a coping mechanism to deal with contradictory emotions (Jarzabowski & Le, 2017). Second, when, in being authentic, leaders incur (vi) *emotional costs*. The demands to use emotions to achieve better job performance force intermediate leaders to express emotions that sometimes are in contradiction with their truly felt ones. This continuous choice between organizationally-ascribed, and genuine emotions is extenuating, so that being authentic causes emotional burnouts ('it's an energy zapper' JL2), typical by products of emotional labour (Horschild, 1983; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989; Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Morris & Feldman, 1996). So, rather than being authentic, intermediate leaders 'switch off' or 'tune down emotions'. By doing so they alert the

top managers, who, in an attempt to inject a greater ‘use of emotions’ in the work place, reinforce the teaching of ‘authentic emotions’ through L&D interventions, and the adoptions of books that promote the use of emotions to deepen client relationship. This is signalled in the model in figure 4 by the looping arrow going from the centre (bounded authenticity column), to the left (endorsement of authenticity column). In this sense authenticity is limited by the cognitive and affective limits of each person, in dealing with the complex contextual and relational dynamics. By ascribing the limits of authenticity to individual cognitive (Simon, 1976) and emotional (Mumby & Putnam, 1992) capacity this paper stays in line with existing conceptions of boundedness.

***Pragmatic Practices.*** Past literature has criticised the mainstream view of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2005, Walumbwa et al., 2008) as simplistic, describing how leaders are required more often to be authentic to selves aligned with organizational goals (Pfeffer, 2015; Ford & Harding, 2011) or to tone down authenticity altogether (Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014). This paper contributes to both views demonstrating how leaders do both. They keep up a façade, where through deep acting they abide by organizational requirements for authenticity, but they also engineer occasions in which they can be authentic to their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings, with their followers. These latter practices often breach hierarchical protocols, like when, through open enquiry, intermediate leaders provide access to followers to their true intentions, to the fact that they are not in agreement with the top of the organization, and to the true thought process of their superiors, occasionally allowing followers to go and speak directly with top management. They also breach organizational rules (e.g. NDAs agreements) in the best interest of people (e.g. EY3,

who was secretly encouraged to volunteer for redundancy, rather than being fired for poor performance), and the company, (e.g. it is better to lose a poor performer than having a good performer volunteering for redundancy). They also have authentic conversation behind closed doors, in breach of the choreographed change communication. They take people out of the physical company premises to reveal why they are delaying promotions, to save someone for redundancies (E2), or to reassure people that they are not in the dreaded redundancy list. In these cases authenticity is achieved by those leaders who are able to skilfully create opportunities (e.g. Christmas lunch, coffee meeting) where they can be authentic to their thoughts and feelings towards their followers. In a way this paper identifies that there can be authenticity ‘work’, where intermediate leaders spend time and energy in creating authenticity, in an environment that can be averse to it. In this sense intermediate leaders can operate in clandestine ways, where in order to be authentic they play against the organizational rules, for the benefit of relational transparency, and interpersonal trust. By showing that authenticity can be a maverick activity, pushing leaders to breach corporate protocols in the pursuit of relational goals, this paper adds to previous literature on authenticity, which generally treats it as a normative activity, decontextualizing it (Kernis and Goldman, 2006; Walumbwa, et al., 2008). It also adds to critical views of authenticity that treat authenticity in leadership as ascribed to organizational goals (Pfeffer, 2015; Ford & Harding, 2011; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014).

***Time and Place Bound.*** In this sense this study contributes to existing literature by showing that bounded authenticity is constrained to a particular time in a particular space, and it’s not a continuous state. It is often a back-stage activity, that



might go undetected by a naïve observer. Because of its elusive nature it is difficult to capture (if not through ethnographic methods), as people do not admit lightly to acts of authenticity that go against corporate rules. For example, SL2, the Head of Sport team, admitted to some of these instances only after several months of my presence at PrivBank, after trust had developed. This time a place boundedness means that some intermediate leaders go from being overtly non-authentic in public, by abiding to scripts that contrast their beliefs and feelings, to being very authentic secretly in private, by having behind-closed-doors conversation with a colleague or a report, by speaking quietly at the coffee machine, or even engineering opportunity for authenticity by inviting people out for lunch. But it also varies at hierarchical level, both horizontally and vertically. Given the inter-level specificity of authenticity, it is more likely that leaders are authentic to peers, than to their followers. Similarly, given the hierarchical variance of authenticity, it is more likely for intermediate leader higher in the hierarchy to be perceived as more authentic; these leaders have greater opportunities to contribute to the corporate strategy, and therefore often their thoughts, beliefs and feelings are more aligned with it. By contrast lower level intermediate leaders receive strategic decisions as the fourth, or fifth iterations from the top, and therefore have less leeway in explaining it as coming from their thought process, and as aligned with their personal beliefs. For these reasons lower level leaders are often seen as ‘box tickers’ or ‘mail box managers’, perpetuating the curse of the ‘middle manager’ as being poor leaders. Last but not least, because authenticity means dropping the mask, leaders demonstrate authenticity to the followers in their in-group (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), those who they trust. In this way perceptions of authenticity, in the ‘eye of the beholder’, can vary from person to person, and from audience to audience.

In short, this research moves from heroic, normative, visions of authenticity as always good for leaders, followers, and organizations, to a much more nuanced concept of bounded authenticity in leadership, which can be good for individuals, but not for the organization, or vice versa. In extreme cases intermediate leaders can be inauthentic to the organization, to stay true to their own beliefs (Kernis, 2003), for the benefit of relational transparency, and of trust with their followers.

### **Practical Contributions**

PrivBank, in a financial industry that prioritizes values of conduct based on integrity, is not alone in its desire for greater authenticity. George and colleagues (2007: 138) noted that authenticity and authentic leadership is one of the most critical forms of leadership, which, if applied widely in organizations, would ‘make the world a better place’. In the financial industry authenticity is seen as important because after the financial crisis there is a need for greater transparency. The industry is changing and wants to re-build its reputation in society by moving from motivational practices relying on extrinsic motivation, which centre on financial compensation, to motivational practices relying on intrinsic motivation, which centre on trust, autonomy and individuals’ self-determination.

In this sense, the bounded authenticity practices described here further our practical knowledge by giving us a model through which to interpret existing organizational practices, as well as suggesting new avenues for managerial action. First this research may help us better understand why some organizations might find it easier than others to encourage authenticity. The model of bounded authenticity I propose may explain how the rigid structure and regulations typical of the financial

industry (Knorr & al., 2006), might make it one of the least favourable environments for authenticity. For example, the more hierarchical the structure, the stronger the inter-level segregation of information, the more difficult for managers to be authentic to their followers. Similarly, the greater the vertical variance in the capacity to be authentic, the more difficult it is for middle managers and lower level managers to be authentic to their employees. Further, the financial industry is centred on confidentiality, and is highly regulated, reinforcing a culture of scripted exchanges between bankers and customers, but also between HR departments and employees. This rigidity in communication hinders the ability of workers, and managers alike to develop relational transparency which is so important to authenticity. In order to manage authenticity in this type of organizations executives might need to make structural decisions to make the organization flatter, or to create forums for open enquiry to flourish and hierarchically compartmentalised information to be shared.

In short, the financial industry seeks authenticity, but is poorly positioned for authenticity to develop easily. The risk is that authenticity will progressively lose its appeal and become a hollow concept in those organizations that do not understand, publicly acknowledge, and address the barriers that constrain or even stifle it. Or, even worse, it might be seen as an opportunistic motivational device, a 'nice to have', part of a corporate jargon that makes the organization look good on paper, but without positive consequences for the workforce. The concept of bounded authenticity looks promising in this way by promoting a non-defensive language which organizations can use to recognise and teach their work force that authenticity is not easy to achieve; it can help leaders acknowledge the difficulty of their roles, with positive effect on relational transparency and trust.

## TABLES AND FIGURES

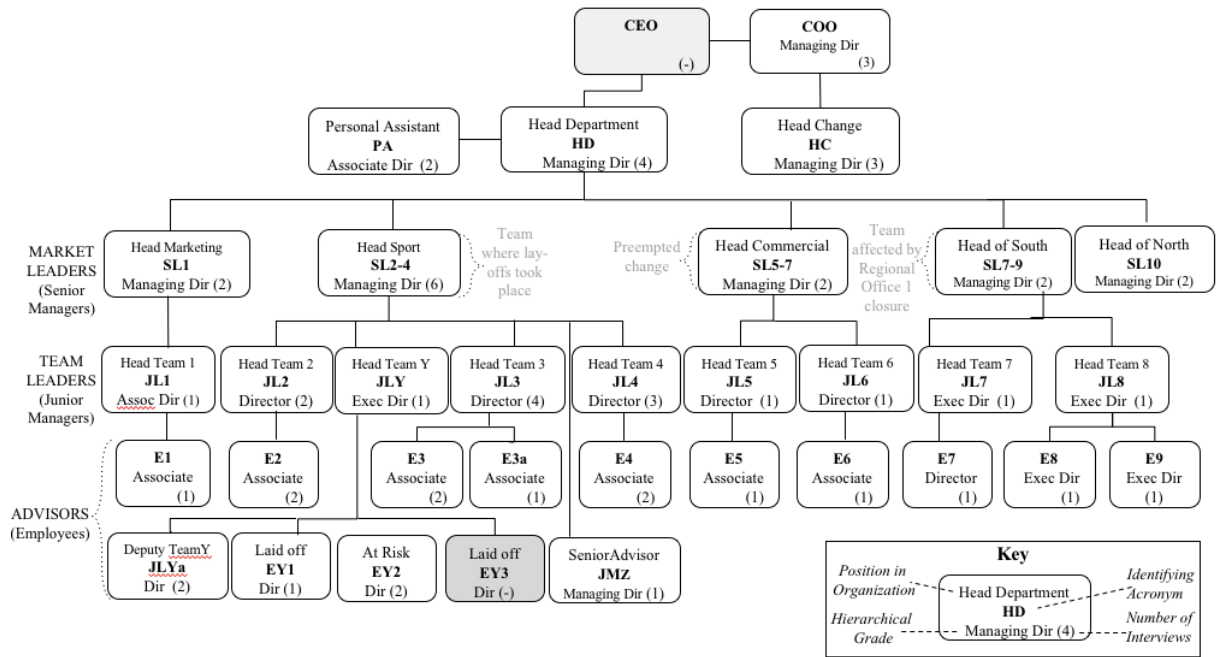
**TABLE 1**  
**Coding in Support of the Data Structure**

Second Level Concepts	First level Concepts
<b>Endorsing Authenticity</b>	
<i>Instrumentality to Organizational Values</i>	<p>And it's by being authentic – understanding themselves and their people, and fostering openness in their working relationships – that leaders can make a real difference. A lot of people are still uncomfortable talking about inclusion but authentic leaders can change that. If you work for someone who's authentic then you know that they get it and you'll follow them. (Bank Career Document, Diversity and Inclusion)</p> <p>For participants it is important to have self-knowledge, and to be able to self-assess that that might not be in the right role (SL5, L&amp;D Diagnostic Interview)</p> <p>Team Leaders sometimes are too defensive ... Team Leaders need to realise if they are in a right role, [be] more self-aware, do you have the skills to be a player manager, to build a good relationship with your clients and your team? (HD, L&amp;D Diagnostic Interview)</p> <p>A great leader has the following attributes: direction - clear about your strategy; self-awareness-you need to have clarity on what areas you would like to be better at. Can empower people to solve problems, with trust. (HC, L&amp;D Diagnostic Interview)</p> <p>Day 2 Leading Your Team – Adaptive Leadership. Topics: 1. Developing Leadership Agility, Emotional, Mental, Style; 2. Developing Core Leadership Behaviour, Be Authentic, Empower, Envision. (<i>The Academy</i> Team Leader Programme Slide, Doc 5, p.13)</p> <p>What I'm saying is that the heart and the soul and the empathy that was there has been ripped out of this organisation with the [Bank] influence... And it's not just anything- it's not just, ripped off, I don't use words lightly, um, it really has been because everything, everything is now just down to the bottom line and it doesn't matter what the consequences are. (EY1)</p>
<i>Relational Presentation as Dramaturgy</i>	<p>Gaining new clients is imperative to PrivBank future success, [to gain new clients] your personal brand is what others associate you with. Being able to project with authenticity requires knowledge of your personal brand. Communicating authentically requires consistency. (<i>The Academy</i>, Advisory Programme Slide, Doc 12, p.48)</p> <p>Pitching Product Exercise. Using the case study, prepare to pitch PrivBank to the prospect clients. Work in threes and assess each other's performance against the following measures ... Style: authentic and appealing to the 'croc' brain [client's survival instinct]. Take 10 minutes to plan, 3 minutes per pitch, 5 minutes to provide feedback. (Exercise at <i>The Academy</i> Advisor Programme Slide, Doc 12, p.67)</p> <p>[Day 1] Evening Activity – Authentic Communication, [at] 18:45 before dinner in the Auditorium. Authentic Communication: What it is, and why it matters to leaders. [at] 21:00 after dinner in the Auditorium. Debate Authentically “To be a great coach you have to have been a great player” (<i>The Academy</i> Team Leader Programme Slide, Doc 8, p.4)</p> <p>[Day 3] What: Practical tasks and exercises to embed key skills over period of 2 – 4 months. Practical on-line sessions to develop authentic communication. Team leader uses feedback from diagnostics to coach advisor on why and how to change (<i>The Academy</i> Team Leader Programme, Doc 8, p. 54)</p>
<i>Ascription to Individual Performance Goals</i>	<p>Many of the Advisors used to be private bankers who made their revenue through credit cards and ordinary lending, but now they need to have the interpersonal skills to connect with the client emotional side and connect to the client needs to be able to justify an explicit charge for advice. They now more than ever need to become the Trusted Advisors. (COO, L&amp;D Diagnostic)</p> <p>Team Leader Programme: UK Transformation journey. Theme: Emotional Intelligence. From 'Lack of emotional energy and skills for coaching' to 'confident coaching ability to empower people in the quest for collective excellence'. (<i>The Academy</i>, Design Document 'UK Diagnostics Key Team and Implications', Doc 74, p.2)</p> <p>When we conduct business and push our boundaries we all have to deal with emotions that arise from our fears. As an example, when we are advising we could fall under the “fear of losing the business” ... This session will provide participants with role plays for ...increasing authenticity and understanding in the relationship with their clients through sharing real-life experiences (<i>The Academy</i>, Presentation for Diagnostic Interviews Doc.16, p.15)</p> <p>Implication for design focus. Team Leader Programme: Emotional Intelligence to coach, empower, influence your team. Advisors Programme: Emotional Intelligence to Guide clients, build self-awareness and Interpersonal impact. (<i>The Academy</i>, Design Document 'UK Diagnostics Key Team and Implications', Doc 74, p.4)</p>
<b>Limiting Authenticity</b>	
<i>Organizational Barriers</i>	<p>[Being a leader] it's never gonna be an easy job, particularly where you're trying to juggle, you know, different bosses. Uh. You know [JMY] has to keep [SL2] happy, he has to keep [Head of Department] happy. [Head of Department] has to keep [CEO] happy, in a way. (EY1)</p> <p>So I was in some of the meetings when he wasn't in where the NDAs had been signed, to talk about these things. I knew when they were doing stuff before, um, when we had to choose the seven, before it went to the- Before it went to the second iteration. The NDA's were signed by the Team Leaders, I was included because I was a deputy. But no one else knew. (JLY)</p>

	<p>Unfortunately, we cannot control things that happen at the top that we do have to communicate to our team and sometimes you do need to just make sure that some of the answer that you give are corporate enough to, um, to justify what's actually happening in the business. (JM3, int.1)</p> <p>I am not sure how they have made those decisions [about cost cutting, and redundancies], I hear and talk to other people and other areas of the Bank, and I hear different things. (EY3)</p> <p>Uh, it was controversial, very controversial... An email was sent out to the support staff. They all got it at different times. Some of them started talking about it before others knew what was going on. We had, we, you know, took all the support staff into a room. They kind of spoke about it. Some of them were more passionate about it than others. ... Unfortunately, that does is just create ambiguity. (JM3, int.2)</p>
<p><i>Relational Barriers</i></p>	<p>There are various things I am not supposed to say in front of the team. And I do say too much. But I need to make them more comfortable. The change is going to be advertised or articulated in a couple of month time... JL2 has got an idea, I have tried to pave the way for him to know what is going to look like. (SL2, int.2)</p> <p>JLZ and JL4 would be aware that there is some big changes... And not aware of the full details. I think because, unlike myself, they are probably concerned about the future, about how it's going to look like, about how it's going to affect them... So they are probably concerned (SL2, int.3)</p> <p>I read the script [with the message for volunteer redundancies]. I knew what I had to say. I always write bullet points down to remind me of the key topics, I talk around it. And sometimes you then might lose a bit of impact and you get a word wrong or something, but generally you're then selling it, because it's you talking. (SL10)</p> <p>The issue with the [personal] elaborations is that you can either dilute the message, yeah? Or you can give mixed messages, so it's the Chinese whispers if you elaborate too much. But it's more of a case of, it's, you need to stay on track and stay on message and own as a leader, you need to own that decision, whether it's your decision or whether that's your CEO, XO's, whoever's decision. The moment that you start, you know, deciding to go off piece, is where you're going to have an issue. (JMY)</p> <p>I've always had professional and home. And compartmentalising those kinds of things. It's the same I have with clients. So, [the redundancy week] it wasn't ...the best couple of weeks of my life, you know. But also, ...you-you've got to, it's like anything, you-you, you've, you know, I say flip the switch. It's not the easiest, it's not a switch that you can just, it's not an up and down switch. It's something that, it's almost like a, a dimmer switch. (JLY)</p> <p>So I always know that there is a line, and you make sure that you are working first and foremost and end the friendship comes second. (E2, int.1)</p> <p>Is the best way of doing it. So, you-you-you're turning down the emotions, right? And as you turn down the emotions, you're bringing up more of the rationale of the line manager kind of thing that you've gotta do. And then sometimes you can't turn it all the way, but you can get it to where you can be professional. (JMY)</p>
<p><i>Individual Barriers</i></p>	<p>[Some Team Leaders show] an aversion to express emotions, even in the form of conflict. Too many people treat consistently all relationships in the same way. This attitude is detrimental to creating trust - because you lose authenticity. (HD, L&amp;D Diagnostic Interview)</p> <p>So, it's interesting for me watching the [junior] management now as we've brought them into the loop, because some of them have responded very positively ... others are almost rabbits [caught] in [the] headlights. ... [They] are suddenly thinking, "Oh I've got to deliver all these bad messages." Um ... And, you know, this is change. And people won't necessarily agree with it, and we'll be changing this structure. (HD, int.3)</p> <p>Some of them I think uh deal with that in different ways. And sometimes you know some of them assume that they've probably got a bit more you know, power than, than they actually have. And it's a bit of a fact, it's in line isn't it because we're asking them to do things and we're asking them to use their uh-, their strategic know how, but they haven't always got enough to be, able to do that. (PA, int.2)</p> <p>The ones that probably don't agree with it. And this may come down to, maybe they're not most suited [for] those sort of roles ... They've almost becomes blockers. The ones that don't really agree with it. They'll tell their people they don't agree with it. (HD, int.2)</p> <p>Some of them [junior managers] told me: 'I can talk to my clients, I can be a banker, I can do all those things really really well. [But] I've never made anybody redundant. I've never done this, I don't know it. Most of my time haven't' So, yeah, they were, they were very very open, they told us ... And for us, that's priceless, cause at least you know that's where one of your risks are. And we can put a process in place to protect [the change] from that risk. (Head of Change)</p>
<p><b>Bounded Authenticity</b> <i>Authenticity Encased in Structure</i></p>	<p>[Speaking to peers during Team Leader Meeting] JL3: "EY3 was sitting to our desk last week. I mean he was quite vocal with the assistants about it, that he might want to go for it [redundancy]", JLZ "Yes, but he is one of those people that says one thing and he does another", JL4: "What about Christina", SL2: "I think Christina will go", JL3: "Is her husband working?", SL2: "She has question whether she can push the date back". (Close Doors conversation at Team Leader meeting amongst peers)</p> <p>It's difficult if EY3 doesn't opt to take that, uh, voluntary redundancy and then he continues underperforming, he gets to be sacked, he'll lose any kind of, um, benefits. I said [to my peers], well, can somebody sidle up to him and say a quiet word, you know, here's what you should be doing? But, that's, uh, one of my feelings is that we probably should from a personal point of view. But from a professional point of view- Um, but that's really down to JLY [his boss] and, um, JLY has to decide. (JL4)</p> <p>It comes down to how much, what power and autonomy that you have. Um, and even up to kind of SL8 level, it depends on power, autonomy, uh, that you have, again as part of a big corporate like this. That 'letterbox' pointer, it is very apt in terms of how, it describes how a lot of the managers,</p>

	<p>leaders within Bank and PrivBank would work (JM8)</p> <p>I feel, in terms of my future I've probably got a greater affinity with SL2 than with JL4, because JL4 doesn't know-, he only does the box-ticking, the day-job stuff. (EY1)</p> <p>Keeping an active relationship with [Head of Sport] is not an active strategy, it is more like an opportunistic one. Because he makes the decision, and can tell me what is going on. (E2)</p>
<p><i>Authenticity Specific to Audience</i></p>	<p>I bypassed JL4, and SL2, I've gotta say has been really good, uh, because I'm not one for, you know, either dodging the bullet or dodging a conversation or bullshitting but I had a very honest conversation at the beginning of the year. Or was it the end of last year? No, beginning of this year. When I was- when I could see what was coming I just said "look, I need a chat". And I asked him, I said "SL2, you know, I know- I can see what's happening, I can see some changes coming along, do you want me on the team?" So that sort of set him back but, you know, we talked openly and, you know, confidentially, um, and that's quite useful for me. (EY1)</p> <p>It's my need to know that what they [at the top] are doing, and for people [at the top] recognise that what I'm doing, all the hard work I'm doing... In the eight months I've been here, I've been nominated [by SL2] to attend two lunches with Head of Department (HD) ... which is a good thing ... because I think he has- uh-, a say so in who gets promoted and stuff like that, so yes it's a motivation for me. (E3)</p> <p>E2 is also a really good guy that is going places I have a lot of respect for him. I took him out for a drink in December. I paved the way to say, "although you want a promotion and you deserve a promotion you don't want to get into promotional pool at his stage, because this pool will be looked very closely, with the change of course there will be a greater risk. I just put my arm around him, he is a great guy. (SL2)</p> <p>I saw Head of Department yesterday, because he happened to pass by, and I thought to asking the question ... As I was walking back might to my desk, HD was walking towards me and I thought, this is a good opportunity ... (E2)</p> <p>Head of Commercial (SL5) instigated one to one discussions ... with each employee but with a senior member of the management team who they don't report directly to...for the sake of getting good feedback and honest feedback from me. (E6)</p>
<p><i>Authenticity as a Finite State</i></p>	<p>It was not awkward when we were walking there [to the meeting room for the consultation meeting], but when he started talking- It was more awkward that he actually had to go through the process with me. Because he, he, he had the level of formality, which was, it does not belong to our ... our usual relationships (EY2, int. 2)</p> <p>We have a tendency of not speaking about emotions and relationship. We don't want to. It's quite difficult when you are ... You have just, just, the tendency to get a lot done with things don't think about it.. I think it is because we are thinking about emotions attached to work. And we always then separate work from emotions than we say let's not have any emotions about it and let's do it. (JL2)</p> <p>You're having feeling towards these people, trying to help them, when you need help perhaps yourself... But you are responsible to make sure that these things happen and work. And to make sure that the staff are engaged and working in very understanding of what happens. (JM2)</p> <p>I've realised over time that it is really important not to come in and being really peeved off. And if you disagree with the something that the bank has done, or some decisions ... I'm not suggesting that I should just accept that the move on. But I try really hard not to bust those feelings further down the line, because I try to work out what the reasons are, and develop that a bit more. (JL8)</p> <p>[JLY] had a whole day of thi [redundancy conversations], so dunno how many people he may have had to speak to, um, but it was obviously quite wearing.(EY2, int.2)</p> <p>[People at the top] they don't see that. They don't see, you know, the one that had to commit to eight [people] to call, that had to prepare the meeting, that had to sit down with their letters, to potentially coming at you, you know, that emotional burden with them, in and out of that meeting. But also, one of the important things I hear as well, it's something like a very, very small office like they've got. Those guys have to come back in the next day. (Head of Change)</p> <p>For many people ... it's exhausting when they have to be two people, one at work and one at home. If you don't have to think, or worry about, whatever part of you is different to the majority of people, be it a disability or your sexual orientation, then you can give your all to your role. (2016 Bank Career Website, Authenticity and Inclusion)</p> <p>Coaching my people is difficult, it is like emotionally draining for me. It is very demanding for me to be a coach to my people. It is like having someone nibbling at me all the time. (SL1)</p>

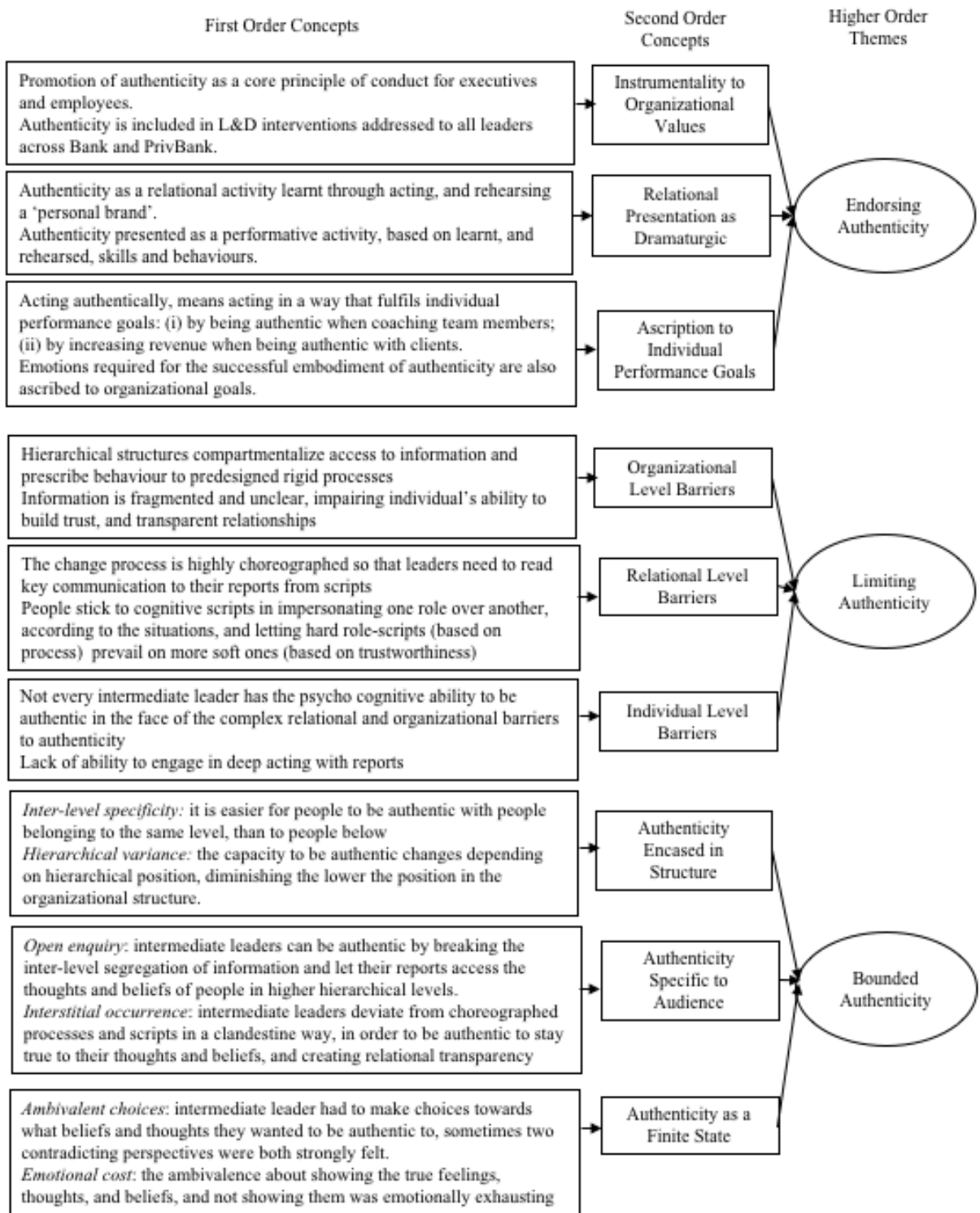
**FIGURE 1**  
The organogram of the teams studied. Representing for each individual: position in the organizations, hierarchical grade, identifying acronym and number of interviews.



**FIGURE 2**  
Chronological representation of the research timing, and the events in the organization

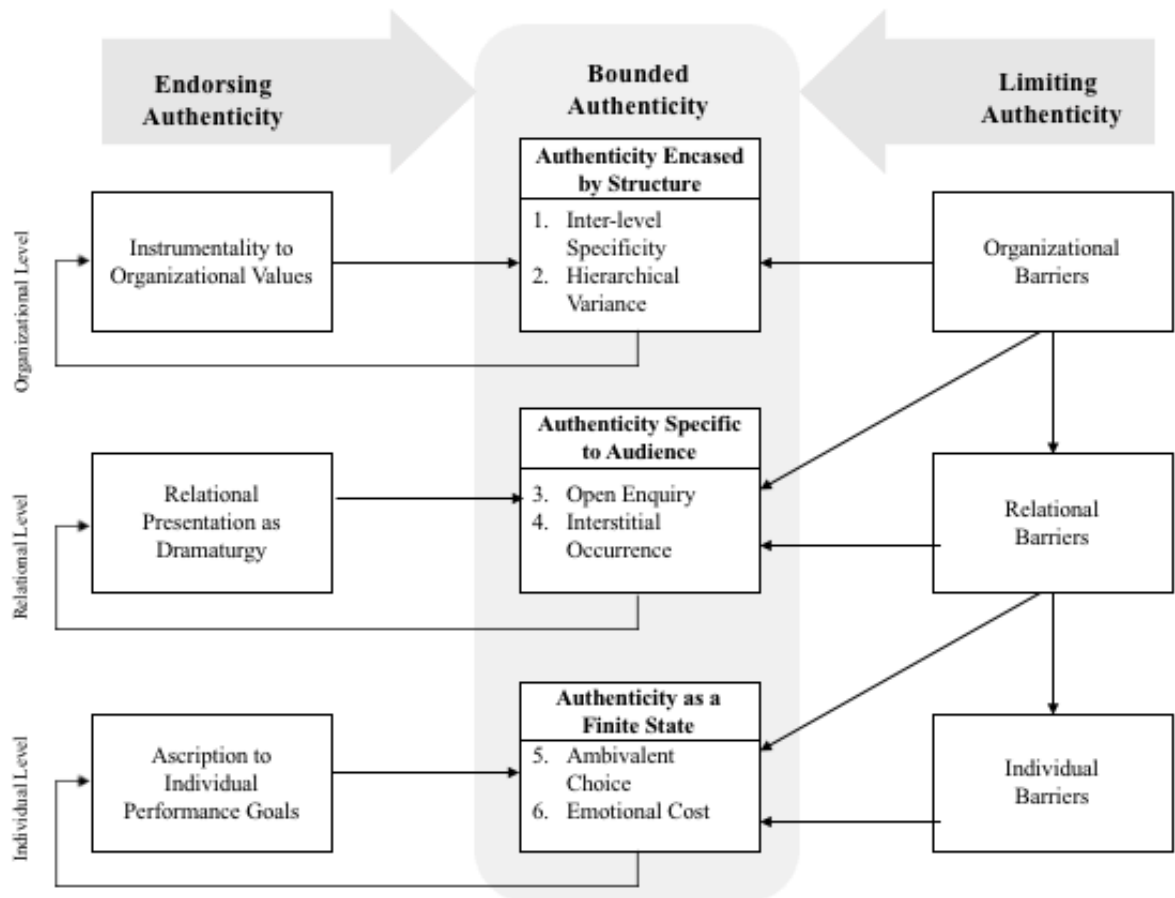
	L&D Programme			Planning of Strategic Change					Implementing Change		Post Change		
TIME LINE	May-Jul 2015	Sep-Oct 2015	Nov-Dec 2015	Jul 2016	Jan 2017	Feb 2017	Mar 2017	Apr 2017	May 2017	June 2017	Sep 2017	Oct 2017	Dec 2017
Research Schedule	Interviews with seven Executives and Team Leaders, Gathering Documents on Organization and Industry	Gathering of Archival Material of L&D Intervention.		Research Proposals & Exploratory Interviews with Head of Change and Head of Department	Second Round Interview (HQ) Triad 2	Third Round Interview (HQ) Triad 5, Triad 6	Fourth & Fifth Round Interviews (Regional Office 2) Triad 7, 8, 9 (HQ) Triad 3, 4 Interview with COO	Fifth Round Interviews (HQ) - Head of Department - Head of Sport Team.	Interview with Head of Department PA. Interviews with Head of Change & various managers involved in lay-offs	Interviews with Managers at risk, and with Triad 2, 3 and 4 Managers	Various informal conversations and observations with previously interviewed actors in the Sport Team, more interviews with key informants		Interviews with Head of Department, Head of Sport and Triad 2, 3 and 4 Managers
Observation	Ethnographic days at HQ and during Residential L&D Roll Out at Business Schools.			Ethnographic days.			Sport Team All Hands Meeting		Ethnographic days with Sport Team Including attendance of All Hands Meetings and Team Leaders Meetings				
L&D and Change Milestones	Diagnostic Phase, Understanding the Needs before Designing	Design of Residential L&D Program. Roll Out at European and UK Business Schools		Expectations for Change Announced Broadly. Change Designed ONLY by Senior Leaders.	Regional Office 1 Closure	Regional Office 1 employees move to Regional Office 2	Junior Leaders of Sport Team are finally involved in the Change Design.		Head of Department Conference Call announcing lay-off: in Sport Team Plus Head of Sport & Junior Leaders conversation with people at risk	Some people are in Limbo, they do not know where to take up redundancy, or look for an internal position	The lay off period is over, initiatives are launched for re-energize the survivors.		

**FIGURE 3**  
Data Structure





**FIGURE 4**  
**The emergent model of Bounded Authenticity, and its six components.**



## CONCLUSIONS

In the introduction of this thesis I proposed the research question: *how do intermediate leaders enact both roles effectively, in order to contribute concurrently to their relationship with their boss and with their followers?* In this dissertation I have contributed in different ways to a better understanding of this phenomenon. Paper one focused on the definition of intermediate leaders, the definition of the leadership triad as an area of enquiry, and the proposition of a model for the roles co-enactment based on paradox theory. Paper two focused on the leadership dynamics at triadic level revealing emerging dynamics of skip level leadership, which influence the role co-enactment. Paper three explored the multilevel dynamics faced by intermediate leaders in their effort to be authentic followers to their bosses, as well as authentic leaders to their own team members. This latter paper defines a model of bounded authenticity in leadership. This thesis aims at establishing intermediate leadership as an emergent area of studies, by providing three key contributions.

Firstly, I contribute a definition of intermediate leaders, as those individuals in organizations who need to be effective in the enactment of both roles of leader and follower. In the first paper I establish that, at the level of the intermediate leader, his or her action as a leader are rooted in his or her actions as follower. Thus, interlinking the two roles I push the boundaries of our current understanding of leadership and followership (Uhl-Bien, et al., 2014), providing theoretical insight on how the enactment of one role influences the other.

Secondly, I propose the leadership triad as a unit of observation to zoom into the dynamics of intermediate leadership, building on, and challenging at the same time, our knowledge of dyadic leadership relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). By moving beyond dyadic dynamics I respond to the call for studying leadership through

qualitative methods, focusing on multi-relational processes (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Fairhurst, 2016).

Thirdly, by adopting qualitative, inductive, longitudinal methods I reveal emerging processes of leadership which had gone undetected in previous studies. In my second paper I reveal the emerging process of skip level leadership, I categorize different types of skip level leadership and show how they play different parts in the ability of leaders to co-enact both roles. By developing the concept of skip-level leadership, I add to the emerging study of this kind of leadership (Detert & Trevino, 2010). In doing so I confirm it as a promising area of investigation for future leadership studies. In my third paper I highlight multilevel processes that bound authenticity, adding to the study of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2011). This adds to our understanding of leadership and followership actions as steeped in organizational-, relational- and individual-level dynamics.

At a broader level, this thesis opens up an entire new field of studies in the leadership literature. By thinking of intermediate leaders as connectors of multiple organizational levels this dissertation goes back to the origin of leadership studies in organization, reigniting interest in the concept of 'linking pin' (Likert, 1961, 1967), and the concept of organizations as linkages of dyads (see the Vertical Dyad Linkage model by Dansereau and colleagues, 1975). It locates leadership back at the core of organizations, by investing managers at all levels with the responsibility of effectively co-enacting both roles of leader and follower. It also recognises the different challenges they might encounter in this co-enactment, depending on which hierarchical level they occupy. But perhaps most radically this thesis provides reflections on the interconnectedness of the roles of leader and follower, and how the enactment of one role informs and determines the enactment of the other.

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