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Collective leadership dynamics among professional peers:

Co-constructing an unstable equilibrium

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Abstract

Professional service firms (PSFs) are characterised by contingent and contested power relations among an extended group of professional peers. Studies of such firms can therefore yield important insights for the literatures on collective leadership and leader–follower relations. Yet to date PSF scholars have neglected the topic of leadership, and leadership scholars have neglected the context of PSFs. Based on 102 interviews across the consulting, accounting, and legal sectors, we identify three relational processes through which professional peers co-construct collective leadership: legitimising, negotiating, and manoeuvring. We demonstrate how the relational processes taken together constitute an unstable equilibrium, both in the moment and over time, emphasising how leadership in PSFs is inherently contested and fragile. Our model contributes to theories of collective leadership and leader–follower relations by foregrounding the power and politics that underlie collective leadership. We highlight the significance of the individual leader within the collective. We challenge assumptions concerning the binary nature of leadership and followership, by showing how colleagues may grant leadership identities to their peers without necessarily granting them leadership authority, and without claiming follower identities for themselves.

Key words: Collective leadership, Leader–follower relations, Contingent authority, Unstable equilibrium, Leadership dynamics, Politics, Professional service firms.

Introduction

The leading role that professionals, such as accountants, lawyers, and consultants, play in shaping societal, economic, and governmental institutions has been well-documented in this journal and elsewhere (Scott, 2008). Yet recent years have been marked by intense public criticism of the leaders of professional service firms (PSFs[1]) for their failure to prevent the global financial crisis and the various corporate scandals that preceded and followed it (e.g. Mueller, Carter, and Whittle, 2015). While leaders of PSFs have been extensively criticised, very little is known about how leadership is actually achieved in PSFs. To date, PSF scholars have neglected the topic of leadership and leadership scholars have neglected the context of PSFs (Empson and Langley, 2015).

PSFs are characterised by contingent and contested power relations among an extended group of professional peers; in the largest firms this group may comprise several hundred partners (Greenwood and Empson, 2003). These senior professionals claim extensive autonomy and grant leadership authority to their colleagues on a contingent basis (Empson and Langley, 2015), resulting in highly politicised internal competitions for power, protracted processes of consensus-based decision making, and failures to execute decisions once they have been agreed (Hinings, Brown, and Greenwood, 1991; Lawrence, Malhotra, and Morris, 2012; Morris, Greenwood and Fairclough, 2010). Conventional leadership studies, predicated as they are on clearly defined roles and hierarchical relationships between leaders and followers, therefore fail to capture the complex power relations and collective nature of leadership which is characteristic of PSFs (Empson, 2017).

However, two recent and related developments in leadership research, the emerging literatures on collective leadership and leader–follower relations, represent useful lenses through which to develop a more nuanced understanding of leadership dynamics among professional peers. Scholars of collective leadership (such as Cullen and Yammarino, 2014; and Ospina, Foldy, Fairhurst, and Jackson, 2018) focus on the process of leadership as co-constructed among an extended group of colleagues, rather than the actions of individual leaders alone. Empirical studies of collective leadership "emphasize *processual* 'how' questions, aimed at understanding how leadership is produced and performed" (Denis, Langley, and Sergi, 2012: 255). Consistent with this approach some scholars of leader–follower relations (Chreim, 2015; DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, and Carsten, 2014) add an important perspective to studies of collective leadership by emphasising that leadership and followership reflect a "relational process co-created by leaders and followers in context" (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012, p. 1024). Problematising the conventional leadership literature's focus on the primacy and agency of individuals in leadership positions, Uhl-Bien and Pillai (2007) state, "if leadership involves actively influencing others, then followership involves allowing oneself to be influenced" (p. 196).

In building our analysis we draw together these bodies of literature. In so doing, we address some of their key limitations. First, the literature on PSFs focuses on governance at a relatively abstract and depersonalised level and is generally silent on the subject of leadership dynamics (Empson and Langley, 2015). Second, the collective leadership literature presents an unproblematised view of power relations so there is a "need to pay greater attention to the underlying pattern of power relationships" (Denis et al., 2012: 270) that affect the interactions and outcomes of leadership processes; as Bolden (2011: 260) argues, much current research on collective forms of leadership "takes insufficient consideration of the dynamics of power

… within which it is situated". Third, the leader–follower relations literature tends to assume positions of leader and follower are dichotomised and stable (Collinson, 2005; Chreim, 2015; Fairhurst, 2016). There is therefore a need for more research that explores how individuals navigate these relational dynamics, both collectively and individually.

Based on a qualitative study of 102 senior professionals in three accounting, consulting and law firms, we ask: How is collective leadership co-constructed among professional peers? To explore this broad question we begin by asking, 1) *What are the dynamics through which professional peers co-construct collective leadership?* We use cross-sectional analysis of interviews to identify the relational processes and underlying power relations that mutually constitute collective leadership. Identifying relational processes is an important first step but to focus on them in isolation risks ignoring or misrepresenting their interplay over time. We therefore go on to ask, 2) *How do changes in underlying power relations among professional peers serve to stabilise and destabilise collective leadership dynamics over time?* We address this second question through a longitudinal case analysis of one firm over a five-year period

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin by examining what is already known about leadership and power in PSFs and then highlight key issues in the literatures on collective leadership and leader–follower relations which merit particular attention in the context of our study. We outline the research design and explain our process of analysis. We go on to identify and describe the three interdependent relational processes by which collective leadership is co-constructed among professional peers (research question 1). We then focus on the interplay of these relational processes over time (research question 2). We illustrate how the destabilisation of any one of the relational processes will likely destabilise the

collective leadership dynamics as a whole, and argue that the relational processes taken together constitute an unstable equilibrium, both in the moment and over time.

In addition to representing a novel study of leadership in PSFs, the model we develop contributes to current leadership theories on collective leadership and leader–follower relations. We identify and explicate the power relations and political behaviours underlying collective leadership dynamics, and identify the significance of the individual leader within collective leadership. We challenge taken for granted assumptions concerning the binary nature of leadership and followership within the leader–follower relations literature by showing how colleagues may grant leadership identities to their peers, without necessarily granting them leadership authority, and without claiming follower identities for themselves.

Leadership and power in PSFs

PSFs typically adopt a partnership form of governance, with ownership and profits shared among professional peers (Greenwood and Empson, 2003). Whereas many PSFs have abandoned partnership as a legal form, they often continue to emulate its organisational characteristics (Empson, 2007; Pickering, 2015). Chief among these characteristics are extensive autonomy and contingent authority (Empson & Langley, 2015), which give rise to distinctive power relations among professional peers.

Experienced professionals require, or at least expect, extensive autonomy to carry out their work (Thomas and Hewitt, 2011). The customised nature of professional work means that professionals are afforded considerable autonomy to make finely tuned judgements about how best to apply their expertise to client work (Freidson, 2001). While performance pressures and

regulatory change have to some extent constrained the autonomy of professionals (Cooper, Hinings, Greenwood, and Brown, 1996; Smets, Morris, von Nordenflycht, and Brock, 2017), the partnership form of governance has persisted, thus institutionalising senior professionals' expectations of autonomy (Alvehus, 2017; Empson, Muzio, Broschak, and Hining, 2015; Robertson and Swan, 2003).

With regard to contingent authority, a senior executive in a PSF "maintains power only as long as the professionals perceive him or her to be serving their interests effectively" (Mintzberg, 1989: 181). In PSFs most professionals are selected, and often elected, by their peers to formal leadership positions for a fixed term and can be deposed if they fail to retain their support (Empson, 2007; 2017; Greenwood, Hinings and Brown, 1990). Authority is "collegial and fragile" (Hinings et al., 1991) and deemed to rest with the professional peer group rather than any individual.

Power relations in PSFs are therefore contingent and potentially contested among peers. The extent to which power relations in PSFs differ from conventional hierarchical organisations can be highlighted by applying French and Raven's (1959) classic conceptualisation of the bases of power, originally developed as a typology of power relations in conventional hierarchical organisations. In PSFs "expert" power does not constitute a basis of power, as all partners are experts. "Formal" power is typically constrained by the contingent nature of authority. Similarly "reward" and "coercive" power are limited because professionals in senior leadership positions often lack the power to set the pay of their peers[2] and are prevented by complex internal procedures from being able to dismiss them (Empson, 2017). "Referent" power, however, represents a highly significant source of power among senior professionals (Empson and Langley, 2015) as professionals who role model desired

behaviours gain credibility, and with it power, to demand the same of their peers (Muhr, 2011).

Because of contingent and contested power relations in PSFs, "leadership is a matter of guiding, nudging, and persuading" (Greenwood et al., 1990: 748) and "is typically a collective endeavor" (Empson and Langley, 2015: 179). PSFs are, therefore, "uniquely political environments"; "many traditional professional partnerships are consensus-based democracies but, as such, are subject to the lobbying, scheming, and bargaining which occur in any other political arena to achieve agreement" (Morris et al., 2010: 297). In order to build consensus, professionals in leadership positions need to display the full range of political skills (Empson, 2017), combining networking ability and social astuteness with interpersonal influence and apparent sincerity (Ferris et al., 2007). In such a context political behaviour represents an essential means of achieving consensus (Kirk and Broussine, 2000), rather than a negative and illegitimate pursuit of self-interest, as conventionally depicted within the leadership literature (Ammeter, Douglas, Gardner, Hochwarter, and Ferris, 2002; Silvester, 2008).

Given the significance of PSFs to the global economy, and high-profile examples of leadership failure (Empson et al., 2015), it is problematic that the PSF literature is largely silent on the topic of leadership (Empson and Langley, 2015). The PSF literature analyses governance as an archetypal organisational form at the level of structures, systems and interpretive schema (Cooper et al., 1996; Greenwood et al., 1990; Greenwood and Empson, 2003) and is therefore somewhat abstract and impersonal. When PSF scholars do address the topic of leadership it is to represent it somewhat simplistically, for example by referring to it dismissively as "cat herding" (von Nordenflycht, 2010).

Collective leadership and leader–follower relations

Conventional leadership research is predicated on clearly defined hierarchical relationship between leaders and followers and is ill-suited to studying contested and contingent power relations among professional peers. Since mainstream leadership and PSF researchers both have little to say about leadership in PSFs, we must turn to emerging bodies of leadership research to help frame our study of leadership dynamics in PSFs: specifically the literature on collective leadership and leader–follower relations.

In the past decade the study of leadership has moved beyond heroic, trait-based studies of individuals in conventional hierarchical organisations (Bligh, Kohles and Pillai, 2011; Collinson, Grint, and Smolovic-Jones, 2018) to explore this phenomenon of collective leadership. Scholars within this emerging field view leadership "not as a property of individuals ... but as a collective phenomenon that is distributed or shared among different people, potentially fluid, and constructed in interaction" (Denis et al., 2012: 212), therefore emphasising leadership processes and interactions. A variety of overlapping terms have proliferated to describe this broad phenomenon, including collective (Ospina et al., 2018), plural (Denis et al., 2012), and relational (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012), as well as related concepts such as shared (Pearce and Conger, 2003), distributed (Gronn, 2002), and complexity leadership (Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey, 2007). In the context of PSFs, the most pertinent form of collective leadership is that described by Denis et al. (2012: 231) as "pooling leadership at the top to direct others".

In pluralistic organisations, where objectives are divergent and power is diffuse, collective leadership is often institutionally prescribed as a means of accommodating multiple

perspectives and managing internal political relationships (Denis et al., 2001; Reid and Karambayya, 2009). No single individual is vested with power to lead unilaterally; it is only though the collective interactions of multiple individuals in leadership positions that leadership can be accomplished (Empson and Langley, 2015). The limited number of studies of this "pooling" form of collective leadership have focused on leadership dyads, triads, and constellations. They typically take the formal authority of those in leadership positions for granted, neglecting the extended network of informal power relations that underlie the leadership dynamics (Chreim, 2015; Denis et al., 2001; Denis et al., 2012). This is potentially problematic in the context of PSFs, where the extended leadership group may encompass several hundred professional peers, who may or may not occupy formal leadership positions but are nevertheless involved in the process of the co-construction of leadership through their informal political interactions and formal involvement in the election of their peers (Empson, 2017).

Thus, given the contested and contingent nature of power relations among professional peers, our study of leadership in PSFs necessarily involves addressing issues of power, and doing so in a way which captures the subtlety and nuance in how it is exercised. It therefore provides an opportunity to address the collective leadership literature's unproblematised view of power (Denis et al., 2012), by examining power relations among an extended group of peers. Our study recognises that, whereas leadership may be represented by formal positions, professionals who occupy such positions will have been placed there by their peers and are entirely dependent on colleagues' on-going support to perform their role.

In parallel, and consistent with, the emerging literature on collective leadership, leadership scholars' increased interest in followership has shifted focus from individual leaders to those supposedly under their influence (Bligh et al., 2011). As Uhl-Bien et al. (2014: 83) emphasise, it is "accepted wisdom that there is no leadership without followers." Yet, in the past, followers "have been viewed as unproblematic and predictable cogs in the (leadership) machine" (Collinson, 2005: 1424) and many followership studies adopt a conventional positional approach to leadership and followership. However some scholars emphasise that leadership and followership are not fixed and immutable positions and that followership is co-created through a process of interaction between leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). For example, DeRue and Ashford's (2010) theoretical model proposes that leader–follower identities are co-constructed through the relational processes of an individual coming to see themselves, and being seen by others, as a leader or follower (the claiming and granting of leader and follower identities). Given the contingent and contested nature of power among professional peers, this perspective on leader–follower relations represents a useful lens for studying leadership dynamics in PSFs. While recognising that leadership and followership are co-constructed through relational processes, most leader–follower studies nevertheless assume that concepts of leadership and followership are not only co-dependent but mutually exclusive. Some scholars argue, therefore, that many studies of leader–follower relations perpetuate the overly oppositional binaries of leadership and followership common in conventional leadership studies (Fairhurst, 2001; Collinson, 2005).

Collinson (2006: 1436) instead argues that leader and follower identities and power relations are not clear-cut and homogeneous but "blurred, multiple, ambiguous, and contradictory". He suggests that followers are "knowledgeable agents ... proactive, self-aware and knowing

subjects who have at their disposal a repertoire of possible agencies within the workplace"
(Collinson, 2005: 1422). In this way some leader–follower studies potentially overcompensate
in their critique, ascribing a disproportionately high degree of agency to followers, and
neglecting the significance of formal authority and leadership positions. As Alvehus (2018:
17) emphasises, leadership "is not an organizational quality shared democratically, but a
question of contestation and negotiation, depending on power asymmetries."

Regardless of what approach is taken, research on leader–follower relations, therefore,
typically excludes, or at least does not sensitise us to, more subtly interpersonal political
processes amongst colleagues. By examining in detail how peers claim and grant leadership
identities and authority to each other on an on-going basis, our study represents an
opportunity to examine the underlying power relations involved in the co-construction of
collective leadership dynamics and to interrogate a foundational assumption of leadership
research that there can be no leadership without followership.

Research design

Numerous scholars have emphasised the need for qualitative studies that "capture the truly
dynamic qualities of leadership" (Gordon and Yukl, 2004: 364), which cannot be studied
through the survey-based methods that dominate the leadership literature (Bryman, 2004).
Whereas observation is a popular qualitative method adopted by many practice-based studies
of leadership, it is not well suited to studying the more political aspects of leadership, which
may involve the withholding or concealment of actions. Accordingly, we developed an
interview-based research design that drew on current developments in grounded theory (e.g.
Charmaz, 2014). Our research questions evolved as we gathered data and developed
interpretations, and our structured approach as outlined below helped to safeguard against

interpreter bias and facilitated "systematic data collection in order to develop theories that address the interpretive realities of actors" (Suddaby, 2006: 634).

Sampling and data collection

As part of a broader research project, the first author conducted 102 interviews in fifteen countries with senior professionals in global PSFs in the accounting, consulting and legal sectors. The project studied leadership in large, global PSFs across a range of sectors, to avoid focusing on idiosyncratic sector-specific dynamics. Interviewees were selected from firms that were among the largest and most preeminent in their respective sectors. Roughly equal numbers of interviews were conducted in each firm (34, 31, and 37 in Firms A, B, and C respectively). The firms ranged in size from 200 to 600 senior professionals/partners and generated revenue ranging from US$ 750m to US$ 2,250m. All were organised as partnerships, though one was legally a corporation and "mimicked" a partnership (Empson, 2017). Each, therefore, had several hundred senior professionals sharing in the ownership and profits and electing their senior leaders for a fixed term.

Preliminary interviews were conducted with the two most senior executives (Chairman and CEO or Senior and Managing Partner), alongside reviews of internal documentation (e.g. partnership agreements, minutes of board meetings, transcriptions of partner meetings), to identify formal structures of governance. Thereafter a "snowball" method of sampling (Heckathorn, 1997) was employed to identify individuals recognised by each other as being involved in the senior leadership group. This was typically around 30 professionals within each firm, who might or might not have formal leadership positions but were recognised as highly influential. Interviewees included: heads of practices, geographic regions, market

sectors, and functional areas. The interview phase was concluded when the same names were consistently identified as part of the senior leadership group and no new names emerged[3].

Interviews typically lasted for about 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews explored professionals' perspectives on leadership, asking how they interpreted and engaged in leadership within their firms. Lines of questioning began broad but became more focused. Example questions included: "What does the concept of leadership mean to you in the context of [Firm]?", "Do you consider yourself a leader of [Firm]?", "Please explain why you think that?". Interviewees were then asked to identify colleagues they considered part of the senior leadership group and to explain their reasoning.

Data analysis

The following description presents the highly complex and iterative analysis process in a simplified and linear form – the process was inevitably "messy" and "nonlinear" (Suddaby, 2006: 637). The analysis took two distinct forms: cross-sectional analysis of all interviews and longitudinal analysis of a single case. The cross-sectional analysis enabled us to address our first research question and develop our model of collective dynamics among professional peers (Figure 2). Having identified the leadership dynamics, we then explored them in depth through a longitudinal case analysis of a single firm. This enabled us to address our second research question, by identifying how changes in the underlying power relations among professional peers serve to stabilise and destabilise the collective leadership dynamics over time (Figure 3).

Our *cross-sectional analysis* followed a three-stage process of theoretically informed coding (Charmaz, 2004): *focused codes* (stage 1), from which we developed *theoretical codes* (stage 2), which we then integrated into *aggregate dimensions* (stage 3). Throughout the analytical process, the primary coder (first author) checked, challenged, and discussed the coding with the second author (see Figure 1 for a representation of our coding, which includes illustrative quotes.)

Insert Figure 1

Initially almost 100 focused codes and sub-codes were developed, covering themes such as: Who are the leaders in the firm? Why are they seen as such? How has this changed over time? Following Golden-Biddle and Locke's (1993) guidelines, the focused coding enabled us to identify a strong theoretical plot: the relational processes and power relations that underlie collective leadership. We then refined the focused codes into theoretical codes. By drawing on works such as Collinson (2005, 2006) and DeRue and Ashford (2010), we shifted our emphasis from the actions of individuals (e.g. "enabling autonomy while maintaining control") to interactions among peers (e.g. one professional "asserting control" while others see themselves as "exercising autonomy"). Through this we identified three aggregate dimensions: the relational processes of legitimising, negotiating, and manoeuvring. For example, "asserting control" and "exercising autonomy" came together in the relational process "negotiating". The interplay among these three relational processes is represented in our model (see Figure 2).

For the *longitudinal case analysis* we focused on one particular firm in our study because, very unusually, it had three Managing Partners over a five-year period. This suggested it

would provide a particularly clear illustration of how changes in underlying power relations among professional peers serve to stabilise and destabilise collective leadership dynamics over time. We started by creating a time line based on interviews and formal documentation, and identified the main actors. We then analysed the events, actions and reactions of key actors in terms of our model (represented by Figure 3). For example, we looked at how the first Managing Partner was initially perceived as exerting excessive control, which created opportunities for another partner to rise to power by political actions. We also analysed the reactions among the firm's partners, for example in response to the second Managing Partner's relaxation of control. Step-by-step we analysed the interplay of the three relational processes (i.e. legitimising, negotiating, and manoeuvring) over a five-year period. In this way, we demonstrated the value of the empirically derived model in understanding changing power relations and the destabilisation and stabilisation of leadership dynamics over time.

Co-constructing collective leadership dynamics among professional peers

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Insert Figure 2

Our empirically derived model (Figure 2) identifies three distinct and interrelated relational processes: *legitimising, negotiating* and *manoeuvring*. Taken together they represent the leadership dynamics by which collective leadership is co-constructed among professional peers. We use the term "legitimising" to express the relational process whereby professionals develop a leader identity, by succeeding in the market while their peers infer that they have leadership ability. However, to be granted not just a leadership identity but leadership authority, professionals must engage in two further relational processes: negotiating and manoeuvring. We use the term "negotiating" to express the relational process whereby

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professionals assert control while their colleagues exercise autonomy. This is an overt interaction as it involves professionals contesting manifestations of formal authority. By contrast, we use the term "manoeuvring" to express a more covert relational process, whereby professionals seek to exert informal influence over their peers by behaving politically while their colleagues perceive them as having integrity. As explained in detail in the following three sections, and explored through the subsequent case analysis, these relational processes express three different aspects of the contested and contingent power relations within PSFs, whereby professional peers act and react to each other by claiming and/or temporarily granting leadership and followership among themselves.

Legitimising: Succeeding in market and inferring leadership ability

> To be accepted by colleagues as a leader you've got to show you are big in the market and can win work. (C36[4])

Success in the market is not a direct manifestation of leadership ability but a necessary precondition for professionals to gain the legitimacy to lead (Table I). An individual professional's success in the market causes them to stand out from their peers and be seen as a sufficiently credible role model, thus increasing respect and signalling a shift in underlying power relations.

> You can't be a leader without having credibility as a practitioner in this firm … You have to have a demonstrated track record of having delivered. (B27)

However, as another interviewee says, this "doesn't necessarily and mean you're a good leader" (A16).

Insert Table I

In this context, market success is characterised as a professional's ability to generate work for themselves and their colleagues, to be "outstanding with clients" (C7) and to "enhance the value of the partnership" (C14); "everything else is icing on the cake" (A4). "If you bring in lots of business you will always generate respect." (A13). One interviewee explains:

> I've been the partner on [major client] having won that … And, even now I've become head of [major practice], I'm just going onto [major client]. … So if I put my little ego hat on for a moment I was sort of, you know, seen to be a good partner. You know, one of the top partners, I suppose, and one that can get out there and win work. (C18)

After being raised to a leadership position, professionals must continue to demonstrate that they are succeeding in the market, to show that they can "still cut it" (A11), to ensure their colleagues continue to infer that they have leadership ability.

> Joe, who's very, very good, made a classic mistake of cutting right back on his practice and becoming full-time management. And that doesn't work in a firm like ours. You do lose credibility doing that. (A11)

As the case analysis will demonstrate, once professionals decide that their colleague is no longer succeeding in the market, they may conclude that he or she has lost the legitimacy to lead them, prompting a shift in power relations and destabilising the collective leadership dynamics overall.

Negotiating: Asserting control and exercising autonomy

It's not about following in that sense. It's about leaders enabling and directing, giving people outlets. … Because frankly nobody has to follow anyone. (C9)

Interviewees consistently claim to be autonomous and resist any sense that they are being controlled by colleagues whom they perceive to be their peers (Table II). This perception is confirmed by professionals in leadership positions. As an interviewee explains:

You can't really tell people what to do. You can say what you're going to do and then hope people will agree with it … and the people you can least tell what to do are those who are most important for the success of the business. Because they are the ones who control the client relationships. (A17)

Insert Table II

To achieve their objectives, therefore, leaders must negotiate with powerful peers when seeking to impose formal controls. Professionals acknowledge the latitude they have in relation to individuals in leadership positions. The CEO and other senior colleagues "are really coordinating or communicating … but definitely not controlling, not managing, not policing" (B29). This can be frustrating:

At times I'd just like to say, "You know something, just go and do it, because we haven't got time to debate it just do it." But that's not our culture. (C27)

Yet, professionals in leadership positions *do* exercise a degree of control, but in a context where leadership "sort of happens" (A7), they must demonstrate an acute understanding of the

underlying power relations. They must "walk a tightrope" (B32) between their need to assert

control and their colleagues' desire to exercise autonomy. As one Senior Partner explains:

> Partners say "you're too tight" and they say "get looser". So you get looser and they say
> "it's chaotic, get tighter". If the money is going up, you can do what you like. If the
> money is going down, you can't do anything. But the money going up or down isn't
> within control of the Senior Partner. (C1)

As the case analysis will demonstrate, if a professional in a leadership position is "too tight"

in asserting control and peers feel overly constrained in exercising autonomy, or he or she is

"too loose" and peers start to press for greater controls on colleagues autonomy, power

relations will shift and the collective leadership dynamics will become destabilised.

Manoeuvring: Behaving politically and perceiving integrity

> I think the political types in this firm are playing too many games, getting too clever for
> their own good, constantly thinking about tactics. But I do that all the time with my
> clients…. My last transaction, there were seven different stakeholder groups, all with
> complex demands, all wanting their own way, and my job was to get everybody across
> the line without them punching each other … I'm really good at working out
> strategically how to move something forward. I feel passionately about the firm and I
> think there is a difference between me and the real political game players here who are
> not always doing it for the common good. (C32)

This quote captures the complexity of the third relational process, manoeuvring, and the

power relations that underlie it. To be accepted by their peers as leaders, professionals must

engage in subtle political behaviour, while their peers perceive them to be apolitical and behaving with integrity. Table III presents this manoeuvring as a set of distinct but intertwined beliefs and behaviours.

Insert Table III

Overt political behaviour (Table III:1). The interview guide did not explicitly address politics, yet many interviewees raised the topic unprompted. Interviewees express abhorrence of apparent political behaviour, e.g. "I hate politics" (B12), colleagues "are not in the business of politics" (B32). A professional's reputation can be damaged if they are seen by colleagues to be politically "pushy" or "ambitious" (A2), or "leading for their own advantage, just grabbing opportunities for themselves" (A26); "people get found out" (C32). Interviewees typically describe politics in terms of behaviours that are "self-serving" (C27).

> By "too political" what I mean is someone who looks like they are constantly
> manoeuvring for their own benefit as opposed to the wider firm benefit. (C32)

Yet, as interviewees' comments reveal, partners adopt overtly political language: "It's a bit like being part of a political party" (C35). Politics is integral to their firm's leadership dynamics and is enshrined within their governance structures. To be admitted to partnership professionals must be elected by the partners. Thereafter elections are held for senior leadership positions, requiring candidates to issue "manifestos", give speeches at "candidates' debates", and engage in "run-off elections". Senior and Managing Partners refer to their "electorate" or "constituents" who provide them with "mandates". "We have our constituents … we have to help them, be seen to be helpful" (A34). So, whereas abhorring what they view

as politics (i.e. self-serving behaviours) professionals are dependent upon political behaviours for the effective functioning of their firm's leadership dynamics.

Subtle political behaviour (Table III:2). Once elected to leadership positions, professionals cannot simply represent the wishes of their electorate but must pay attention to their most powerful peers – to "build a consensus amongst a key group of people" (A17). They need to make trade-offs between competing interest groups and offer incentives to colleagues in private to persuade them to lend their support in public. Interviewees talk of "promises being made" behind "closed doors" in "smoke filled rooms" (C6).

The following two quotes from the same individual demonstrate how professionals in leadership positions need the political skill to judge how to deal with different colleagues in different contexts – knowing when to treat them like "adults" and when to challenge them for childish behaviour:

> This is about dealing with adults, very bright adults and consequently I think the consummate leadership skill in this firm [is] the ability to drive change through influence rather than by telling. (C27)

> I spend the vast bulk of my time just trying to resolve internecine conflicts between partners … To be able to hold up a mirror and say, "Guys, you look like two kids scrapping in the playground. Is that really what we want? I mean we're all partners, for goodness sake." (C27)

Perception of integrity (Table III:3). To continue to grant a colleague leadership authority, professionals must to perceive that a colleague is acting for the "common good" (C32).

The partnership as a whole trusts our leader, that he's going to resolve it for the best –
for the good of the partnership. As long as they believe that and trust that, then there's
no reason to put any other kind of hold on him. (B23)

Professionals in leadership positions must be seen by their colleagues to be "genuine and
clean" rather than "creeping" and "slightly sinister" (A19); "[the firm] is stamped on their
heart if you open them up" (AI2). They need to be able to "come in on [a] white horse" (B5),
to be recognised as "trying to do the right thing" (C12), and "not appear to be having to work
politically to keep their position" (C4). One Senior Partner is praised by his colleagues for
being "very modest, quite self-effacing" and not being "a player" (A19). Of course a
professional such as he, operating in a highly-politicised environment, may in fact be
deploying highly sophisticated political skills – whether utilising them consciously or not, or
to fulfil his ambitions for the firm of for himself.

The one who does [leadership] more naturally, partners will recognise that, and he is
more likely to sustain the role. And the others are more likely to crash and burn. (C4)

If colleagues become aware of colleagues' political behaviour and begin to question their
integrity, they may no longer be willing to grant those individuals leadership authority over
them.

We have, therefore, addressed our first research question by identifying the three relational
processes through which collective leadership dynamics are co-constructed among
professional peers and the power relations that underlie them. Power is most explicit within
the relational process of negotiating. Formal power is expressed as professionals in leadership
positions seek to assert control while their colleagues seek to exercise autonomy. The

relational process of legitimising illustrates the importance of referent power in PSFs. When a professional succeeds in the market, colleagues may start to see them as role model and, in so doing, be willing to elevate them to leadership status. Power is less apparent but nevertheless present within the most covert relational process of manoeuvring, whereby an individual acts politically while their peers infer that they have integrity. Because professionals' formal power is so circumscribed in this context, political behaviour becomes a necessary component of leadership through exerting informal influence. But, as the case analysis will demonstrate, once professionals recognise a colleague is behaving politically, they will no longer infer that her or she has integrity, leading to a shift in power relations and destabilising the collective leadership dynamics overall. In the following section, we address the second research question and explore how changes in underlying power relations among professional peers serve to stabilise and destabilise collective leadership dynamics over time.

Collective leadership dynamics in a PSF: an unstable equilibrium

This case analysis explores leadership dynamics as they unfold in a specific PSF, a firm comprising more than 400 partners.[5] We demonstrate how the complex interplay of the three relational processes, and the changing power relations that underlie them, serve to destabilise and stabilise the firm's collective leadership dynamics over a five year period (Figure 3). The following, which represents an inevitably simplified and reductive narrative of a complex and nuanced process, is presented in four distinct phases, each representing a period of stabilisation or destabilisation. It demonstrates how these leadership dynamics represent an unstable equilibrium, and that stability can never be more than temporary. Instead leadership dynamics are in perpetual flux, moving through periods of destabilisation and stabilisation, but never achieving a stable equilibrium.

[1][6] Destabilising

Adam was Global Managing Partner of the firm. During his four-year term of office he introduced a range of controls designed to improve financial performance. However, his somewhat confrontational personal style prompted many partners to become concerned that these controls represented a systematic attempt by him and his senior leadership group to increase their power and inhibit partner autonomy. Their fears appeared justified when Adam attempted to introduce new stringent partner performance management systems, prompting the partners to reject the proposals.

When Adam announced his retirement as Managing Partner, he indicated his preferred successor. As partners would not accept a faît accompli, so nine additional partners put their names forward as candidates for election.

Bob was one of these candidates. He was unknown to most partners; as the practice he led was relatively small and he was not a member of the senior leadership group. He therefore campaigned intensively and met most of the more than 400 partners individually. Partners were impressed by his success in building his small practice and his strong belief in the firm and in them personally. He suggested he could unleash their "innate entrepreneurialism" by removing some of the recently imposed controls. He explicitly criticised the track record of candidates who had served with Adam as part of the senior leadership group. In his campaign speeches he promised to "give the partnership back to the partners" and introduce a

significant programme of investment. Bob was elected with a substantial majority, in spite of being a rank outsider at the start of the election.

Analysing the unstable equilibrium. During this phase Adam was seen by partners as asserting excessive control, which impinged on their autonomy *(negotiating)*. He lacked the political skills to persuade his colleagues that he was acting in their best interests, causing his colleagues to question his integrity *(manoeuvring)*. By contrast Bob's leadership campaign revealed his significant political skills (specifically networking ability and apparent sincerity), while partners perceived that he had integrity due to his rhetoric of commitment to the partnership (*manoeuvring*). Bob's success at building his practice also prompted partners to infer he had leadership ability (*legitimising*). The shift in the underlying power relations among Adam and the partners as a whole, caused by his clumsy attempt to assert control and his lack of political skills, destabilised the collective leadership dynamics and created an opportunity for Bob to rise to power.

[2] Stabilising

Bob had made campaign promises to influential colleagues (such as Chris who was leader of the firm's largest practice) to win their support. He now consolidated his position by inviting them to join his new senior leadership group. Bob also acted on his election promises by announcing a new programme of investment and involving the entire partnership in nominating and prioritising investment projects. Partners appreciated the relaxation of controls and began to enjoy their increased autonomy; they were reassured that Bob had the integrity to deliver on his promises.

At the partner conference on the first anniversary of the election, Bob presented the year-end financial results. While the presentations of the senior leadership group were emphatically upbeat, some partners expressed concerns about the dramatic rise in expenditure and on-going stagnation in revenue. They suggested that Bob's electoral promises were unrealistic and that he lacked the ability and integrity to lead the firm effectively. The majority of partners, however, remained supportive.

Analysing the unstable equilibrium. During this phase collective leadership dynamics were stabilised as partners were reassured by two factors: Bob had demonstrated integrity by fulfilling his election promises (*manoeuvring*) and, as a result, partners had gained in autonomy (*negotiating*). However, as financial performance deteriorated, some partners began to question Bob's leadership ability (*legitimising*).

[3] Destabilising

In spite of declining financial performance Bob held back from introducing more stringent controls on partners' spending as this would have been contrary to his electoral mandate (and potentially undermined his reputation for integrity). Profits continued to decline steadily and, towards the end of Bob's second year, members of the senior leadership group began expressing serious concerns. They put pressure on Bob to appoint a COO, with the brief to reduce costs. The new COO, who was not a partner and came from outside the firm, cut costs in areas that did not affect partners directly. As a result, partners were broadly supportive of these enhanced controls.

Whereas initially supportive, Chris (the head of the firm's largest practice) had become privately critical of Bob, telling colleagues within the senior leadership group that he and the new CEO were failing to "get a grip" on declining performance. He argued that the COO, as an external hire with no track record of success in the market, lacked legitimacy among partners, and was therefore unable to take the tough actions required to turnaround declining performance. By contrast, Chris was exceptionally successful, both as an individual professional and as a practice leader.

Chris had previously resisted all encouragement from colleagues to stand for election as Managing Partner, professing his commitment to his practice. He now let it be known within the senior leadership group that, for the sake of the firm, he might be persuaded to take over as COO. Meanwhile, as the annual partner conference approached, a growing number of partners were threatening a vote of no confidence in Bob.

A delegation from the senior leadership group met with Bob to argue that he should appoint Chris COO. They believed Chris's success in the market would give him the legitimacy among partners for them to accept more stringent controls on their performance. Bob could retain the title Managing Partner but focus exclusively on an "ambassadorial" role with clients. Bob reluctantly agreed, fired his COO, and appointed Chris in his place.

Analysing the unstable equilibrium. During this phase three factors brought about a shift in the underlying power relations among Bob, Chris, and the senior leadership group. First was Bob's reluctance to introduce controls that would impinge on partner autonomy (*negotiating*). Second was Bob's appointment of an external COO without a record of market success (*legitimising*). Third was Chris's political behaviour in undermining Bob while reassuring

colleagues in the senior leadership group that he had integrity through his stated reluctance to run for Managing Partner (*manoeuvring)*. The combination of these three factors served to destabilise the collective leadership dynamics and led to Chris gaining power at the expense of Bob.

[4] Stabilising

After three years of watching their profits decline, partners welcomed the "strong leadership" that Chris offered as COO. Rather than complaining about infringements on their autonomy, partners appreciated Chris for halting the precipitous decline in performance. By contrast, Bob appeared weak. Towards the end of his four-year term as Managing Partner, Bob took soundings among the partners to assess his probability of re-election. He realised he had very little support so announced he would not run for a second term. Chris put his name forward for election to Managing Partner, strongly supported by the members of the senior leadership group who had helped engineer his appointment as COO. As no rival candidate challenged him, he was elected unopposed.

Analysing the unstable equilibrium. During this phase Chris consolidated power at the expense of Bob. Initially it was the members of the senior leadership group who perceived Chris positively but now the partners as a whole came to share this view. They saw his success in the market as evidence of his leadership ability (*legitimising*). They were unaware of his political behaviour so perceived him as behaving with integrity (*manoeuvring*). As a result, when Chris asserted control, partners did not resent the constraints on their autonomy *(negotiating)* and the collective leadership dynamics as a whole were stabilised. Given the inherently unstable equilibrium, this stability would inevitably prove temporary.

Our second research question asked *how do changes in underlying power relations among professional peers serve to stabilise and destabilise collective leadership dynamics over time?* Our case study points to various factors likely to trigger this destabilisation. First, declining success in the marketplace may cause professionals to infer that a colleague no longer has the ability to lead them. Second asserting too much control may cause professionals to infer that a colleague is preventing them from exercising their autonomy, and asserting too little control may cause professionals to judge them as ineffective. Third, being seen to act politically may cause professionals to infer that a colleague lacks integrity. The destabilisation of any one of these relational processes will likely destabilise the collective leadership dynamics as a whole. For example, if individuals become less successful in the marketplace and lose the legitimacy to lead, or are perceived to lack integrity as a result of overt political manoeuvring, they will find it more difficult to assert control over their autonomous colleagues.

Conclusions

To answer our first research question – *What are the dynamics through which professional peers co-construct collective leadership?* – we have identified three relational processes: legitimising, negotiating, and manoeuvring. Legitimising expresses the relational process whereby professionals develop leader identity. Negotiating and manoeuvring express how professionals develop leader authority; the former is concerned with overt actions to enhance formal authority and the latter is concerned with more covert political actions to enhance informal influence. These express three different aspects of contested and contingent power relations within PSFs. Taken together they explain how collective leadership is co-constructed among professional peers. At any point in time, these relational processes may coexist in

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equilibrium, as professional peers claim and temporarily grant leadership and followership among themselves. However, as explained below, that equilibrium is inherently unstable.

In answering our second research question – *How do changes in underlying power relations among professional peers serve to stabilise and destabilise collective leadership dynamics over time?* – we have demonstrated how the collective leadership dynamics constitute an unstable equilibrium, as a result of the instability in the relational processes and power relations that underlie them. At any moment, each relational process encompasses a potentially destabilising tension between how a professional in a leadership position acts, and how their peers experience, interpret and react to these actions, and this can potentially trigger a shift in power relations. Over time, the destabilisation of one relational process potentially destabilises the collective leadership dynamics as a whole. The co-construction of leadership in PSFs is, therefore, unstable both at a moment in time and over time.

We have demonstrated the processes by which power may become manifest in professional peer relations, and the impact this may have on leadership. When collective leadership dynamics are destabilised, the most visible outcome is some form of change in formal leadership positions. For example, individuals may replace colleagues in leadership positions, new colleagues may join the senior leadership group, and existing leadership positions may be redefined. In time the equilibrium can be re-established (albeit temporarily). Leadership positions are confirmed and collective leadership dynamics are stabilised, as colleagues adjust to new power relationships, and engage in the process of mutually claiming and granting leadership and followership among themselves on a contingent and temporary basis. However, our study goes further than previous studies of leadership and power in professional service firms to explicitly identify the nature of these power relationships, and how processes

of claiming and granting leadership and followership are co-constructed among professional peers. As outlined below, this contributes to the understanding of both collective leadership processes in general, and in PSFs in particular.

Collective leadership and leader–follower relations

Our study contributes to the literature on collective leadership, which has been criticised for treating power as implicit and taken for granted, ignoring the extended network of power relations which underlie the interactions of those in formal leadership positions (Bolden, 2011; Denis et al., 2012). We have shown in detail the intricate, nuanced, and dynamic relational processes by which power relations can play out. Each relational process embodies a power relationship. This is most obvious within the relational process of negotiating (where professionals seek to exert control by formal means), but power is also implicit in legitimising (where professionals confer leader identity on a peer) and manoeuvring (where professionals' engage in covert political behaviour in order to influence their peers).

Our study explains how power can be lost and gained by those who aspire to formal leadership positions, and emphasises the inherently political nature of collective leadership. We therefore extend established theories by placing politics as well as power at the heart of our examination of collective leadership dynamics. In so doing our approach is consistent with critique of much contemporary management research for neglecting the reality of power relations within organizations (Bolden, 2011; Pfeffer, 2013). Whereas collective leadership for some authors holds the promise of more democratic forms of organizing (Raelin, 2016), our study shows that, just as with democracy in general, collective leadership may appear to

distribute power equally while conferring advantages on those who engage in political activity.

Our study of collective leadership also speaks to theories of followership. Whilst theories of collective leadership represent a valuable antidote to conventional approaches to leadership, which overly privilege leadership agency, there is a risk that contemporary followership studies place too great an emphasis on follower agency in isolation. Our study highlights the extent to which professionals in non-leader positions actively constitute or refute both the legitimacy and authority of those in positions of power, wielding a 'repertoire of possible agencies' as Collinson (2005: 1422) suggests. However, our study emphasises that these agencies are not detached from the agencies of leaders. Rather, as our model illustrates, the processes are relational and reciprocal, co-constructing each other. In other words, we cannot understand leadership and followership as separate phenomena (cf. Fairhurst, 2001; Collinson, 2005); they are co-dependent. Thus, our study emphasises that the often-perpetuated oppositional binaries of leader–follower positions (Collinson, 2006) do not offer a good starting point for understanding processes of collective leadership.

In other words, our study argues that the "accepted wisdom" that there can be no leadership without followers (Uhl-Bien et al, 2014: 83) is potentially simplistic and even misleading. Instead we argue for a conceptualisation of the ways in which individuals can move in and out of leader–follower relations, subtly and continuously, as they engage in the co-constructing collective leadership. We believe this represents an important new direction in leadership research and provides a fertile grounding for more studies that explore the challenging processes of compromising and consensus building, in which multiple individuals engage in co-constructing collective leadership.

At the same time, by identifying the significance of an individual leader's market success and political skills in gaining and exercising leadership legitimacy and authority, our study encourages collective leadership scholars to acknowledge the significance of individual agency – for leaders and followers alike – and the extent to which they are co-dependent. Ultimately, collective leadership is co-constructed through the actions and reactions of specific individuals. In studies of collective leadership there is a tendency to over-compensate by emphasising the processual and constructed nature of leadership and followership to such an extent that these studies neglect the significance of formal leadership positions altogether (Alvehus, 2018). By contrast, our longitudinal case study analysis has demonstrated that formal positions *do* matter in the co-construction of leadership, as it is peers' political processes of selecting, electing, undermining and deposing colleagues in leadership positions which signals shifts in underlying power relations.

By identifying and examining the inherent instabilities in contested and contingent power relations, our study calls into question a further taken for granted assumption within the leadership literature – that leader identity and authority are mutually constitutive. We show, instead, that colleagues may grant leadership identities to their peers, without necessarily granting them leadership authority, and without claiming follower identities for themselves. This deceptively straightforward statement initially appears somewhat counter-intuitive. However, we argue that whereas at an abstracted level we can understand processes of claiming and granting leader and follower positions to be unambiguous (DeRue and Ashford, 2010), in practice these relationships are considerably less clear than has previously been portrayed. For example, individuals may identify themselves as being in leadership positions whereas at the same time being bereft of authority. Claims and grants do not only happen in

the overt relational processes of legitimizing and negotiating, but also in the covert process of manoeuvring. We suggest that future research on leader–follower relations will achieve a deeper level of insight and more closely reflect reality, if it acknowledges that leadership and followership are temporary and precarious, as colleagues engage in on-going processes of interaction by claiming and challenging each other's claims to leadership.

Leadership and power in PSFs

Finally, our study represents a novel study of leadership dynamics in PSFs, by combining detailed systematic cross-sectional and longitudinal case analysis in multiple sectors to investigate a phenomenon previously neglected within the PSF and leadership literatures. It has gone beyond the somewhat abstract and impersonal representations of power relations which characterise studies of PSF governance (e.g. Greenwood and Empson, 2003) to identify and examine in detail the specific relational processes through which professional peers co-construct collective leadership. In so doing we challenge the somewhat simplistic about PSF leadership (von Nordenflycht, 2010). In fact, rather than talking in terms of "non-leadership" (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003) we find that leadership *is* being achieved in PSFs, and may be highly effective, but it is nuanced and complex, political and unstable.

We argue that what is deemed to be effective or ineffective leadership will vary according to the specific configuration of circumstances, the actions of each professional in leadership positions, and the interpretation that their colleagues place on those actions. For example, actors' explanations of cause and effect in firm performance play a key role in constituting legitimacy. In our longitudinal study there is no clear pattern underlying the stabilising and destabilising processes. This may in itself represent an important finding, suggesting that, like

weather patterns, it remains unpredictable and constantly changeable. However, further research would be needed, into multiple longitudinal case studies of changing power relations in PSFs to test this tentative finding. We suggest that there is much more to be discovered from researching the subtleties of leadership dynamics in PSFs, in particular by studying such processes in real-time, avoiding actors' inevitable post-facto rationalizations of events and intents.

Given the significance of PSFs to the global economy, our study has potentially disturbing implications when it comes to leadership, governance, and accountability of PSFs. It highlights two particularly vulnerabilities. First, given the complex and unstable political dynamics of these firms, it may be difficult to precisely locate relevant responsibility for inappropriate actions by individual professionals and to hold locally powerful leaders to account. Ultimately the most senior leaders are dependent upon the ongoing support of their powerful peers, suggesting that there may be circumstances where they are constrained in their ability to engage in effective oversight of their actions. This leads on to the second vulnerability. We have demonstrated that professionals can be elevated by their peers to senior positions of leadership through their success at selling professional work, and not necessarily as a result of their leadership experience and expertise. Also, to borrow from the language of political leadership, leaders of PSFs may be very good at campaigning but not good at governing, finding themselves in office but not in power. Both these underlying vulnerabilities of in PSFs suggests that, given the exceptional complexity and inherent instability of leadership dynamics, high-profile examples of leadership failings in PSFs are likely to remain commonplace.

Notes

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1. The primary activity of professional service firms, such as consulting, accounting, and law firms, is the "application of specialist knowledge to the creation of customised solutions to clients' problems" (Empson et al., 2015: 6). The core assets of these firms, i.e. knowledge and clients, are intangible, not directly owned or controlled by the firm and embodied in the senior professionals who have developed their technical knowledge and client relationships over many years.

2. PSFs traditionally operated a lockstep system whereby profits were shared among partners on the basis of time-served rather than individual performance. More commonly now partner remuneration is determined by a remunerations committee, elected by the partners, and operating independently of the Managing or Senior Partner.

3. In each firm no more than two to three females were identified by interviewees as part of the extended leadership group of 30 or more individuals. While there has been an increase in the number of female partners in professional service firms in recent years this change has predominantly been limited to more junior levels.

4. Letter and number in brackets denote firm and interviewee number.

5. As this case engages in analysis of very sensitive political activities, we have changed minor details in the following text in order to ensure anonymity. These details do not change the overall character of the leadership dynamics described.

6. Numbers in square brackets relate to numbers at top of Figure 3.

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Table I: Legitimising
Succeeding in market and Inferring leadership ability

One of the reasons I think why people were happy to have me as Senior Partner was because I was perceived to be a successful fee-earning partner… I ran a lot of our key relationships and so on. (A7)

A lot of the leadership in a firm is linked to your practice and the position in the market because those people have the credibility, those people are in the market, they actually know the client and so on and in the end all that we do is ultimately directed towards clients. (A1)

Leadership in this firm is a function of one's credibility as a professional, in what we do – I don't think I necessarily have been the *best* professional in our firm but I am respected, and particularly respected as a client relationship person – without that I cannot lead. (B11)

The people on the global executive committee are the people who are perceived within the firm as being very strong performers in their market or in their practice or whatever. (B2)

They earn the right to get into one of those [leadership] positions through ... doing fantastic stuff with clients, through enhancing the value of the partnership because they've either developed a client relationship that we didn't have before, or won a major piece of work and done that consistently ... They have the respect of the partners because they're recognised for doing that. (C14)

People were drawn to me, I had followers, before I went into a leadership role because I was the lead partner on [Company X] which was a big client for the firm. So I created opportunities for people, I was successful, they enjoyed working with the client. So all those things, I think, create followers. (C27)

Table II: Negotiating
Asserting control and Exercising autonomy

Because we are the size we are now, we have to have a more regulated set of rules. … So there has to be checks and balances and I think that stops a bit of entrepreneurialism. (A9)

Interviewer: Does anyone have power over you?
Partner: Not as far as I'm concerned no.
Interviewer: Does anyone think they have power over you?
Partner: I don't think so. (A8)

Being Chairman is like walking a tightrope of helping my partners feel like owners, helping them feel involved, helping them be engaged, not dominating them, not getting out in front, not having a huge ego which makes them feel like the Chairman's kind of off on his own trip. At the same time being strong and providing them with a sense of confidence that we're going somewhere. (B32)

The organisation has thrived on giving people a high degree of independence, allowing them to operate within certain constraints, which are mainly ethically driven and sort of quality driven, to do things in their own way. And has allowed people to experiment, quite freely, very freely I would say. (B13)

Even though all the partners are peers, there do need to be decisions made. There do need to be tough things done … knowing when you have to step in and say "no", "yes". (C14)

You take as much responsibility as you want. And people will allow it. But they don't offer it to you. (C6)

Table III: Manoeuvring
Behaving politically and Perceiving integrity

Part 1: Overt political behaviour – how it is understood, manifested, and criticised

There are people who are clearly very ambitious in the firm, who will say from quite an early age to you, particularly over a beer or over a meal or over a chat, "do you think I'm in the frame to be Managing Partner or Senior Partner, what is it I need to do?"… And they're regarded as more political in terms of what they think people will want to hear and what they think people will want to vote for. (A2)

To me politics smacks of alliance building in the corridors, in offices behind the scenes. It smacks of people engineering agendas, which creep up on the firm and deliver *faît accompli* or behave in ways that become disruptive. Or politics could manifest as someone undermining another person. I would like to think we don't have those behaviours in this firm. (B11)

I'm not naïve in thinking there's an amount of manipulation, manoeuvring, etc. involved in leading this firm, but if, underneath all of that, there's no authenticity about why we're doing it, then people get found out. And that's what I mean by political. And I think sometimes that political tag is unfairly ascribed. A very good friend of mine was unjustly perceived to be too political, and suffered as a result…. I think he does genuinely care about the firm. But unfortunately, sometimes he gives off that political vibe. (C32)

Part 2: Subtle political behaviour – how it is manifested, explained, and accepted

If there's an idea, a sort of major initiative, it will start with the inner circle. Then it will get the air cover from the Board… As it develops and it's got some legs [the Senior Partner] will involve one or two other heads of offices…and there will just be a sort of few people here and there. Then, if the thing is going to happen, there will be a call of all the heads of major offices and all the heads of the other practice groups to get their views before launching it on the partnership. (A12)

You need to build alliances with your colleagues, you need to build interest around the issue, you need to show someone that this is a successful story that they would like to be associated with. Plus you have to play a few kind of international things, alongside the local office things, and once you do, it goes very smoothly. (B29)

The previous election for Senior Partner there was a bit of a power struggle between two individuals who were dominant characters within the organisation and (person) held sway on the basis of support from a number of the more senior partners including the outgoing Senior Partner who had quite a lot of influence…. It was all closed doors – smoke filled rooms – lots of politicking etc. etc. etc. – a variety of promises being made to various senior people to get them to support [person]. (C6)

Part 3: Perception of integrity – how leaders are seen to be working for "common good"

Sometimes my sense would be [Senior Partner] doesn't necessarily always understand how influential he is. He's very modest about it, quite self-effacing, and he himself doesn't attach such great importance to some of those things that might be under the heading of creeping as in slightly sinister. He is not himself a player in that way at all. … it's simply because his own motivations in this world are so, I think, very genuine and clean. (A19)

[Before we elected him Chairman] he didn't say a lot at partner conferences. But on some key discussions he was the compelling speaker. I'd say once a year on a particular issue, he would come in on his white horse and say "well, this is what I think" and do it very well and with a good ability to sort of link the discussion that had been happening to some prime principle of the firm, some prime value of the firm. (B5)

[The Chair's] got a really remarkable ability to operate on his feet, without a script and not mumble, and he's hugely eloquent. His ability to deal with questions is almost unrivalled. He's very softly spoken and sometimes you just want him to rah-rah a bit, but that's not his style. He comes across as having very high integrity. (C31)

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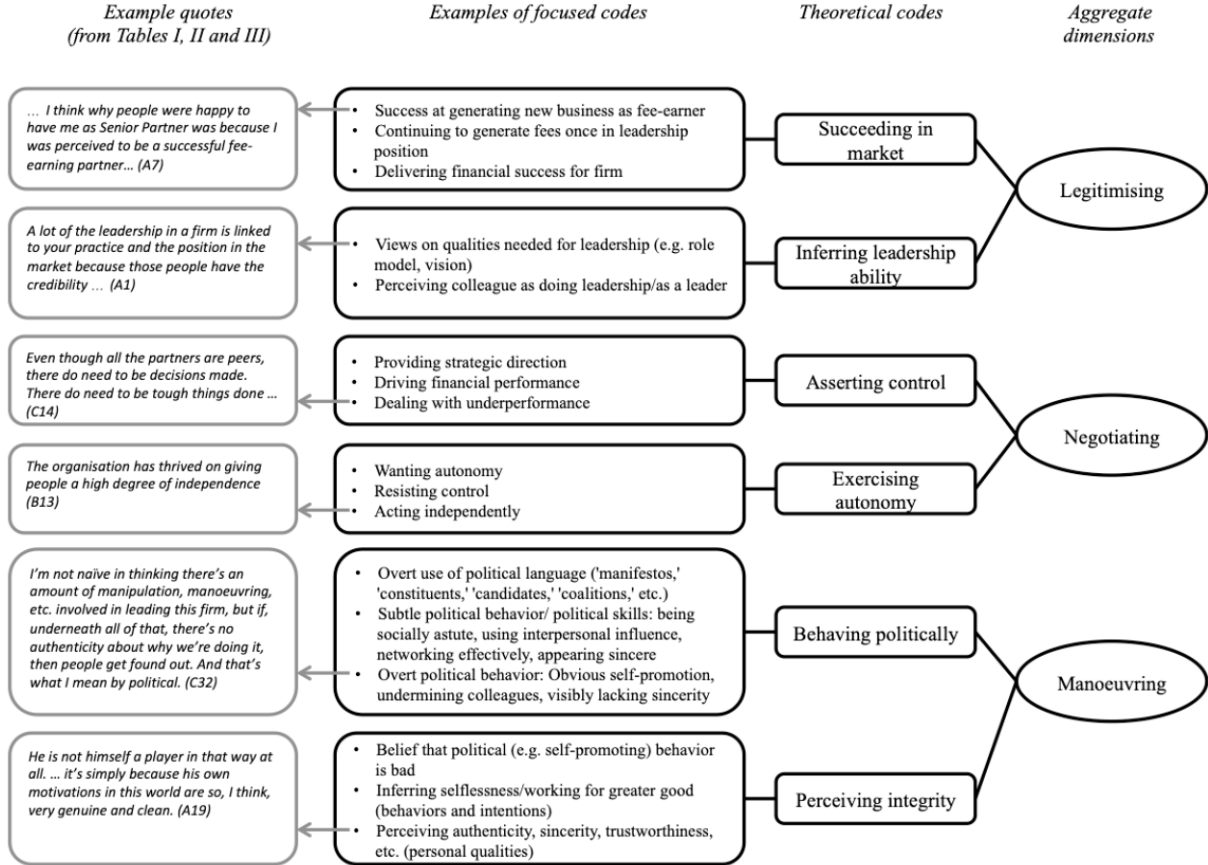
Figure 1. Coding structure

Figure 2. Co-constructing collective leadership dynamics among professional peers
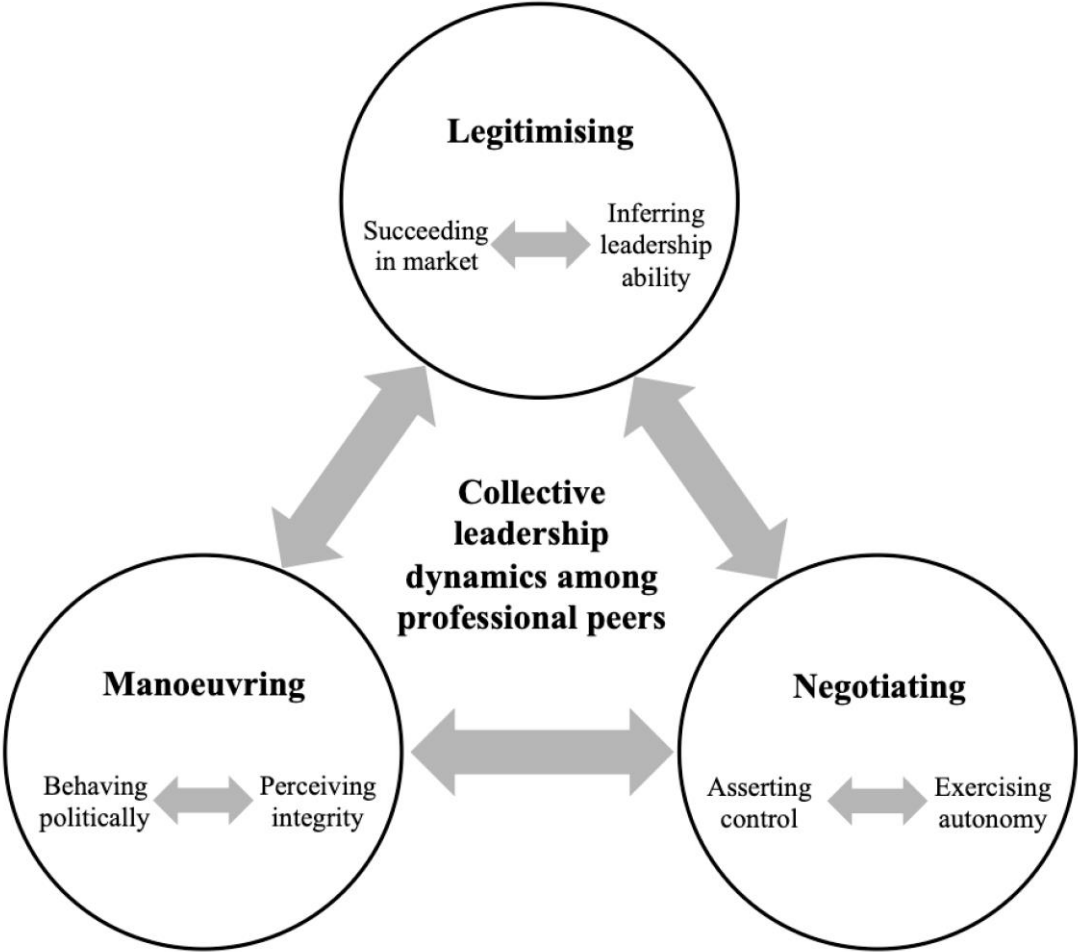
Figure 3. Collective leadership dynamics in a PSF: Events, actions and reactions over a 5-year period

	[1] Destabilising (Year 1)		[2] Stabilising (Year 2)		[3] Destabilising (Year 3)		(Year 4)		[4] Stabilising (Year 5)	
Key dynamics	Negotiating	Legitimising Manoeuvring	Negotiating Manoeuvring	Legitimising	Legitimising Negotiating	Legitimising Manoeuvring	Legitimising Manoeuvring		Negotiating	Legitimising Manoeuvring
Partners	Perceive Adam as exerting excessive control.	6 run for election.	Enjoy increasing autonomy and investment.	Some concern about financial performance.	Support enhanced controls.		Threaten vote of no confidence in Bob.		Endorse Chris taking a strong "grip" on (other) partners' performance.	
Senior leadership group members	Support Adam.	4 run for election.	New group established. Implement relaxation of partner controls.	Publicly support Bob.	Growing concern about financial performance. COO joins firm.		Increasing concern about Bob's effectiveness. Pressure on Bob to appoint Chris as COO. COO fired from firm.		Support Bob and Chris in their respective roles.	No alternative candidates step forward.
Adam	Introduces partner performance management systems.	Does not stand for re-election.								
Bob	Runs successful small practice.	Campaigns and runs for election.	Establishes new senior leadership group. Launches new investment programme.		Resists introducing more stringent controls.	Appoints COO.	Resigns from chairing ExCo. to focus on client relations.		Decides not to run for reelection.	
Chris	Runs successful large practice.	Decides not to run for election.	Joins new senior leadership group.		Privately critical of Bob.		Lobbies for COO role. Takes over as COO and chair of ExCo.		Imposes stringent partner management systems.	Runs for election unopposed.
	Year 1	Election of Managing Partner	Year 2	Year 3			Year 4		Year 5 / Election of Managing Partner	