



**Aalborg Universitet**

**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
DENMARK

## **What does it take to become a Cullinan Leader?**

Larsen, Mette Vinther; Madsen, Charlotte Øland; Svane, Marita Susanna

*Published in:*

Det Danske Ledelsesakademis konference

*Publication date:*

2014

*Document Version*

Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Larsen, M. V., Madsen, C. Ø., & Svane, M. (2014). What does it take to become a Cullinan Leader? When the relational construction of leading is on the move. In F. Poulfelt (Ed.), Det Danske Ledelsesakademis konference: Meningsskabelse, tillid og frihed - udfordringer i moderne ledelse (pp. 1-27)

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- ? Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- ? You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- ? You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [vbn@aub.aau.dk](mailto:vbn@aub.aau.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# **Ledelseskonference: Meningsskabelse, tillid og frihed – udfordringer i moderne ledelse**

Det Danske Ledelsesakademi 2014 konference  
*1.- 2. december 2014 på Roskilde Universitet*

Forskningsbaseret paper

## **What does it take to become a Cullinan leader<sup>1</sup>?– *When the relational construction of leading is on the move* First draft**

Mette Vinther Larsen<sup>2</sup>  
Charlotte Øland Madsen &  
Marita Svane  
Department of Business & Management,  
Aalborg University

---

<sup>1</sup> “The Cullinan Leader” and other uses of the word cullinany are pseudonyms to uphold agreed confidentiality.

<sup>2</sup> Corresponding author. All authors are situated at Aalborg University, Department of Business & Management, Fibigerstræde 2, 9220 Aalborg Øst, [mvl@business.aau.dk](mailto:mvl@business.aau.dk), 99408253

# What does it take to become a Cullinan leader?

*When relational construction of leading is on the move*

## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to explore and discuss how seven managers during a top leader competence development programme; the Cullinan Leader, which lasted a little more than a year constructed meaning with each other about what leading is all about and how they could practice leading in, what they in-situ believed to be, reasonable and sensible ways. The paper has a relational and social constructionism perspective on leading and brings in the notions of; social constructionism, leading in-between, continually evolving relational meaning construction, social poetics, unjustified responses, different inter-acts and unique confluent moment acquire in the attempt to present how leading can be understood from this perspective. The perspective and the notions are theoretically presented, empirically illustrated and subsequently used to discuss how leading can be explored and understood from this perspective.*

**Keywords:** social constructionism, relational leading, meaning construction, unique moments, social poetic, unjustified responses, confluence

## Introduction

*M: I think these days here have been good, I feel close to being a Cullinan leader now*

*Several: Yes!*

*.....*

*L: The Cullinan leader is beginning to enter me. It has been knocking on seminar 1 and 2... we are helping each other to become more enquiring."*

The above was uttered by top leaders during the third seminar of a one year long top leader competence development programme: "The Cullinan Leader" The amount of management and leadership courses in Denmark is huge and it keeps growing. Both within the public and the private sector leadership programmes and courses are the most appealing type of competence development and between 24 and 33% of all courses held in Denmark in 2013 and 2014 centred on management and leadership.<sup>3</sup> What goes on at these courses, what kind of sense is constructed, what and how do the leaders learn and how is leading as a practice and management learning connected? These were some of the questions we, as researchers, asked ourselves as we were invited to partake in a top leader competence development course for little more than a year as follow researchers.

We all research within the field of leading from a social constructionism and relational perspective and we have for some years taught and still teach practicing managers at master programs in public governance and business administration at our university. Based on this we have some experience talking with leaders and trying to make room for them to explore their practice from various theoretical perspectives. Simultaneously, we have also observed

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://magisterbladet.dk/magisterbladet/2013/042013/042013\\_p30](http://magisterbladet.dk/magisterbladet/2013/042013/042013_p30),  
<http://www.djoefbladet.dk/nyheder/2014/10/kurser-i-ledelse-hitter-hos-dj-oe-ferne.aspx>

several management courses, strategy processes; change programmes etc. and held multiple conversations with leaders both in the public and the private sphere. This has provided us with insights into how some organisations and leaders work with changing and developing their practice, the organisation's processes, structures and organising in general.

The field of management learning is something we find both intriguing and interesting because it enables us to follow how leadership is articulated both by consultants and leaders in contexts that are diverse from the leaders' everyday practice. In such settings we are allowed to explore how leaders communicate about their practice with other leaders, employees, consultants and researchers. We can observe what words, stories and metaphors they use and what discourses are presents as they attempt to make sense of their own and others' practices together with each other. Hence, exploring leading within these contexts adds new perspectives to our knowledge about and understanding of leading as a practice.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how seven managers during a top leader competence development course that lasted a little more than a year attempted to construct meaning with each other about what leading is all about and how one can practice leading in, what they believe to be, reasonable and sensible ways. What has been interesting to follow is how the relational constructions of what leading is about never settles down, but continues to change and develop dependent on who takes part in the communication, the words and concepts they use and the concrete context.

The paper will present and discuss how a concept like 'cullinany' gains content and meaning based on the conversations the managers have with each other as they attempt to figure out what leading means to them and how they can lead in, what they in-situ believe are reasonable and sensible ways. At times the concept cullinany lingered whereas other times it was weighed only to be found wanting. The purpose of this exploration and illustrations of how the sense these leaders jointly constructed continually was on the move is to initiate a discussion of how leading and management development, based on insights presented in this paper, can be understood from a relational and social constructionism perspective.

A perspective where the meaning people construct with each other as they communicate is significant if one wants to understand how a concept like leading is understood and practiced. It is through people's communication with each other that concepts and words become meaningful and brought to life through practice;" *Situations, organizations, and environments are talked into being.*" as Weick et al. (2005: 409) writes. On these grounds the paper supplements existing processual research on leading and leadership development by illustrating and emphasizing the significant role communication and relational construction of meaning have when one wants to understand leading and management learning as continually emerging and becoming.

### **Leading understood as relational processes**

The theoretical framework for the paper is anchored within a social constructionism and relational perspective (Larsen & Rasmussen, 2014; Hosking, 2011, 2010, Gergen, 2009; Uhl-Bien, 2006). A perspective where the meaning the leaders participating in the top leader competence development course continually and incrementally construct with each other in

their attempts to figure out what cullinany is about acquire a significant role when one wants to understand leading (Larsen & Rasmussen, 2014; Cunliffe, 2008; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002).

To perceive leading as relational processes that emerge between people as they attempt to deal with everyday challenges and operations have been elaborated and discussed by many social construct scholars (McNamee & Hosking, 2012; Ospina & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Hosking, 2011, 2010; Gergen, 2009, 2005, 1995; Cunliffe & Shotter, 2006; Shotter, 2006, 2005). They each focus on various aspects of how a social construct perspective on leading can enhance our existing knowledge on leading. Where some like Cunliffe & Eriksen (2011) focus on the moral and ethical perspectives on leading others like Hosking (2011, 2010) explore how leading is practiced from a social constructionism perspective where organisations are constituted by several local and cultural realities where various understandings and practices thrive side by side.

The focus on relational leading that is presented and explored in this paper is one that gives primacy to how the understanding of what constitutes leading continually emerges and changes dependent on the concrete context and the persons taken part in the communication. This focus stems from a curiosity that arose during “the Cullinan Leader” program where we observed how the leaders participating in the programme used, perceived and tried to make sense of the concept “cullinany” in ways that differed, continually emerged and never settled down. Hence, the research question being explored in this paper is: *“How do the understanding and use of the concept “cullinany” change during the top leader competence development programme ‘The Cullinan Leader’ and what can be learned about leading based on these changes?”*

### **Leading occurs in-between people**

Perceiving leading as relationally constructed opens up for an understanding of leading as processes that take place in-between people, where focus is on the meaning these people jointly construct and the actions they initiate (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The leader still possesses formal authorities that separate him from other organisational members, but what is interesting from a relational perspective is how these formal authorities are practiced and brought to life in relation with others on an everyday basis in organisations (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Leading is not something a person possesses or entail, leading is always a joint action taking place between people where they in relation with each other attempt to figure out what is going on and how they can proceed in ways, they in-situ believe are reasonable and sensible (Gergen, 2009). Uhl-Bien (2006, 654) writes: *“... a relational perspective... views leadership as a process of social construction through which certain understandings of leadership come about and are given privileged ontology.”* This quote emphasizes how leading are processes where people jointly figure out how to make sense about a given organisational issue or situation and based on the sense they construct certain actions are initiated with the intention to realize the sense just constructed (Hosking, 2011; Shotter, 2006). Hence, all knowledge about what is perceived as sensible and reasonable are socially and contextually constructed (Gergen, 2009).

Within this approach formal documents like structural diagrams, strategy procedures, job descriptions, action plans and statistical analysis do exist and play a part in how leading is

practiced. They are merely perceived as objectified phenomena that are both socially and contextually constructed (Shotter, 2011; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004). Following the way these formal documents are realised and brought to life depends on the sense the organisational members construct in-situ as they attempt to solve the concrete challenge they are facing in ways they in-situ find both sensible and reasonable (Larsen & Rasmussen, 2014; Shotter, 2012).

### **Relational leading are continual attempts to construct meaning**

The way organisations evolve and continually become is closely entwined with how the members within the organisation construct meaning and act: “... *organizational realities are created by organizational members as they try to make sense of what is happening, both as it occurs and in retrospect.*” (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2006: 133) Language and communication acquire a significant position in this perspective on organisations and leading because it is through leaders and organisational members’ communication with each other that the organisational realities are created (Hosking, 2011; Shotter & Cunliffe, 2006; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004).

Cunliffe & Eriksen (2011) argue that: “*Relational leaders see communication not as an expression of something preconceived, but as emerging and open, as a way of working out what is meaningful and possible.*” (p. 1434). Following this, leading emerges and is constructed primarily through communication through the use of what Bakhtin (1986) calls ‘dialogism’ where participants talk *with* and not *to* each other and in relation with each other try to understand the concrete situation they find themselves in the midst of. Language do not mirror or represent a reality, on the contrary, language, dialogue and communication are used to both understand and construct realities (Larsen & Rasmussen, 2014; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Hosking, 2011; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004).

Communication can then be perceived as relational attempts to figure out how to understand and handle the current task that organisational members face in a way they at the moment believe is meaningful: “*In essence meanings belong to a word in its position between speakers.*” (Vološinov, 1986: 101) Exploring how the generation of meaning occurs from a perspective emphasizing social construction illustrates that relations play a central role regarding what meaning is being constructed. Ospina & Uhl-Bien (2012) argue that meaning is always an outcome of people’s joined attempts to understand what goes on around them. Simultaneously, Cunliffe & Eriksen (2011) write that meaning is always underway; it is what Bakhtin (1986) calls ‘unfinalizable’ – momentary, dynamic and porous.

Hence, the construction of meaning never settles down it is constantly on the move dependent on the actual context and the people who take part in the communication: “... *meaning can never be finalized, nor has it any ultimate origin, it is always in the process of making.*” (Uhl-Bien, 2006: 655). Meaning is never given or incorporated in certain words or concepts. Meaning stems from actions and it emerges out of organisational members’ gestures and adjusted responses where they in-situ invite each other to construct a meaning that they in the given situation find reasonable and sensible (Mead, 2005). Following meaning is never the same, meaning keeps changing in incremental ways through actors’ communication and their actions (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2006; Vološinov, 1986).

### **Relational leading is guided by local meaning structures**

As leaders and organisational members communicate with each other and attempt to construct meaning they draw on their existing knowledge and what they take for granted. They all embody understandings, knowledge and taken for granted assumptions that have been socially constructed and through years of primary and secondary socialising practices incrementally have developed into what Schütz (1967, 1966) and Berger & Luckmann (1996) call meaning structures. These meaning structures have gradually evolved along with peoples' attempt to deal with challenges in reasonable and sensible ways, and they represent the experiences these people have generated in relation with other persons (Berger & Luckmann, 1996).

The meaning structures are socially constructed, they are based on experience taken for granted assumptions and they are shared, but they do also differ dependent on the concrete persons and contexts and dependent on the local, cultural and relational grouping (Hosking, 2011, 2010). Gergen would argue that people in their everyday practice act accordingly to social and local constructed rules: *"... saying an actor acts rational is equivalent to saying that he follows the conventions or 'play by the rules' favoured within a particular part of the world."* (Gergen, 2009: 242; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004: 235 IN Larsen, 2014: 86) Following, the process of constructing meaning in relation with people that know each other well and are each other's significant other is not always as porous and momentary as it could be. People tend in their ambition to act rational to construct meaning and understanding that resembles their existing meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experiences (Shotter, 2005a).

Through years of practice, experience and meaning construction peoples' meaning structures have been incrementally refined and developed. Hence, they become reified and perceived as generally accepted and normative ways to act and make sense of the concrete situations (Shotter, 2005). People tend to forget that the meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions and existing knowledge are socially constructed and reconstructed. The meaning structures represent the understandings and practices that locally are privileged and perceived as sensible and reasonable, hence, they reduce complexity and help people understand the situations they find themselves in the midst of (Weick, 1995, 1988, 1979, Schütz, 1972).

The meaning structures then function as a shared frame of reference that can be used to make sense of concrete situations. Simultaneously, the meaning structures contain certain practices and acts that locally and within a certain grouping are perceived as sensible and reasonable ways to act (Shotter, 2011; Gergen, 2009, 2005; Weick, 1988; Berger & Luckmann, 1996). Shotter uses the terms 'action guiding anticipations' and 'action guiding advisories' in his framing of how people act in their ambitions to understand a given situation and act in ways that are perceived to be sensible and reasonable (Shotter, 2006, 2005, 2005a).

Shotter (2005) argues that people often construct meaning in ways that are guided by their existing meaning structures, knowledge and what they take for granted, what they anticipate. At the same time the actions they initiate in their ambitions to act in what they perceive as sensible and reasonable ways are structured in relation to what they anticipate will happen – guided by what Mead (2005) calls a shared generalised other. The outcome is, that when

people think they act through improvisation, experiment, intuition or are spontaneous they act according to already established meaning structures (Shotter, 2006, 2005a). They make the new and unknown old and familiar and in that way miss out on the uniqueness each situation contains.

Any situation, gesture or attempt to construct meaning with other people contain incremental changes, something unpredicted, unknown and unique that people have to relate to (Hosking, 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Shotter, 2005). It can, however, be difficult to grasp the unique because: *"... we never say or hear words, we say and hear what is true and false, good or bad, important and unimportant, pleasant or unpleasant, and so on. Words are always filled with content and meaning."* (Vološinov, 1986: 41f) Peoples' existing meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions and existing knowledge are always present and guide their perception (Shotter, 2005). Following, they are not always aware of the possibility to grasp and dwell with the unique and once-occurring that takes place in every act, situation and construction of sense because every act and our language is entwined in our existing meaning structures (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2006; Shotter, 2005a).

Shotter alone (2011) and together with Cunliffe (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003) present the term 'social poetics' as a possible way to slow down the immediate and relational construction of meaning and make room for more reflexivity and different reasonable and sensible understandings and practices. The way people communicate about an experience or a situation organises and constructs the experience and situation (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2003; Vološinov, 1986). Hence, people can by slowing down, explore various ways to understand a given situation or experience, they can use other words and concepts to make sense about what goes on around them and construct other and different ways to act that also are sensible and reasonable (Shotter, 2011). Following, the participating people can pause their immediate way to understand a given situation or experience and explore the unique and unknown aspects that occur. They can attempt to dwell in the momentary lack of meaning and in relation with others try to construct other meaning and practice in different ways that also are reasonable and sensible (Shotter, 2011, 2005a).

### **Relational leading is about making words come alive**

A purpose of being able to practice 'social poetic' and acknowledge that there are many ways to understand and deal with a given experience or situation is that leading always involves many relations, hence many meaning structures. These relations are characterised by multiple and diverse ways to act and construct meaning that may be different but they are all perceived as reasonable and sensible (Hosking, 2011, 2010). Hosking (2011) uses the term 'inter-acting': *"I use the term inter-acting (a) to speak of a performance (b) that involves a coming together (c) of 'whoever and whatever' thereby (re) constructing person-world relations as (d) relational realities."* (Hosking, 2011: 53) Perceived in an organisational perspective this means that there are many diverse and different ways to construct reasonable meaning and act in sensible ways present at the same time (Hosking, 2011).

Leading, therefore, comes in many shapes, colours and sizes within the same organisations where dependent on the context and the people present various meaning will be constructed and different actions be initiated. Hence relational leading also revolves around being able to make these diverse inter-acts to co-occur in ways where the various ways to act and construct



meaning can; “...open-up spaces for new kinds of conversations and for new ways of being in relation, and open up possibilities for multiple local realities... to co-exist and be appreciated as different but equal.” (Hosking, 2010: 19). A purpose of relational leading is to support the becoming of diverse understanding and practices and to reflexively explore how unique, unknown and unfinalizable the construction of meaning can be if every experience or situation is perceived as new (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Shotter, 2011).

A relational and social constructionism approach to leading is an attempt to in constructive ways to work with and embrace how organisations continually become in diverse ways through peoples’ communication and attempts to solve their tasks in what they at the present moment relationally believe to be reasonable and sensible. Cunliffe & Shotter (2006) argue: “... not matter what ‘thin simplifications’... we might produce to give order to life’s activities, chaos happens and we must deal with it ways that are spontaneously responsive to unique and crucial details as they change and develop.” (p. 124) It is an approach to leading where it is taken for granted that meanings shift and develop along with peoples’ actions and understanding. Dickinson (1961) write: “A word is dead when it is said, some say. I say it just begins to live that day.” Once words are uttered by people in conversations they begin to take shape, gain colour and become alive as they are used to construct meaning about a given situation where people want to figure out what actions it would be sensible and reasonable to initiate.

Simultaneously, it is a perspective on leading where it is accepted that there are multiple different meaning structures, existing knowledge, experiences and taken for granted assumption co-existing and evolving at once and in various ways in every organisation. Following, it will be the concrete context and the actual people partaking that jointly figure out what meaning and which actions that in-situ are perceived as reasonable and sensible. Shotter (2014) draws at times a parallel to parkour as he describes how leading can be understood within this perspective; as a practice where you have your existing experience and knowledge embedded as you move around but you have to, simultaneously and continuously, take the curves and surface structures of the territory into considerations if you want to move forward in appropriate ways.

Recently, Gergen (2014) at times uses the concept; ‘confluence’ in his attempts to describe the continual emerging, relational and processual understanding that is anchored within this perspective on organisations and leading. Processes that are constituted by long lines of unique relations and here-and-now situations where people improvise their way forward manoeuvring jointly between existing and socially constructed knowledge and the unknown people constantly find themselves in the midst of.

Based on the theoretical perspective on relational leading that has been presented here it becomes possible to discuss and explore how a concept like cullinany is being used during a top leader competence development programme by seven leaders in their joined attempt to understand what constitutes reasonable and sensible ways to lead. In the following the top leader competence development programme: “the Cullinan Leader” is presented. Following, examples on how the concept ‘cullinany’ was being used and discussed by the seven managers are presented and explored from a relational and social constructionism perspective on leading.

## **The top leader competence development programme**

“The Cullinan Leader” is a cross-regional top leader competence development programme that is aimed at top leaders who want to work with their leading in, what the consultancy firms that offered the programme called, post-conventional, profound and sustainable ways. The intention with the programme is to offer top leaders the possibility to engage in learning communities with other top leaders and work with specific strategic or organisational challenges from their praxis that the leaders have chosen themselves. The programme is positioned in a complexity-thinking approach to leadership where the leaders are presented to different tools and techniques that would help them deal with complex and complicated matters in authentic, ethical and insightful ways.

The title of the programme; “The Cullinan Leader” stems from a larger survey study where approximately 600 managers were asked to fill out a questionnaire and based on their replies 8 leadership practices were formulated. The survey showed that only 1% of the managers embodied practices that made him an 8; a cullinan leader; a leader who embodies charisma, who creates social, material and spiritual transformation, who explores existential questions, works with his personal leadership, challenges taken-for-granted assumptions and can communicate with both kings and common people. Organisations that have a cullinan leader in front are effective, innovative and reach great results. Although only 1% lead cullinany it is possible to transform ones leadership and be able to make employees and middle managers shine like diamonds carved out of a mine. Maybe even locate a cullinan diamond like sir William Crooke did after many years of unsuccessful search.

In sum more than 20 leaders participated in the programme that consisted of four joined seminars, three-five group meetings, where the leaders in groups of seven-eight managers in more depth discussed relevant managerial challenges with each other. Some of these group meetings were facilitated by a consultant and some were unfacilitated and lead by the leaders themselves. The programme was facilitated by an international consultancy firm in cooperation with public consultants from some of the Danish regions. The Danish public consultants were responsible for administrating the programme and they facilitated some of the smaller group meetings the participating leaders held during the programme. The international consultants were in charge of the content, framing and processes taken place during the four seminars.

We participated in all the activities during the programme, primarily observing. Besides observing the seminars and group meetings we also held 1-3 individual conversations with the participating leaders during the year the programme ran. The data for this paper focuses primarily on communication between managers in one of the three leader groups. The group consisted of seven managers that during the year the programme ran held four facilitated and three unfacilitated meetings. During these meetings, the researcher who followed the group through the whole program took notes that attempted to represent as much of the verbal and nonverbal communication as the researcher’s noting pace allowed. Besides data from the group meetings, observations and notes from the four seminars also make up the empirical material for this paper.

We have chosen to include data from only one of the three leader groups to minimize complexity for the reader and because these data contain sufficient material to engage in explorations about how the relational constructions of the ways leading can be understood and practiced continually change and develop dependent on context and the people who participated in the conversations.

The seven managers were primarily public sector leaders; there was only one private sector leader in the learning group. They were all leaders with several years of experiences from various departments, organisations and firms and who all were interested in developing themselves as leaders. Their organisational challenges and focus areas in relation to their personal leadership had both overlapped and differed. One of the leaders was interested in building and sustaining constructive strategic dialogues with the board of her organisation, whereas another was occupied with how he could empower the leaders and employees in his organisation and enable them to take responsibility and ownership of their local change initiatives.

Their concrete challenges differed in relation to the concrete content and processes, but, the challenges also overlapped as both leaders were convinced that their practice as leaders had a huge impact on how the processes would unfold. During the learning group meetings the leaders would spend time on exploring each other's organisational challenges, try to put the challenge in new perspectives and see how they could help each other move forward in, what they believed at the present moment, would be reasonable and sensible ways.

### **Researching the relational constructions of leading**

The data generated stems from a longitudinal qualitative case study where we have conducted explorative observation studies and held qualitative and individual enquiring conversations with the participating leaders (McNamee & Hosking, 2012, Robson, 2011, Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002). We have used a social constructionism and relational approach in this study emphasizing that we are always in relation with others -imaginatively or physically (McNamee & Hosking, 2012, Cunliffe, 2011, Gergen, 2009). Hence, all knowledge emerges out of the relations people take part and as a researcher you cannot detach yourself from the ongoing, fluid, contextual and relational sense constructing processes that take place – we are all 'embodied insiders' (Cunliffe, 2011).

The purpose of the study has been to understand how leaders during a formal competence development programme together with each other, consultants and us as researchers communicated and constructed sense about how leading can be understood and how they believed it should be practiced. In this process we have tried to practice what Shotter (2011) calls a '*withness-thinking*' where we; "... *work with research participants from within conversations to explore how we ongoingly interpret, understand, and relate with others and our surroundings.*" (Cunliffe, 2011: 658) We have aimed at following and becoming a part of the flux and flow that continually have emerged concurrent as the leaders jointly have tried to construct sense about the challenges they were facing and figure out how they should handle them in reasonable ways (Gergen, 2009, Cunliffe & Shotter, 2006, James, 1909).

Simultaneously, we have worked towards '*moving inside the processes*' and '*inside the moment of managing*' (Shotter, 2005. 2005a) to gradually generate knowledge about how the meaning

about leading and the concrete practices evolved and changed during the year the programme lasted (Shotter, 2005a; James, 1909). The meaning and practices evolved and changed alongly as the leaders jointly tried to understand what happened around them and initiate what they in-situ and relationally believed to be sensible and reasonable. Following, we have with this approach been able to construct an understanding of how practices that at one moment appeared to be a reasonable way to handle an organizational challenge later was be understood as unsuitable (Shotter, 2005a; Vološinov, 1986).

### **Observing as 'embodied insiders'**

During the seminars and group meetings our role has primarily revolved around observing the communication processes. A few times we have been asked about our reflections and observations and then we have shared our notes and thoughts with the leaders, but only when called upon as the agreement with the consultants was that we would only be observing and taking notes during seminars and group meetings.

We are well aware that this does not mean that our presence was not noticed or did not affect the concrete processes and conversations between the leaders and consultants (Cunliffe, 2011; Robson, 2011). Our presence was noticed and our role discussed on various occasions, so we have despite our verbal silence during these seminars and learning group meeting influenced the communication and taken part in constructing meaning (Kornberger & Carter, 2011, Czarniawska, 2004).

The joint construction of meaning also has an extra dimension as we also have held 1-3 individual enquiring conversations with the participating leaders during the one year the Cullinan Leader program lasted. During these enquiring conversations the leaders and we have jointly co-authored the various perceptions and understanding that were expressed during these conversations. The ambition has been in-situ insights into the leaders' practice and understanding that emerged from meaningful dialogues between the leaders and us (McNamee & Hosking, 2012; Cunliffe, 2011). Dialogues that would explore the various ways the leaders could relate themselves to their practice and the concrete challenges they were facing (Cunliffe, 2011).

### **The social construction of data**

The notes we have taken during the seminars and group meetings present insights into how the leaders communicated with each other about their practice and reflections about leading. We have done the best we could to uphold the actual text-context relations and get as many aspects and parts of the verbal as well as nonverbal communication down on paper. They are, however, notes taken by us where we unavoidably have been affected by selective perception and influenced by our research interest and existing knowledge (Robson, 2011; Alvesson & Deetz, 2009; Czarniawska, 2004).

The notes generate an understanding of the organisational challenges and processes the leaders were occupied with at the present moment where the seminars and group meetings were held. Hence, they provide insights into how the leaders communicated with each other, what word and concepts they used in their joint attempts to make sense about the concrete challenges and figure out how they each could proceed in what they, at the present moment found reasonable and sensible.

We are, however, well aware that we have taken an active part in constructing the data that we are now exploring in this paper. McNamee & Hosking (2012) uses the term '*re-construction*' to describe how researchers working with qualitative data always re-construct their data because as they begin to work with them they are in another context, where other discourses and ways to construct meaning are used. Czarniawska (2004: 135) writes: "*Every reading is an interpretation, and every interpretation is an association: tying the text that is interpreted to other texts, other voices, other times and places.*" Continual reweaving and reconstructing is an integrated part of doing qualitative and social constructionism research where every data generated is both socially constructed and represents local here-and-now interpretations (McNamee & Hosking, 2012, Cunliffe, 2011, Czarniawska, 2004).

This does not mean that data can be re-constructed in any way the researchers see fit; much emphasis is being put into preserving as many text-context relations as possible and ensuing that the chosen method supports what the researcher set out to explain and offers a trustworthy and credible understanding (McNamee & Hosking, 2012; Kvale, 1992). The reason is that the text-context relations enables one to explore how existing taken-for-granted assumptions and shared meaning structures are being upheld and changed communicatively. Hence, one can follow how people jointly relate to a practice like for example leading and one can engage in conversations where other ways to relate can be discussed and maybe shape future understandings and practices. Kvale (1992) argues that science is the creative search to make a community understand an object of study better, more fully and deeply.

We would not argue that what we offer is a better understanding; it is, however, another understanding and framing of leading. A framing and understanding where leaders' continuous in-situ and joined attempts to understand the challenges and situations they find themselves in the midst of and figure out how to act in what they, at the present moment, perceive as reasonable and sensible ways play a significant part in how leading can be perceived. This dynamic, fluent and relational approach to leading enables one to perceive leading as meshed and confluent practices and understanding that continually are on the move.

In the following part of the paper we will present and explore how seven leaders during the top leader competence development programme communicated with each other and consultants as they attempted to construct meaning about how leading could be understood and practiced. The presentation and exploration will center on the use of the concept 'cullinany' because it was a concept that was used and discussed during the year the programme lasted, and because it was a concept where meaning and understanding of the concept differed throughout the year.

### **Exploring how the concept 'cullinany' is on the move**

Throughout the one year the top leadership programme took place the idea of what it meant to be a cullinan leader was discussed and explored by the seven leaders. During the first seminar of the programme, which took place in Denmark, cullinany was, by the two international consultants; Cynthia and Charles facilitating the programme, presented as an extraordinary way of leading that only few were capable of practicing. Cynthia and Charles

explained the research study behind the programme and how researchers had identified the cullinan leader as a person with extraordinary characteristics; he embodies charisma, he creates social, material and spiritual transformation, he explores existential questions, works with his personal leadership, challenges taken-for-granted assumptions and can communicate with both kings and common people.

Cynthia and Charles explain how only 1% of the practicing leaders today are cullinan leaders. It is, however, possible to transform one's leadership and practices by being enquiring and dare to move out of one's comfort zone and develop post-conventional leadership qualities and be able to transform the organisation. Cynthia and Charles present the purpose of the programme as being able to be enquiring, bold, curious and hold each other accountable for moving towards a more ethical, sustainable and transformative way of leading. Charles explains how cullinany is not a tool kit, but more an awareness of being enquiring and how the leaders should perceive the programme as a journey of mutual learning. It should be a journey where the leaders each take their point of departure in a central challenge that they want to explore and discuss during the programme with other leaders.

The leaders did not use the concept cullinany during the first seminar in any way to refer to their own practice and when they used it they referred to it with a certain distance and reverence as something inspirational and extraordinary, but also detached from their practice. The international consultants used the concept several times for example as they described how post-conventional leadership is a part of being a cullinan leader.

During the seminar the leaders are divided into three learning groups who will meet at least four times between the planned seminars. This is where the seven leaders, who generate data for this paper, meet each other and the local consultant; Margaret, who is in charge of facilitating the group meeting, for the first time as learning group members. Steven, is leading a regional medical supply function, Christian is director for a larger entrepreneurial consultancy firm, Jenny is the HR manager for a Danish hospital, Emma is the chief surgeon at a Danish hospital, Laura is leader of the department of regional development in one of the Danish regions and Paul and Thomas are both directors at two of the Danish hospitals. Jenny and Emma know each other as they work together and the same goes for Thomas and Paul who meet regularly for example during regional board meetings.

As a part of the first seminar the seven leaders got three to four hours to get to know each other, present their central challenge to each other and spend time to establish some ground rules for how they want to spend their time together. We did, as agreed with the Danish consultants, not observe this first gathering of the leaders or the first learning group meeting that took place a few weeks after the first seminar. Hence, the researcher who followed these seven leaders met them 1 ½ month later during the second learning group meeting.

### **The great disappearing act of the concept cullinany**

During the second learning group meeting the leaders shared their managerial challenges and coupled them to their concrete challenge. They all enquired into each other's thoughts and perspectives, various ways to frame the challenge and came up with constructive ways to deal with the challenges. Margaret made sure they kept track of the time and made room for everyone to share their reflections and thoughts by ensuring they followed an enquiring

guide. Through this meeting none of them referred to the concept cullinany neither in their understanding of their own and each other challenges or regarding how the explored challenges could be handled.

The seven leaders meet each other 1 ½ month later without Margaret to facilitate the meeting. During this unfacilitated meeting the leaders shared current challenges with each other and they all took part in attempting to make sense of the challenges and figure out how to proceed from here in what they believed were sensible ways. They were engaged in the conversations and took the time needed to explore each challenge, which meant that not everyone got to share their challenge, but they did not perceive this as problematic. They did not follow a specific enquiring approach like the one Margaret used previously and they presented more solutions than answers, but they still ask each other multiple questions where the reply *“that is a good question, I do not know...”* They discussed at the end that it would have been beneficial if someone could have kept track on time and guided them through the process. On the other hand they expressed how they enjoyed being able to talk like they wanted to and be able to share their thoughts and ideas more freely. None of them referred to or used the term cullinany or took their point of departure in any of the other terms that was presented during the first seminar.

The next time the leaders meet each other is during the second seminar held in Denmark. During the second module various models and approaches to leadership are presented and the learning groups are asked to spent time to discuss how their relations are among each other; do they use each other in constructive ways and should their joined activities be changed in any ways. The learning group, being followed in this paper, used this time to reflect on how important trust is to them, if they do not trust each other there would not be room for mutual exploration or confidence. Some raises the question whether they should have more contact with each other between the modules and the seminars, but they all agree that they are extremely occupied with deadlines, continual decision making etc. Following, they do not want to destroy the freedom of just being together, being enquiring and not immediately jumping to solutions.

After they have discussed this issue, the leaders begin to share insights into their current challenges with each other. During these presentations the managers begin to use some of the concepts that they have heard during the second seminar:

*“...I want to get away from traditional leadership and move towards a more transformative approach to leadership...”* (Emma)

*“...educate them [the employees], not school them.”* (Christian)

*“The second module has moved me... I have to be a hostess and not a hero...”* (Jenny)

*“... How do I change my leadership? I want to move away from management and towards a more adaptive approach and work with storytelling...”* (Christian)

*“I have to get up on the balcony - that caught my attention. I need to work with storytelling... I need to give the work back to the people and I need that we as a management team raises the standards and make our employees thrive... I am not the expert, I manage so many areas, I cannot be the expert on all of this, I have to be a hostess and not a hero. It begins to make sense.”* (Laura)

*“I should not solve problems. I want to spar with them, they have a problem but they also have a solution.” “I feel exactly like that...”* (Steven and Laura)

During the second seminar they do not use or refer to the concept cullinany. As the leaders meet next time a month later for an unfacilitated learning group meeting they share their current challenges, explore them and try to help each other in figuring out how to move forward. A few times a concept presented at one of the seminars is being used, but cullinany is not amongst them. After the meeting is finished Paul, Steven and Laura discuss the programme and Paul expresses how he is uncertain about what he is gaining from the programme. Laura agrees that the theory presented does not give her much, but participating in the learning groups is a free space for her to discuss what occupies and challenges her. Steven explains how he felt that he had gained more perspectives on his praxis during the programme. The many exercises during the seminars were not very beneficial, but being able to spend time together with others in a similar situation to explore and enquire into his and their practice was valuable to him and maybe the biggest advantage of the programme.

### **The re-appearance of the concept cullinany**

As the researcher three months later meets the leaders it is during the programme's third seminar, which is held abroad at a business school where the international consultants sometimes work. In the time between the last learning group meeting and the third seminar the leaders in this learning group have spent a weekend together abroad discussing and exploring their current organisational challenges and how they each perceive and practice leading. In the beginning of the second day of the third seminar the managers actively bring in the term cullinany as they share their experiences with the other managers and the consultants. Charles begins the day by saying: *"For me the honest cullinan answer is we do not know. Did we have the answer we needed not to come. We are here to explore and change management. If someone could teach a course we did not need to be here. We are here learning to look and listen, we are here learning the balance between me interfering in the process and me stepping out to make room for change."*

Simultaneously the managers begin to describe the programme and their development as a journey. The consultants use the terms; cullinany and journey frequently and raise questions like: *"What interesting cullinany insights do you have?"* and *"What are the stories you have worked with? Draw the stories together and come up with a story where you share your journey with other."* And early on during day two the leaders also begin to use the term cullinan and refer to their praxis as containing cullinany moments. During a group learning meeting at the seminar Thomas utters: *"I think the days here have been good, I feel closer to being a cullinan leader now"* and several of the other leaders reply with a sound "yes".

During a shared reflection exercise, for all the leaders, the use of the term cullinan is repeated: Thomas: *"I am coming close to what cullinan is."*

...

Leader 1: *"As other have mentioned yesterday I saw the approach and gained more lenses on what it means to be a cullinan leader."*

...

Jenny: *"The cullinan experience is beginning to enter me. Been knocking during seminar one and two ... we are helping ourselves to be more enquiring."*



The next time the learning group meets is 1½ month later for a facilitated group meeting. During this meeting the term cullinany is being used by both Margaret and the leaders. The concept comes to play a central role because the assignment for the 4<sup>th</sup> seminar is that the leaders share their individual or group-based cullinan moment with the rest of the participants. The managers discuss their shared experiences both in Denmark and abroad and try to make sense about their mutual and individual changes in relation with the concept cullinany. Margaret is supporting this and argues through the meeting how they can use the term journey as a way to describe and present what they have gone through:

Margaret: *"I feel like challenging you on your cullinan moments. When have they occurred and what character have they had?"*

No one follows up on this and they start talking about they should stay in contact with each other after the last seminar has been held.

Thomas: *"We like each other and we can make various arrangements, but the tricky part is how we hang on to the cullinany in all of this. It should not be about poor jokes and sarcasm, at the same time it should be more than just good company. How do we hang on to the energy, we believe in the cullinan programme?"*

...

Jenny: *"We can have a good time during dinner, but if we want to become cullinan leaders we really have to be enquiring."*

Paul: *"I agree"*

...

Margaret: *"It is a wish from Cynthia that you as a group have 20 minutes to present your cullinan moment either as a group or individually... What kind of journey is it that you have been on?"*

Laughter

Thomas: *"I am not capable of answering this shortly."*

Margaret: *"You have time."*

Thomas: *"Many things bubbling, learning, theories, quite banal but some sort of awakening... What have moved me the most is the journey I have been on with the learning group, I wish it could continue."*

Margaret: *"Can I ask you to connect that to a cullinan experience? You have taken lots of small steps and a few large, where have you taken the large steps?"*

Thomas: *"I have thought about it, I have moved myself in some way, been more thorough. Someone raised the question where is the cullinan leader in all of this. I do not know exactly what it means to be a cullinan leader; being together, having a shared vocabulary, I have gained most from the learning group meetings when we have explored together."*

Christian: *"It has not only been a development, it has been a transmission. When we first met we were all occupied with solving problems efficiently. We mostly presented solutions to each other, now we bring exploring and challenging questions."*

Steven: *"... to be able to stay in the unknown and not solve the problems immediately as the great leader. But being able to see a situation from various angles and dwell in the fact that you do not have an answer. I have also used in relation to my employees."*

Christian: *"I have an image of Mungo Park (Scottish explorer), he was a true cullinan leader. When we forget to explore and start focusing on solutions that when it breaks down. This describes this journey very well."*

...

Laura: *"I also think in images – our trip. We all came from various places and have spent two nights together. We move in different pace. We have been flying high and fishing on deep sea. We have been on an amazing journey together and we saw the light one evening."*

Christian: *"The image of a journey is a good illustration of this and also exploration. It is something else and besides the world we usually operate in... De we dare to dream big enough dreams?"*

...

Margaret: *"Can you get closer to the highs and the depths with examples. We have to make it revolve around **your** journey so it is not just a trip abroad."*

...

Emma: *"Our work together has in many ways been transcending"*

...

Christian: *"We have scrutinized each other and forced each other to look at ourselves."*

Laughter

...

Christian: *"The cullinan leader has been a journey of zooming out and seeing the bigger picture."*

Laura: *"And also about zooming in."*

...

Margaret: *"I recapitalize. You want to catch movements in cullinan moments – I dare to take that word in my mouth. Is that what you want to take home with you?"*

Emma: *"Both to be a cullinan leader and to move as one."*

...

Jenny: *"I think I am better at seeing the bigger picture also regarding relational leading."*

...

Christian: *"... If you want to see the bigger picture we need a more challenging approach. This is not good enough."*

Emma: *"Personally I have gained from moving away from the nitty-gritty every day and if we want to stay there we need to do more..."*

...

The managers meet each other 1½ month later during the fourth seminar where the theme ethical is highlighted, explored and connected to the leaders' everyday practice. There is much talk about what it means to lead ethically and whether it at all is possible. During this seminar the concept cullinany is used much less than at the previous seminar and the leaders do not refer to the concept more than a few times. The concept is primarily being used the last day where the leaders have to share their cullinan moment with the other leaders. The seminar and the whole programme conclude in the learning groups where the group has to decide whether they want to meet again or whether this is the end station for the learning groups. The learning group being explored here had already decided that they wanted to continue to meet and explore each other's organisational challenges.

They meet each other four months later during a semi-facilitated meeting. Margaret is participating, but she is partially facilitating meeting and partly participating as a leader herself. This meeting is the last learning group meeting where the researcher is participating. As they are in the middle of exploring and discussing each other's challenges, Steven utters: *"There is an experience I would like to share with you - an attention I have had."* Following he

tells the other leaders about an experience he had where it was discussed whether his function should merge with another regional supply function to harvest more synergy.

Steven shares his thoughts around this initiative with the other leaders and he hands out a document where he has written down how he originally felt mistrust and found the initiative frustrating. But after reflecting about it he expresses how he felt that he had to change his mind-set and engage more constructively in the process, and this change now makes him feel more energetic and curious and he looks forward to what will happen:

Steven: *"Throughout the meetings we have had there has been a development inside me where my thoughts and reflections have changed from the ordinary to the extraordinary aspects of management... I have moved from mistrust in September towards curiosity regarding what will happen. I think I owe this to the Cullinan Leader, that we have been allowed to think and play, it is exciting."*

Margaret: *"Have the other managers involved taken part in this?"*

Steven: *"No it has been my own process."*

Christian: *"It's amazing..."*

Steven: *"I do not know?"*

...

Jenny: *"So great..."*

Steven: *"I dared to let go and go with it..."*

...

Christian: *"It is extremely inspiring."*

Jenny: *"I want to try it out!"*

Paul: *"I think we all feel like that."* (smiling)

Steven: *"I do not know where the tipping point was, but at a given point I just felt that if I am to sit here and take part in this I will have to leave my opportunistic behaviour behind... It is much more liberating."*

## **When leading is understood as continual and relation attempts to construct meaning in the unique moments**

As the above presentation illustrates the concept cullinany was brought up several times during the one year the top leader competence development programme lasted. The concept was a central part of the programme and many of the consultant's presentations, the assignments that the leaders worked with and texts they read before the seminars were either directly or indirectly linked to the management study illustrating how only 1% of today's leaders are cullinan leaders. Hence, there was no doubt that the consultants wanted to invite the participating leaders to take part in a journey where they came closer to being cullinan leaders than they were before the programme started.

The leaders also tried in various ways to construct meaning about what it meant to be a cullinan leader. They read the articles and tried to link the concept to their existing meaning structures and understandings about what leading reasonable and sensible contains. Initially, however, the concept was perceived as something detached from their existing taken for granted assumptions, experience and existing knowledge. Hence, the leaders referred to cullinany few times and when they did they did not connect it with their practice. As time went

by, and they spent time together abroad during the third seminar several of the leaders began to use the concept in ways where they expressed that they understood it better and felt that it was beginning to enter them.

From a social constructionism and relational perspective what is interesting here, is what happens during this development. A way to understand this process is to explore how the leaders through their communication with each other change the way they refer to the concept. Where it previously was something detached from their existing meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experience they during the third seminar begin to express how they actually are able to link cullinany to their practice. They do not refer to their own practice as being cullinan, but they begin to construct an understanding entailing possible links between their practice and the concept cullinany. They in relation with each other and with assistance from the consultants begin to challenge and expand their existing action guiding anticipation and action guiding advisories in ways where leading cullinany possibly can be a part of their own way of leading.

This process is promoted by some of the activities that took place during the third seminar, where the consultants had arranged that four leaders would come and share their perspective on and experience with leading. These leaders were by the international consultants presented as being cullinan leaders because they in their practice were curious, enquiring, and authentic and had succeeded in transforming organisations. During the intimate sessions where the invited leaders shared their stories with the participating leaders many of the leaders participating in the programme felt that they could resemble parts of their practice with the stories told.

During their conversations the concept of cullinany was transformed from being a concept placed on a pedestal and something extraordinary out of reach the concept suddenly became human, more ordinary and in reach. The more ordinary and practice closed stories the four leaders, who were invited, told, functioned as unjustified responses to the stories the consultants had told about cullinany. The invited leaders' stories were, however, not unjustified in relation to the participating leaders' meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experiences. The stories were justified responses enough for the participating leaders to be able to construct new meaning about how cullinany could be understood and practiced.

Through these communicative processes the participating leaders' understanding of cullinany was transformed and the meaning they were beginning to create was one that had common features with their meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experience. Simultaneously the communicative processes also developed their understanding and meaning structures. The leaders began relationally to take part in constructing social poetics where they expanded their understanding of the concept cullinany simultaneously as they developed their understanding of their own practice – and this process went in ways where cullinany as a concept came closer to their practice. During these communicative processes the leaders jointly created an understanding of cullinany that differed from the one, the international consultants had presented, but one that was much closer to their concrete every day practices and mundane activities.

Simultaneously, as the leaders constructed cullinany in concrete and practice-close ways there was a lofty atmosphere during the third seminar where the participating leaders incrementally began to perceive their leading practice in new ways and began to construct new meaning about already carried out actions. Hence, they began to explore whether leading cullinany maybe already was a part of their way of leading and actually had influenced their prior actions. Maybe the cullinan leader was not so far away after all?

Another way to understand this development is to bring in the understanding of various inter-acts where there concrete activities involving people coming together to perform various tasks influence the meaning and local reality being constructed. The actual context and inter-acts that took place during the third seminar where the leaders were abroad and in the hands of international consultants at an international and known business school influence what the leaders in-situ and in the unique moments understood as reasonable and sensible. Following, by bringing the understanding of cullinany closer to the leaders' practice, one could argue that the leaders merely followed the local conventions and played by the rules favoured in this part of the world, in this inter-acting.

The idea of how given understandings and practices can be understood as sensible and reasonable in one inter-acting, but not in another can help one to understand why the next time the participating leaders talked about cullinany, they experienced difficulties in making the same connections between their way of leading and cullinany. As the leaders met each other in the following learning group and they had to figure out how they as a group would present their cullinan moments to the other participating leaders, at the fourth seminar, they found it very difficult to come up with concrete examples.

They were taking part in another concrete and unique inter-act, where they constructed other local conventions and followed different socially constructed rules. They communicated with each other in different ways and therefore also constructed meaning differently. They had during the few months taken part in many other inter-acts since the third seminar, where they had carried out many in-situ actions, constructed multiple and various meanings and understandings about what can be perceived as reasonable and sensible in the many unique moments they since then had taken part in. Hence, much had happened since they saw each other last and all these experiences had influenced their meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experience.

When the leaders, therefore, experienced difficulties with figuring out what cullinany meant to them and how they wanted to present it to the other leaders on the fourth seminar – despite Margaret's ambitions to make them connect between their practice, experience and cullinany – it was because they were in another context than when they saw each other last time. They were now part of another inter-act and their action guiding anticipations and action guiding assumptions, meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experience were not the same, they had changed and developed. Following, they could not immediately catch up on and continue the conversations they had when they saw each other last. They were in another unique situation where all eight of them had developed and changed their perception and practice of leading because they had taken part in multiple other relations.

The construction of meaning therefore had to take its point of origin in the concrete situation where the leaders and Margaret used their meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experiences as starting points but the concrete communication among them brought about another generation of meaning and understanding than previously. During this learning group meeting the leaders and Margaret jointly constructed a situation where Margaret repeatedly attempted to make the leaders connect their experiences with cullinany. Margaret invited the leaders to take part in constructing social poetic in ways where they brought cullinany closer to their concrete practice.

The leaders, however, tried to work their way around engaging in this meaning construction. Partly because their action guiding advisories and action guiding anticipations led them in other ways and partly because they in-situ found the concept cullinany wanting in relation to their meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experiences. Hence, the concept became a strait jacket to them, because they knew they had to relate to it in one way or the other, as they had to present their cullinan moments at the fourth seminar. They did, however not know what to do with it and they therefore, did not hear it when Margaret asked them to share their cullinan moments or they began to laugh when Margaret consistently tried to get Thomas to describe what cullinany meant to him. Thomas did not know how to reply her –even though he during the third seminar had expressed how he then was close to cullinany. That was, however, then and now is another situation and Thomas' jointly constructed action guiding advisories and action guiding anticipations had gone in other ways and the meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experience, he had taken part in constructing, were different.

The last time the leaders met as a learning group four months after the programme has ended, Steven shared a story that once again made the understanding of cullinany go in a different direction. Following the communication during this learning group meeting it seemed as if many of the leaders had moved on and left the concept cullinany behind them. They discussed and explored each other's organisational challenges, but cullinany was not a part of how they made sense of the challenges and figured out how to proceed in sensible and reasonable ways. This shared understanding emerged incrementally during the meeting where they through gestures and justifies replies jointly created an understanding of leading and dealing with organisational challenges where cullinany was not a part of what leading sensible and reasonable revolved around.

This construction of meaning was, however, paused and developed in other ways as Steven told his story about how he had tried to change his practice, which had enabled other ways to lead and how he owed this development to the Cullinan Leader. The other leaders took part in constructing this new meaning as they replied acknowledging, encouraging and expressed a desire to try out something similar. As Steven presented his story and the other leaders took part in constructing meaning around how the Cullinan Leader had had an impact on them as leaders it became clear how understandings about what leading in reasonable and sensible ways were constructed, suddenly changed and developed through their communication.

Steven presented a situation of how he had changed his practice, and there was, as mentioned earlier, no doubt that practice and communication are closely entwined. It was, however,

through the leaders' subsequent communication in-situ that the situation became meaningful and an example of how one could lead in reasonable and sensible ways. The situation and change in practice *became* meaningful as a result of how the leaders jointly constructed meaning about it in-situ.

Having followed the way the leaders communicated and constructed meaning about the concept cullinany for more than a year, the significance of in-situ and unique moments have been underlined. At no point did the construction of what cullinany meant and how these leaders coupled it with their practice never settled down. It was continually on the move and each time the concept was uttered it came to life in new ways as a result of how the leaders communicated about it, improvised their way forward and experimented with developing their action guiding advisories and action guiding anticipations and incrementally changed their meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experiences. The meaning of cullinany was confluent and continually took new form and shape dependent on the concrete inter-acts and how the communication between the leaders developed.

### **When curiosity about the practice of leading supersedes the concepts for leading**

During the year we have observed the programme and followed these seven leaders we have asked ourselves several times what role the concept cullinany has played in relation to these leaders' attempts to figure out how to lead in reasonable and sensible ways. Because even though the leaders have used and explored the concept cullinany their primary interest had not revolved around the concept but rather around their practice, their organisational challenges and their interest in understanding how to lead in, what they in-situ and jointly believed were, sensible and reasonable.

In this process the concept cullinany played a role because it has been a concept and a frame that has given the leaders the possibility to explore and discuss what leading is and how they as leaders could develop their practice of leading. But other concepts like; journey, transformative leadership, ethical leading, relational leadership, extraordinary leading, post-conventional and sustainable leadership, to be a host and not a hero, be on the balcony and storytelling have also been used by both consultants and participating leaders during the programme and they have also at times been brought up by the leaders during the learning group meetings in the leaders' attempts to figure out how to lead in reasonable and sensible ways.

These concepts have, like cullinany, been used and understood in various ways dependent on the concrete and unique situation where the leaders brought it up. They have not played the same role as the concept cullinany during the whole programme, because many of them primarily have been presented and discussed at only one or two of the four seminars, whereas cullinany both was the title of the programme and was brought up by the consultants frequently throughout the year. What, however, still lingers with us are Vološinov's words about how we never hear or say words, but what is good and bad etc. and how words are used to construct meaning about what is useful, possible and meaningful.

Following, understanding and meaning does not stem from the words, but from how the words were used relationally to construct meaning and make certain actions and practices reasonable and sensible. This does not mean that the construction of meaning supersedes words because the construction of meaning is dependent on words. But sometimes the participating leaders' curiosity to figure out how to lead in sensible and reasonable ways superseded their need to understand the concepts for leading. And this has made us wonder how important the concrete words or concepts were during the programme?

Looking back at our notes what was important and significant for these leaders was not the exploration of concrete words or concepts but the possibility to discuss and explore concrete everyday organisational challenges with people who embodied different meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experiences. They often and many times referred to the conversations in the learning groups as the most enriching and beneficial part of the programme. Being together in the learning group the leaders met people who could present them with unjustified responses, different gestures, other ways to understand a given organisational challenge and present them with actions that were different but still sensible and reasonable, they just stemmed from other local groupings and inter-acts.

Being presented with these unjustified responses and different understandings the leaders responded by uttering: *"I do not know"* or *"that is a good question"* and the leaders had together and with support from Margaret who facilitated some of the learning group meetings gradually build up and maintained a shared understanding and practice. An understanding and practice where it was acceptable and also often expected that they were enquiring and exploring instead of immediately jumping to conclusions and presenting solutions to the various organisational challenges.

Although this practice was in many ways different from the inter-acts the leaders primarily participated in and it differed from their existing meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experiences and one could assume that they therefore would perceive such gestures as strange and unfamiliar and respond with unjustified responses they did not. On the contrary, they took – guided by Margaret – active part in constructing inter-acts, where they attempted to change their existing action guiding assumptions and action guiding anticipations and acted differently than usually. They sought to explore and enquire and enjoyed being able to do this with people who also were leaders and who had no interests or share in the concrete organisational challenges that were discussed.

These processes were further supported by the fact that they had all chosen to join this programme because they wanted to work with and develop their leading in ways that differed from more traditional management programmes like e.g. a MBA or MPG and focussed more on personal development. They were, therefore, tuned into changing and developing their leading. Simultaneously, these processes took place in inter-acts that differed significantly from the leaders' everyday practice, which meant that they were not constrained or caught in existing and organisationally anchored inter-acts where shared taken for granted assumptions, meaning structures, existing knowledge and experiences would shape their action guiding assumptions and action guiding anticipations. All this had the potential to



enhance the possibility for constructing new meaning about leading in-between the seven leaders, the consultants and researchers if they jointly and through communication and practices made it happen.

What this enquiring and exploring approach to each other's organisational challenges created was a possibility to slow down the immediate and relational construction of meaning and take part in social poetics where there were room for more reflexivity and possibilities for constructing different reasonable and sensible understandings and practices. They were, by slowing down, able to communicatively understand their organisational challenge through other perspectives and in ways that generated new ways to act and lead in relation with other.

### **A few final reflections on what can be learned about leading based on the changes in meaning construction that took place during the Cullinan Leader programme**

Looking back at the Cullinan Leader programme a few reflections linger with us regarding how to understand leading. One is how significant and important it is to acknowledge and work constructively with the continually evolving construction of meaning. This process never settles down, it is confluent and constantly on the move and leading, perceived from a social constructionism and relational perspective, revolves around being able to take part in the various ways meaning construction goes in the various inter-acts that constitute an organisation.

Being able to perceive every interaction, every attempt to construct meaning as unique and once occurring. Acknowledging that all participating in the given context bring with them meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experiences that shape their action guiding anticipations and action guiding advisories and these all form the starting point for constructing meaning that builds on and simultaneously develops and challenges all of this at once. Following, it revolves around being able to be present in the given situation and having the courage to believe in that not knowing what will happen is a good place to start constructing meaning together.

Second, it is salient how important unjustified responses and being part of new inter-acts are when new meaning is to be constructed. It is difficult to change existing meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experiences when people stay within established and known inter-acts. Because people here primarily communicate with their significant others with whom they already share all of this. When people communicate they tend to make the unique and once-occurrences of each moment known and familiar as their action guiding anticipations and action guiding advisories spontaneously will help them that way.

Being met with unjustified responses and different meaning structures, taken for granted assumptions, existing knowledge and experiences lead one in ways where responses like *"I do not know"* and *"that is a good question"* And these responses invite you to slow down the immediate construction of meaning, make the spontaneous action guiding anticipations and action guiding advisories appear as insufficient in the attempts to construct meaning. This can

lead to social poetry where other understanding, different practices that at first might seem strange and non-sensible can be explored and generate new practices of leading.

Third, the data from this study illustrates and underlines what so many relational and social constructionism scholars have argued for long, how leading is a joined communicative practice emerging in-between people as they attempt to figure out how to solve every day organisational challenges. Leading takes place between people. The leaders in this programme continually and relationally sought out what leading in sensible and reasonable ways revolved around. In this process concepts and experiences were brought in, some lingered, some were re-constructed and some were tried out only to be found wanting. All of these processes were communicative practices where the leaders jointly and through gestures and adjusted responses constructed meaning about how to lead in what they in-situ believed were reasonable and sensible ways.

The purpose of this paper has been to explore and discuss how seven managers during a top leader competence development programme that lasted a little more than a year attempted to construct meaning with each other about what leading is all about and how one can practice leading in, what they believe to be, reasonable and sensible ways. We have aimed at enriching the growing field of relational and social constructionism perspectives on leading by presenting empirical data on how this perspective can open up other ways to understand leading. We hope that the emphasis on continually evolving relational meaning construction, social poetics, unjustified responses, different inter-acts and unique confluent moment, we have presented and discussed here will invite other social constructionism and relational scholars to participate in exploring what can be learned about leading from this perspective.

### **Literature:**

- Alvesson, M. & D., Stanley (2000) *Doing critical management research*. London: Sage
- Bakhtin, M. (1981) *The dialogic imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press
- Berger, P. & T. Luckmann, (1966/1996) *The social construction of knowledge: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday
- Cunliffe, A. (2008) Orientations to Social Constructionism: Relationally Responsive Social Constructionism and its Implications for Knowledge and Learning, *Management Learning*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 123-139
- Cunliffe, A. L. (2011) Qualitative Research Morgan and Smircich 30 Years On, *Academy of Management Proceedings*, Vol. 14, Iss. 4, pp. 647-673
- Cunliffe, A. L. & M. Eriksen (2011) Relational Leadership, *Human Relations*, Vol. 64, No. 11, 1425-1449
- Cunliffe, A. L. & J. Shotter (2006) Linguistic artifacts in organizing and managing, i A. Rafaeli and M. G. Pratt (eds) *Artifacts and Organizing: Beyond Mere Symbolism*, 119–37. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum
- Czarniawska B. (2004) *Narratives in Social Science Research*, SAGE Publications, London, California, New Dehli
- Dickinson, E. (1961) *Emily Dickinson's poems*, TH Johnson, Boston, USA
- Gergen, K. J. (1995) «Relational theory and the discourses of power» i Hosking, Dian-Marie et. al (eds.) *Management and Organization: Relational alternatives to individualism*. Aldershot: Avebury

- Gergen, K. J. (2005) *Virkelighed og relationer. Tanker om sociale konstruktioner*. Viborg: Dansk Psykologisk Forlag
- Gergen, K. J. (2009) *Relational Being: Beyond the individual and community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Gergen, K. J. (2014) Key note presentations during the Attractor Summer School, 2-4 July, Copenhagen, Denmark
- Gergen, K. J. & T. Thatchenkery (2004) «Organization Science as Social Construction Postmodern Potentials», *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 40(2):228 – 249
- Hosking, D. (2010) «Moving Relationality: Meditations on a relational approach to management», i Bryman Alan et al. (eds.) *SAGE Handbook of Leadership*, Thousand Oaks CA: SAGE Publications
- Hosking, D. (2011) «Telling Tales of Relations: Appreciating Relational Constructionism», *Organization Studies*, 32(1): 47-65
- Kornberger, M. & S. Clegg (2012) Strategy as performative practice: The case of Sydney 2030, *Strategic Organization*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 136-162
- Larsen, M. V. (2014) *Strategising through organising – The significance of relational sensemaking*. Chagrin, OH: World Share Books.
- Kvale, S. (1992) *Ten Standard Responses to Qualitative Research*, Institute of Psychology, Aarhus University, Denmark
- Larsen, M. V. & J. G. Rasmussen (2014) «Relationel ledelse», IN Larsen, M. V. & J. G. Rasmussen (red.) *Relationelle perspektiver på ledelse*. København: Reitzel Forlag
- McNamee, S. & D. Hosking (2012) *Resesearch and Social Change – A Relational Constructionist Approach*, Routledge, NY, USA
- Mead, G. H. (2005) *Sindet, selvet og samfundet*. København: Akademisk Forlag
- Robson, Colin (2011) *Real World Research*, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, UK
- Schütz, A. (1967) *Collected Papers I. Studies in Social Theory*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff
- Schütz, A. (1964) *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff
- Schütz, A. (1966) *Collected Papers III. Studies in Phenomenological Philosophy*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff
- Ospina, S. M. & M. Uhl-Bien (2012) *Advancing Relational Leadership Research, A dialog between perspectives*, Information Age Publishing, Charlotte, NC
- Shotter, J. (2005) «Inside the Moment of Managing<sup>2</sup>: Wittgenstein and the Everyday Dynamic of Our Expressive-Responsive Activities», *Organization Studies* 26(1):113-135
- Shotter, J. (2005a) Inside processes: Transitory understandings, action guiding anticipations, and witness thinking, *International Journal of Action Research* No. 1, Vol. 2, pp. 157-189
- Shotter, J. (2006) «Understanding Process From Within: An Argument for 'Witness'-Thinking», *Organization Studies*, 27(4):585-604
- Shotter, J. (2011) *Getting it: Witness-thinking and the dialogical-- in practice*. New York: Hampton Press
- Shotter, J. (2014) Key note presentations during the Attractor Summer School, 2-4 July, Copenhagen, Denmark
- Shotter, J. & A. Cunliffe (2002) Managers as Practical Authors: Everyday Conversations for Action IN D. Holman & R. Thorpe (eds) *Management and language: The Manager as Practical Author*, pp 15-37, Sage, London, UK
- Shotter, J & A.L. Cunliffe (2003) *The 'Voices of Silences': Conversations on Language, Meaning-Making and Organizational Theorizing*, working paper, University of New Hampshire

Uhl-Bien, M. (2006) «Relational leadership theory: Exploring the social processes of leadership and organizing», *The Leadership Quarterly* 17(6): 654-676

Vološinov, V. (1986) *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Harvard: Harvard University Press

Weick, K. (1979) *The Social Psychology of Organising*. McGraw-Hill: USA

Weick, K. (1988) «Enacted Sensemaking in Crisis Situations», *Journal of Management Studies* 25(4):305-317

Weick, K. (1995) *Sensemaking in Organization*. New York: SAGE

Weick, K., K. Sucliffe, & O. Obstfeld, (2005) «Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking», *Organization Science* 16(4):409-421