A CEO's identity dilemma and painful transition in a context of liberation management

Work in progress

Abstract

The literature on CEO identity considers it as a given and as an independent variable that may affect performance, ethics, and other organizational facets. The same assumption is made in the literature on leadership styles, where the CEO's personal characteristics influence their preferred style. In this perspective, a CEO's identity is static, and organizations must carefully select the best candidate to enable different outcomes, including in terms of leadership style. However, research on identity has shown it is dynamic and changing. Using a case where a CEO is required to change his organization's management philosophy and his leadership style, this study shows that CEO identity can indeed change, although it is at the price of some personal suffering. We will suggest, however, that such change can occur only if some fundamental values remain constant.

Introduction

There is growing recognition in management and organization studies that people's identity is dynamic and changing. For instance, the notion of narrative identity, suggested at once by psychologists (Bruner, 2003), communication scholars (Fisher, 1984), and philosophers (Ricoeur, 1992), stresses how identity construction results from telling and engaging with stories that distinguish between one's own actions and those of others, and that situate the subject relative to those actions (as a hero, as a victim, etc.). Identity is also negotiated through joking at work (Collinson, 1988), through plurilingual interactions (Kilduff et al., 1997), or through sharing meals (Probyn, 1999). In other words, rather than identity, it may be better to think in more processual terms, i.e., in terms of identity work (Brown, 2015).

Such work is not only personal, but also collective. That is why, using similar narrative and discursive approaches, scholars have pointed out that the identity of mythical founders is constantly reshaped through storytelling to meet current needs—for instance, to depict how IBM's Thomas J. Watson was adamant about enforcing organizational rules (Mumby, 1987) or how a credit union's initiator would have supported the financial institution's newest strategic plan (Basque & Langley, 2018). Indeed, both past and present CEO's identity is not intrinsic to the individual, but also results from different corporate practices, such as the proliferation of photographs and portraits that fabricate their 'authentic' personality (Guthey & Jackson, 2005).

Yet, when it comes to the identity of living CEOs, it seems oddly static. Literature on the subject focuses on stable features, such as the person's gender (Dennis & Kunkel, 2004), family ties (Bach & Serrano-Velarde, 2015), place of origin (Ren et al., 2021), their degrees and experience (Black, 2019), whether they were a member of the organization prior to becoming a CEO (Liang & Hendrikse, 2013), and even their celebrity status (Lee et al., 2020). The effect of these different variables, assumed to be part of the CEO's identity, is measured

against the firm's financial performance, but also its ability to innovate, its preference for certain types of labor contract, its governance practices, as well as its commitment to environmental issues and to corporate social responsibility.

Is CEO identity as immutable as it is assumed to be? Can't a CEO also change, along with their organization? To answer this question, we take the case of an organization whose board of directors required from the CEO to adopt a specific management philosophy—namely, a "liberation management" philosophy (Peters, 1992). This change in philosophy also meant, for him, to change his leadership style to a form of servant leadership, where the CEO leads from a position of service and seeks to empower workers to participate in strategy development and decision-making (Greenleaf, 1970; Spears, 2004). Since leadership style is intimately related to the manager's identity (London & Sherman, 2021; Park, 1996), requiring the CEO to change his leadership style unsurprisingly led to an important renegotiation of his own identity.

More specifically, this paper draws from a series of observations and interviews conducted by the first author with the CEO, to analyze how he adjusts his leadership style in the context of the imposed change towards a more participative organization. It focuses on the way the CEO tells the story of how he navigated the challenges this change posed to his professional sense of self. In doing so, this study reveals a messy liminal state which saw the CEO constantly and iteratively (re)negotiating his self-identity, as well as his relationships with his subordinates, during three key phases of the change process. It reveals that the CEO leadership style has evolved in a patchy and non-linear way, from a combination of autocratic style where he acted as the pace setter, to a combination of democratic and coaching styles (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2002), in line with a servant leadership posture required to manage the transformed organization (Spears, 2004). Analysis showed that the former styles were well suited to his natural way of leading, whereas the latter ones involved significant

identity work, but that the CEO was able to adapt because he could find continuity between those new styles and some of his pre-existing values.

Out study makes several contributions to the literature. First, it shows that CEO identity is not immutable, but can change through interactions with others, and therefore that CEOs are no exception to the way identities at work are dynamically shaped. Second, it aligns the literature on leadership styles with the growing literature on discursive and interactional leadership (Clifton et al., 2020; Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012), showing that styles are not innate to a person, but rather collective accomplishments that are open to renegotiation. Our study also reveals, though, that changing one's identity has a high human cost, and can only be accomplished if the person is able to find some continuity between their prior values and those that they need to espouse.

In the next section, we will review the literature on leadership, with a focus on leadership styles and their relation to identity. We will see that current understandings of leadership styles assume that they result from stable identity features such as one's personality or educational background. In contrast, the section that follows will introduce the literature on discursive leadership that allows adopting a more dynamic vision of leadership types, but also opens the door to the idea that identity is not fixed but is also shaped through the (re)negotiation of leadership. The methods section will then present how we were able to study in detail a case of a CEO having to adapt to an imposed change of leadership style. We explain how we conducted a single-case study and analyzed a series of interviews following the insights of narrative identity, complementing that analysis with our notes from on-site observations. Our findings, then, identify three phases in which the CEO adjusted his identity depending on the leadership style he adopted. Finally, our discussion spells out the paper's main contributions, which consists in the development of a conceptual model that positions CEO identity work as a dynamic process crucial to the introduction and achievement of radical organizational change,

especially when it comes to management philosophy. The study challenges the assumption of CEO identity immutability and underscores the significant human cost of profound identity change, emphasizing the necessity for continuity between new leadership approaches and personal values. It highlights the importance of supporting leaders and staff through such transformative processes, advocating for scaffolding, preparation, and training to bridge gaps and facilitate successful organizational change.

Leaders, leadership styles, and identity

As we have already pointed out, literature on CEO identity focuses on their personal characteristics and on their impact on various organizational outcomes. The challenge, then, seems to be to select the right CEO to generate the results board members and owners desire (c.f., Abernethy et al., 2019; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). The option of getting CEOs to change along with evolving needs does not seem to be considered. Yet, as we've also mentioned, identity is necessarily changing. Organizations have been said to be in a constant state of change (Chia & Tsoukas, 2003), continuity being the outcome—rather than the condition—of multiple interactions and activities (Plotnikof & Bencherki, 2023). In the same way, stabilizing a personal identity is also the result of complex identity work, as the person attempts to answer key questions about who they were, are, and should be: "'How shall I relate to others?' 'What shall I strive to become?' and 'How will I make the basic decisions required to guide my life?'" (Brown, 2015, p. 21). Such identity work depends on the position and the role one occupies in the organization, but is not reducible to them—they are but resources on which one can draw (Brown, 2017). Identity work involves both emotional and material dimensions that are often neglected, including a feeling of 'submission' to dominant discourse about one's role, as well as to the way others perceive and interact with the person (Ashcraft, 2017; Aslan, 2017). Indeed, people draw on a range of "discursive resources" to define who they are with respect to others (Kuhn, 2006). There is no reason that CEOs are any

different: their identity undoubtedly evolves depending on the situations where they find themselves, and the resources that are available to them at that moment to constitute their identity.

The relationship between leadership and identity is conceived differently from one leadership perspective to another, contrasting traditional and discursive approaches. The literature on leadership styles, in particular, seems to rather assume the fixity of the CEO's identity. On the other hand, adopting a discursive view of leadership allows for changes in leadership styles, but also in the leader's identity, based on dynamic and evolving interactions with their environment.

Traditional approaches to leadership: Typologies and styles

Research on leadership styles includes many different typologies, to the point Anderson & Sun (2017) call for a new "full range" leadership model. Attempts to put some order in the leadership styles literature can be traced back to Blake and Mouton's (1964) distinction between attention to people and attention to the task. Combining those two variables allows identifying a variety of leadership styles, from the autocratic to social leadership. More recently, Hussain & Hassan (2016) have suggested a new integrative typology incorporating the most common leadership styles along two axes: the level of consideration of employees' needs and the level of consultation. The four integrated style they propose are the authoritative, the pacesetting, the democratic, and the transformational. This last one refers to Bass and Avolio' (1993) distinction between transactional and transformational leadership, the latter having given rise to a rich industry of advice on how achieve such transformation among followers, with the introduction of terms such as coaching and 'affiliative', 'servant', 'shared', 'tolerant', 'considerate', 'relational', 'authentic' or 'integrative' leadership (see Greenleaf, 1998; Yukl, 1989). Another classification is Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee' (2002) six leadership styles model, which identifies the coercive, the

authoritative, the affiliative, the democratic, the pacesetter, and the coach style. Greenfield (2007, p. 161), in an empirical study of a nurse manager, has suggested that she chose between these styles "in response to the changing situation that she was both shaping and simultaneously responding to."

Among the myriad of styles that the literature enumerates, servant leadership is of particular interest to us, as it is the one the firm we studied ended up adopting. It promises to transition out of liberal forms of organizing, as it empowers workers to participate in strategy development and decision-making, while the CEO adopts a posture at the service of his or her team (Greenleaf, 1970; Spears, 2004; Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). This servant posture is associated to ten salient characteristics according to Spears (2004): listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth of people, and building community. In their recent review of servant leadership literature, Eva and colleagues (2019, p. 129) explicitly conclude that "building a servant leadership culture requires a combination of selecting pro-socially motivated conscientious people, combined with servant leadership training. Selection is important because there is a limit to how much training can change individuals' stable personality characteristics." In other words, they explicitly espouse the idea that identities are stable, and that servant leadership (like all other styles, presumably) must correspond to leaders' supposedly natural personality.

The literature on leadership styles seems to rather assume the fixity of the CEO's identity. It connects leadership style with age (Ng & Sears, 2012), psychological traits such as narcissism (Reina et al., 2014), their status as a founder (Peterson et al., 2012), or their biographies taken as a whole (Halsall, 2016). Even literature that insists on the need to adapt leadership styles to various situations, such as the availability of innovative projects (Rotemberg & Saloner, 1993) or generational shifts (Boyle et al., 2018), more or less explicitly suggest that such adaption requires hiring new managers.

Discursive approaches to leadership and a more dynamic view of identity

Yet, the literature adopting a discursive perspective on leadership, which we already alluded to, shows that many of the characteristics of transformational leadership styles, such as listening to others and adapting to their responses, are in fact communicative and interactional features (Bisel et al., 2022; Clifton et al., 2020; Fairhurst, 2007). In other words, there is no need to ascribe such leadership styles to innate personality traits, as they emerge from the way people interact with each other. The leader-member exchange framework had already drawn attention to the fact that leadership is exercised in the relation between people, focusing on the amount and type of exchange they share (see Martin et al., 2018). Discursive leadership extends the insights of the LMX framework and uses the tools of discourse analysis to systematically study what goes on in those exchanges (e.g., Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Svennevig, 2008; Wodak et al., 2011).

Adopting such a discursive view of leadership allows for changes in leadership styles, but also in the leader's identity, as it is through the same interactions that he or she engages in "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising" (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002, p. 626) the sense of self in the quest to achieve a coherent and distinctive self-identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). Professional identity is one aspect of this self-identity and an important part of how people make sense of themselves at work (Chen & Reay, 2021). Professional identity is both implicated and shaped in how individuals interact with their environment (Priya, 2020). For instance, workers often resist change when it confronts their self-identity, thus requiring knowing about how workers navigate identity change (Priya, 2020)—and, we might add, this is particularly important when they are not just any employee, but the executive leading the change process.

Methods

Building upon this theoretical foundation, our investigation sets out to examine the intricacies of an imposed, ideologically-driven organizational transformation on a CEO possessing a leadership style incongruent with the prescribed changes. We therefore inquire into the CEO's subjective experience and sense-making process as he navigates the challenges of spearheading a radical organizational change while concurrently being both the driving force behind the change and a primary target of its effects. As our exploration progressed, it became evident we need to conduct an interpretive case study, as our research aims to delve into the intricate dynamics of a CEO's identity in the context of a significant management style change within an organization. As we collected and analyzed data, we honed our attention to the CEO's professional identity, aiming to unravel the integration of self-identity into their narrative of the transformative experience. We looked for markers of the pivotal role of identity work in the CEO's journey towards adopting a servant leadership posture, and sought to elucidate the specific practices involved in this transformative process.

We focus on DERSOL, a middle-sized company led by a CEO with a long-established paternalistic and autocratic style, whose parent company requested that he adopt a "liberation management" philosophy (Peters, 1992), thus also requiring a servant leadership style. To the CEO, the request appeared to be ideologically-driven. Our study seeks to understand (1) the CEO's experience of leading an imposed ideological driven organizational change and (2) the impact of his experience on transiting to the new way of organizing involving a servant leadership style far from his natural autocratic way of leading. In the first stage of our study, we examined this evolution from the CEO perspective. Then in a second stage, to broaden the perspective we incorporated in-field observations and the narratives of employees reporting to the CEO. In the overall analysis, we conceptualize how the CEO's sensemaking about who he

was and who he is becoming – his self-identity - is playing out in practice and is coupled to the change process.

Data on the CEO's experience of leading change was collected across 2015-2017. First, the CEO's testimony about leading an imposed radical change was solicited using a series of interviews, each requiring him to provide accounts of his unfolding experiences. Second, the same sort of interviewing was undertaken to collect information from the CEO's five executive reports. Third, observations of the CEO and the organization in action were made during a dozen site visits across the same two-year period to see how identity work occurred in practice.

The analysis involved an iterative process whereby the interviews and field notes were read and reread to develop an understanding of how the change process unfolded and of the themes relating to the CEO's identity work. The interviews were coded repeatedly and adjusted our insights while we compared our interpretations (Charmaz, 2001). We continued until we felt we had reached theoretical saturation (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). This process allowed us to identify excerpts in which the CEO expresses challenges related to the adoption of a new leadership style, but also to observe how the language he chose to do so revealed changes to his identity. The findings from this analysis were reviewed and discussed by the first author and the CEO, to establish how they fitted together and how well they captured the CEO's experience of leading the strategic change process and the nature and impact of his identity work on this process. Such back and forth between data analysis and validation continued as long as ambiguity was encountered, or gaps identified, until we had a model that was consistent with our observations.

Our analysis borrowed from the notion of discursive resources, which invites researchers to pay attention to how individuals invoke and reproduce justifications and rationalisations for different situations (Kuhn, 2006, 2009). However, in looking at how the

CEO explained the expectations he felt were imposed on him and his corresponding changes

in leadership style, we also noticed that he positioned himself with respect to those changes,

noting that they were similar or different from what he believed himself to be (on positioning,

see Clifton, 2014; Harré, 2015). In that sense, the way the CEO told his journey through those

different changes corresponded to a form of narrative identity work, whereby he discursively

selected what elements of that story corresponded to "him" as opposed to those that were not

him (Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Ricoeur, 1991). The CEO's identity work thus deploys

through the narrative weaving of his account to us, in the context of interview (Alvesson,

2003; Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2012).

Findings

The analysis revealed that the CEO's experience of leading DERSOL's transformative

change process can be distinguished into three periods. The first period was prior to the

initiation of the change process, during which the CEO was able to continue leading in his

preferred charismatic and autocratic / pacesetter style (Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2002).

This period led into a transition period as the CEO realised that he was ill-equipped to lead a

transition towards a new organizing principle characterized by distributed decision-making

and a servant leader style (Greenleaf, 1970). He characterized this second period as 'the blind

leading the blind' because it was experienced as messy and ambiguous with neither the leader

nor his subordinates appreciating how the empowering ideology should play out in practice.

The third period, in which the company is now, is much less messy, with establish

basic operational processes supporting the new order. In this period, incremental refining

continues, but in a relatively coherent and finely nuanced fashion (see Table 1). In this period,

the CEO has developed a combination of democratic / coaching styles (Goleman, Boyatzis

and McKee; 2002) required to manage the transformed organization, but at the cost of an

extensive and difficult identity work.

Each period in this process of transforming DERSOL's way of organizing had consequences for the CEO's identity work. In period one, the CEO's preferred way of leading became one of the targets of an imposed philosophy change. In period two, the practical implications of installing the new philosophy produced a 'messy' liminal period for the organization, requiring the CEO to resolve the tension between his established style and the newly required way of leading. At times, the messiness required him to privilege one style over the other to respond to workers' declared needs. He reported operating as 'captain of an aircraft carrier,' a role identity that fitted well with his practiced paternalistic and authoritarian leadership style, but also as 'facilitator of an armada of speed boats,' an identity aligned with a servant leadership style. At times, the CEO reported oscillating between these identities in ways he found so confronting and destabilizing that he hired a coach to help him resolve his 'schizophenia.' Eventually, the CEO's experience of a split personality led to a breaking point, as he ended up going through a mental and physical breakdown. In period three, which continues to this day, the CEO has transitioned to a way of leading that is consistent with the new philosophy, by adopting a new set of leadership practices and ways of framing his sense of self that align with the values that prevail in the required new way of organizing. Table 1 summarizes the stages of change and the concomitant identity work. Although this transformation is characterized in terms of three different periods, the lived reality revealed by the thematic analysis of the participants' narratives revealed that it was not a linear or coherent process.

Table 1: Periods of leadership style and identity change

	Period 1	**Period 2**	**Period 3**
Description	Top-down organizing (pre-launch period).	Transitioning towards employee empowerment. Messy feeling of 'the blind leading the blind.'	Developing the empowered organization. Ongoing period of refining practices to fit the new philosophy.
Leadership style	Hierarchical and top down, involving coordination through	Continuously alternating between "an aircraft carrier" to "an agile speed boat fleet," and between	Flat and empowered organization, with information transparency

	control, as well as the centralization of information and of decision-making (reflecting an autocratic / pace setting style).	leadership styles, as both CEO and employees are learning the skills to implement the new philosophy.	and normalized collective decision-making (similar to a servant leadership posture).
Identity work	CEO is comfortable with his charismatic but autocratic self-identity. Identity work largely involves maintaining this self-identity.	Identity dilemma and crisis for the CEO, which he likens to schizophrenia and requires considerable identity work to resolve, leading to a physical hardship that the CEO describes as an important stage in his transition.	CEO now enjoys the sense of being a trusted facilitator and his identity work is about refining and interpreting his new self-identity, with deeply held values acting as bridges with the new organizational philosophy.

In Period 1, before the change, the CEO was a powerful, charismatic, pacesetting and quite paternalistic autocratic type of leader. His senior team consisted of just two managers who both reported directly to him. He was very hands-on operationally, and the sole decision-maker. At this stage in the change process, his sense of who he was—his identity—matched his posture, as we can see in his own words below:

- *"My values: vital [i.e., essential], true, fraternal, responsible. With a strong character and impulsive"*

- *"I've always been directive, paternalistic, affective. I've always liked teams to like me. I was feared and respected, recognized, exemplary. It's always been me. But imposing, big charisma, who casts a lot of shadow, who is a Duracell battery… I could be loved as well as hated. It's black-white, white-black, it's been like that for years. And yet it's always gone well."*

These quotes from the CEO show a hard-working and committed boss with a strong paternalistic, affective and directive identity that contributed to his success (raise to the top) the previous 20 years.

In period 2, at the beginning of the transition towards a more empowering way of leading, the CEO adjusted his leadership style to embrace a more democratic style, but one that continued to rest on his charisma. He began sharing power by distributing decision-making. All operational employees (such as technicians) now reported directly to him, with more frequent relations with these 'speed boat (i.e., co-opted) captains (co-opted by team members with a facilitation and not leading role).' He now shared strategic information with others but remained the final decision-maker for strategic decisions, as well as for some important operational ones. Over time, he supported employee empowerment through a coaching approach but still closely monitored operations.

His former identity did not match his new CEO posture. This was made particularly obvious given that, during the transitory period, the desire to empower others was offset by an even greater need to control activities as there was lots of uncertainty. As the CEO explained:

> *"I'm running out of time. I don't have any time on my own... That's because the company has been reorganised with far fewer hierarchical levels (...). For the last two years, it's been day and night."*

The intensity of the transition period thus created a tension that put him in a very delicate, almost unbearable, 'schizophrenic,' dual posture position and created impossible demands on him, as he needed both to supervise activities in a way that matched his old style, while also spending time encouraging and coaching employees in a new style that he also did not fully understand. This tension could also be understood as the CEO's own need to revert to a directive posture, which he justifies using the need to focus on operations and their specifics, while stretching his abilities and patience to establish a more empowering and employee-focused style.

The dual positions required adopting a hybrid posture that combined these largely incompatible styles, which made the CEO feel very uncomfortable. He began a challenging

quest for a more comfortable and authentic self-identity. The following quotes reveal how he

discursively legitimized the need for control and a partial directive posture consistent with his

established identity, despite the mandate to implement of new form of leadership that

empowered workers.

- *"Who did we rely on to implement the change? The men who have lost their*

  references from their regional directors. Who did they rely on? Me. And as I like

  it, as I still have this belief that I sometimes need to save the world, and that one is

  never better served than by oneself ..."

- *"As we lack processes, as we lack a bit of structure, I am called upon."*

- *"Vital to recall visions, values, but [it is] not enough. On a daily basis, there is a*

  lack of process, mapping, roadmap. We don't manage our roadmaps well. So, we

  don't always know how to set priorities".

During that period the CEO oscillate between these extremes roles in ways he found

so confronting and destabilizing, what he refers to as 'schizophenia'.

This resolution corresponds to a breaking point (CEO experiencing a mental and

physical breakdown). These roles tension and identity confusion, led to a great deal of

suffering and forced him to look for a coach to help him with his transition (to help him

resolve his identity 'schizophenia'), and even to suffer a disabling physical injury (which

immobilized him and forced him to rest for several weeks) which he attributes to the mental

and physical tensions he was feeling:

- *"This physical break was a sign for me and the physical pain and temporary*

  absence from work enabled me to really change my attitude."

On this occasion, the CEO stepped back (by force and in a painful way). This episode

of 'mental and physical' breakdown was a 'turning point', a key stage in his transformation and

in his reconstruction of his identity. This enabled him to realize that the company could

continue to operate without his constant presence, which helped him to adopt a more hands-off approach to operations, a more delegative stance. This has enabled him to move towards greater employee empowerment and away from micromanagement.

In period 3, the period through to the present when the change process became more defined and progressed with a sense of clear direction, the CEO adjusted his style to that of a charismatic coach with the objective of developing further towards a servant leader style. At this stage power became shared except for important strategic decisions. All operational people now reported directly to him. Strategic information became shared and most decision-making became decentralized. The CEO has remained the final decision-maker for strategic decisions, but is only consulted for operational decisions if his input is absolutely necessary. He becomes directive when decision-making does not respect the organization's values (the frame of reference). He now coaches employees so that they make the decision whenever possible, and is progressively stepping back from operations. He has developed strong ties with the employees through the company social network.

Period three has seen his sense of identity as a CEO align with the development of an empowered organization. He has managed to resolve his identity dilemma by transitioning to a new style and gaining satisfaction from the new way of leading. The next quote shows how the CEO perceived that his identity transformation was made easier by embracing values, such as trust, which are at the heart of the new organizational frame of reference:

- *"It suits me to work with trust because I need to be loved, and it's an energy for me"*.

The quote also suggests that, in his identity shift the CEO connected 'trust' (the new organizational value) with his strong need to be loved and deeply connected with people, to give meaning to and legitimize accepting the required leadership behavioural changes.

The next quote indicates first that, charisma, a strong component of the CEO initial identity, is maintained during his identity shift without, in his view, undermining the importance of hard work and engagement, which both remain core values:

- *"I'm very appreciated, and they know we're not here for fun, it's not anarchy, it's not 'l'école des fans'* [a French TV show where kids sing along with their idols]. *They know that I can be tough, they know that when I don't feel like joking, I don't feel like joking. They know me, it's been 10 years now".*

From identity dilemma to inspiring new insights

As the following excerpt from the CEO's narrative reveals, the ebb and flow of the CEOs identity across the change process was due to emerging tensions rather than resistance to change:

- *"I had to change to change the company" "I had to change. In the logic where employees had to take the lead, learn to make decisions, make mistakes, encourage them to test. Given that I was in the driver's seat, I was the crux of the matter".*

He knew he was transitioning from 'captain of an aircraft carrier', which fitted well with his tribal/paternalistic leadership style to the facilitator of 'an armada of speed boats' and that this required him to enact a new sense of 'who I am as a leader'. He knew he was being challenged at the very foundations of his self-identity but underestimated the extent of the identity work involved to meet this challenge. This led to much suffering and compelled him to seek a coach to assist his transitioning:

- *"I'm doing a permanent work on myself. Difficult.",*

- *"I had to work on my posture, my speaking, my presence… learning that it wasn't that essential that I be present at all the decision-making processes to get the company moving, which was very complicated. It works [on] something inside that hurts, because it's my beliefs.*

- *"I'm going to do it on my own. I have the right idea, I know, and I know how to do it fast and it has to be done fast".*

- *"I have worked on my beliefs with a coach".*

As the change progressed, the CEO found the transitioning became more complex and he needed to be both a hands-on and directive and also a servant leader supporting staff, as they grappled with the new post neo-liberal ideology and new agency this provided. His narrative also reveals a complicated series of interrelated tensions that existed between operating at a symbolic level, diffusing the values and new work practices, and keeping' hands-on' to ensure work continued and the 'schizophrenic' feeling this created was not overwhelming:

- *"We haven't changed overnight, the way our teams work. As we lack processes, as we lack a bit of structure, I am called upon."*

All participants' narratives revealed a time lag between the discursive shift supporting the CEO's transition to serving and his employees learning new practices aligned to this discursive shift. The narratives also reveal the identity work required to align discourse and practice occurred at a deeply relational level but that this was a positive transitioning force, one that emboldened the CEO to act. He captured this when he said:

- *"A lot of things happened in my head then... It [interaction with key stakeholders] made me move forward."*

This effect whereby an identity dilemma created by the lag between a discursive shift and practice adoption provided a force requiring that needed to be resolved by significant identity work on the part of the CEO. This is a significant aspect of the emergent model. For the CEO, this identity work was a defining characteristic of period two, the liminal phase connecting the past (old way of leading) with the new. Now in period three, this period and

the preceding one are used as counter references difference against which the CEO makes

sense of his present way of leading. He expressed this in the following quote:

- *"So people respected me, feared me, but they saw that my open-mindedness, my jovial,*

  festive, charismatic side was already present. It is even stronger today. Because I am

  even more into doing, encouraging, celebrating victories, encouraging testing. Today,

  when someone asks me a question, I answer "and you, what do you think? I would

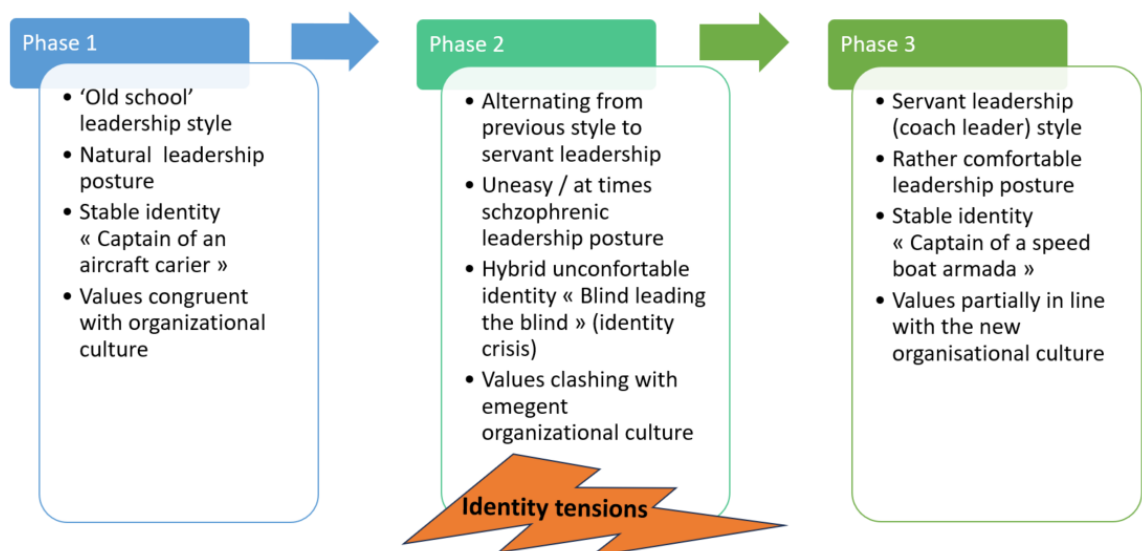 *never have answered like that before", that shows my change of attitude."*

Figure 1: Change phases and identity transformation stages

In period 3, identity transformation is facilitated when CEO make links between some

new organizational values (i.e.: trust) and his strong personal values/needs (i.e.: be loved):

"*It suits me to work with trust because I need to be loved, and it's an energy for me"*

In the context of an important change (implying for the CEO to adopt a very different kind of leadership style), this shows the importance of bridging some of the new organizational values with pre-existing CEO deep individual values, as well as with some past (still) compatible practices, to facilitate/allow adoption of the desired leadership style (requiring a profound identity transformation).

Discussion

The model that emerged as we conceptualized the findings places CEO identity work at the junction between the introduction and achievement of a radical change in a company's way of organizing. Transforming the CEO's self-identity is presented as a temporally distributed and socially embedded process that is coupled to the processual changes being enacted. When processual confusion emerged, the CEO re-embraced his autocratic / pacesetting style, creating a sense of 'schizophrenia' which left him overwhelmed and feeling inauthentic. The model captures this effect by showing how CEO's self-identity dilemma makes leadership actions inconsistent with the change discourse and emerging organizational processes. The model proposes this inconsistency is embedded in a dynamic entanglement of competing discursive practices that mutually constitutes the emerging processes and the CEO self-identity work. In doing so, it represents the imposed introduction of what some people perceived as a radical post-neoliberal way of organizing as a three-stage process of chaotic interdependent co-evolution between theory and practice, both for leaders and workers.

This case study shows how the evolution of leadership from more traditional towards more distributed liberation models is possible but requires a rupture in leadership approach. Indeed, it illustrates how an imposed organizational change requiring the CEO to alter his leadership style gave rise to temporally distributed and somewhat chaotic identity work for him. It reveals how the CEO's discursive leadership processes changed as he steered his firm though the imposed transformative process. In particular, it highlights the challenges the change

presented to his professional sense of self, as he had to develop a new way of leading far from his natural way of doing things. Our analysis reveals a messy liminal state which saw the CEO constantly and iteratively (re)constructing his self-identity and how he related to his subordinates.

The case's theoretical contribution is two-fold. First, it elucidates how change that is designed to empower frontline staff by changing the patterns of engagement can also challenge and eventually profoundly transform the CEO's self-identity. In doing this, it distinguishes between coping practices designed to weather an initial identity instability or disturbance, and practices that support the required new way of leading, involving for the CEO to shift from an autocratic towards a servant leadership posture. This case proves that this type of profound identity change is possible, contrary to the belief that such self-identity shift regarding servant leadership is too extreme to happen (Eva, Robin, Sendjaya, Van Dierendonck & Liden, 2019). In that sense, we break with both literature on CEO identity and that on leadership styles, which share the assumption that identity is stable and that it is the basis of leadership styles (e.g., Black, 2019; Boyle et al., 2018; Liang & Hendrikse, 2013; Rotemberg & Saloner, 1993).

That being said, our study does reveal that such change in CEO identity and leadership style is only achieved at the cost of a radical transformation that is not only a difficult process, but also a source of suffering for the individual. In our case, the CEO went through an important phase of mental and physical breakdown. Our analysis points to the leader's need to be able to establish some continuity between the new leadership approach and his or her personal values. Arguably, it is because he could already perceive such continuity that he agreed to the change to begin with, despite his 'old school' style. While we argue that such continuity is also the result of discursive practices, it does hint at the possibility that, in some situations, leaders cannot engage in leadership style change, if they fail to perceive continuity,

in which case the more conventional literature might be correct to assume that a new leader is needed.

Relatedly, our findings also beg the question of whether it is right to impose such change to leaders without extensively consulting with them, since it may result in significant suffering. While there is definitely some virtue in embracing novel management philosophies and leadership styles, better adapted to current-day values and to new generations, there are probably ways of operating that shift while avoiding making it a source of suffering for the individual, with a risk of endangering their mental and physical health. While, in our case, the story ends well, we may wonder whether some individuals might fail to keep up, with undesirable outcomes both for the person and, possibly, for the organization.

Second, our analysis shows that identity work is not just a liminal space between old and new ways of doing things, but that it involves different temporalities. Congruent with the growing number of studies concerning time and temporalities, which have shown that organizations and organizing bring together the past, the present and the future (e.g., Hernes et al., 2021; Kunisch et al., 2021; Wenzel et al., 2020), our study contributes that personal identities also implicate temporal work. It demonstrates that a leader's self-identity dilemma has its roots in the past but needs to be resolved in the present, while planning change in the future. The ability to change one's identity supposes giving up old attachments that at time strongly anchor it, but also forming new ones with yet-unknown values, artefacts and practices (Baillargeon & Bencherki, 2022).

Practically speaking, this study, where the CEO is trying to lead the people to a new way of organizing while not being comfortable with it himself, could be described as a case of 'the blind leading the blind.' Both the CEO and the staff would have needed more support to cope with transforming their organizational processes and personal practices. Our analysis gives support to Vygotsky (1978) theory of 'zone of proximal development,' which suggests

that there is a limited transitional range where people feel comfortable during a learning process—and, in this case, it was overstretched. This study thus indicates that scaffolding is needed to allow people to bridge such gaps, because the statement of an ideology is not enough: routines are deeply rooted and take time to change, and identity transformation is a challenge for individuals and takes time. Perhaps a mentor or a coach could offer such scaffolding. Instituting radical change in management philosophy, such as liberation management, creates an iterative, conflicted, at times chaotic and socially embedded process of reconfiguring a CEO's embodied identity, and by extension all professional identities. Preparation and training before engaging in the process is needed for the CEO, as well as for managers and workers, to make them fit for change in the first place.

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