Collective leadership in Self-Managing Organizations: how leadership roles are distributed through the "leadership distributive dispositive"

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Résumé :

Les Self-Managing Organizations (SMOs) représentent une forme radicale d'organisations moins hiérarchisées, caractérisées par la décentralisation complète de l'autorité et la suppression des rôles de management. Ces organisations remettent en question les notions traditionnelles de leadership, en offrant un contexte extrême où les rôles de leadership sont répartis entre les membres de l'organisation. Alors que le leadership collectif a déjà fait l'objet d'une étude approfondie dans un contexte hiérarchique, les SMOs offrent une occasion unique d'explorer les limites et les conditions du leadership collectif. Cet article comble cette lacune en examinant la manière dont les rôles de direction sont répartis au sein des SMOs, les conditions qui permettent cette répartition et les tensions et paradoxes qui en résultent. Grâce à une analyse comparative de trois études de cas - Aepsilon, Greatsense et HEA - cette recherche met en évidence la pluralité des approches de la distribution du leadership, influencées par le contexte organisationnel, les fondements idéologiques et les modalités de conception. Sur la base de ces résultats, nous proposons un modèle conceptuel : le « dispositif distributif », en nous inspirant de la notion de "*dispositif*" de Foucault. Ce modèle articule l'interaction entre les modalités humaines et non-humaines (par exemple, les processus, les artefacts et les valeurs culturelles) pour fournir un outil pragmatique permettant d'analyser et de faciliter la distribution du leadership dans les SMOs. En dévoilant les mécanismes qui sous-tendent la distribution du leadership et ses limites, cette étude contribue à faire progresser la compréhension de la décentralisation radicale et offre des perspectives exploitables aux praticiens qui souhaitent mettre en œuvre des modèles d'organisations ahiérarchiques.

Mots clés : leadership collectif, self-managing organizations (SMOs), leadership collectif, décentralisation radicale, dispositif.

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Abstract (EN)

Self-managing organizations (SMOs) represent a radical form of less-hierarchical organizations, characterized by the complete decentralization of authority and the suppression of managerial roles. These organizations challenge traditional notions of leadership, offering an extreme context where leadership roles are distributed across members of the organization. While collective leadership has been already thoroughly explored in hierarchical context, SMOs present a unique opportunity to explore the limits and the conditions of collective leadership. This article addresses this gap by exploring how leadership roles are distributed within SMOs, the conditions that enable this distribution, and the resulting tensions and paradoxes. Through a comparative analysis of three case studies—Aepsilon, Greatsense, and HEA—this research highlights the diverse approaches to leadership distribution, influenced by organizational context, ideological foundations, and design modalities. Based on these findings, we propose a conceptual model of the "distributed leadership dispositive", drawing on Foucault's notion of "*dispositive*". This model articulates the interplay between human and non-human modalities (e.g., processes, artifacts, and cultural values) to provide a pragmatic tool for analyzing and facilitating leadership distribution in SMOs. By uncovering the mechanisms behind leadership distribution and its limitations, this study contributes to advancing the understanding of radical decentralization and offers actionable insights for practitioners aiming to implement self-managing models.

Key words: collective leadership, Self-Managing Organizations (SMOs), distributed leadership, radical decentralization, dispositive.

1. INTRODUCTION

Self-Managing organizations (SMOs) are a radical form of less-hierarchical organizations (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). They radically depart from hierarchical organizations and from previous less-hierarchical approaches, not only through organization-wide decentralization, but also because they eliminate the hierarchical reporting relationship between managers and subordinates. Hence, the traditional managerial role is replaced by leadership roles distributed across the members of the organization (Holtz, 2017; Poli & Gabriel, 2024).

This approach to redistribution within organizations is in line with the trend towards plural leadership (Denis et al., 2012) or post-heroic leadership (Crevani et al., 2007), in which the power to influence is not embodied by a single individual but extends more widely to the organization's stakeholders. In its most radical form, leadership is no longer embodied by an individual, but is translated into practices, interactions, and even non-human processes and modalities (the company's raison d'être, values, and culture) (Collinson, 2020; Raelin, 2016).

However, the literature on collective leadership in context is scarce, and the distribution of leadership roles in the context of an SMO represents an important gap that needs to be addressed. The literature on SMOs mainly explores the decentralization process, organizational model, and its effects, particularly its malfunctions. On the other hand, research aiming to explain these dysfunctions or paradoxes and trying to determine how to prevent or correct them is much rarer. Accordingly, our aim is to provide empirical evidence to better understand this extended conception of collective leadership and explore the tensions and paradoxes resulting from its distribution. In this article, we propose a new conceptual model, the "distributive dispositive" to explain these tensions and to offer a tool that can improve the conditions of distribution and smooth the transformation process from hierarchical organization to SMO.

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2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP: DISTRIBUTING LEADERSHIP ROLES AT ALL LEVELS OF THE ORGANIZATION

2.1.1. Four approaches to collective leadership

The leader(s) influence individual efforts towards a defined collective goal (Yukl, 2013). Necessary for any organized collective action, leadership plays a fundamental role as much in the creation, survival, development, and even decline of organizations (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Unlike management, leadership is a process in which authority comes from influence rather than a hierarchical position (Yukl, 1989; Zaleznik, 1977). Thus, the process leading a hierarchical organization to an SMO raises the question of the dynamics of transformation from hierarchical management to a new form of leadership.

In the early 2000s, scholars focused on diverse forms of collective leadership such as shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2002), distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002), collective leadership (Friedrich et al., 2009), horizontal leadership (Ensley et al., 2006), and post-heroic leadership (Crevani et al., 2007). Far from being a unified conceptualization, this era of plural leadership takes a more critical view of traditional theories and presents leadership "*not as an individual property [...] but as a collective phenomenon distributed or shared between different people, potentially fluid and constructed in interaction*" (Denis et al., 2012).

To provide more clarity to the concept, Denis et al. (2012) identified four approaches to collective leadership: (1) "sharing leadership for team effectiveness," (2) "pooling leadership at the top," (3) "spreading leadership across levels over time, " and (4) "producing leadership through interactions."

In the first approach, "sharing leadership for team effectiveness," collective leadership is conceptualized as a functionalist/strategic approach. The aim is to find an alternative source of

leadership (the team) to that of the vertical leader, which can complement his or her influence and positively impact the organization's performance (Ensley et al., 2006; Pearce & Sims, 2002). Two main contributions emerge from this approach: first, the possibility of thinking about vertical leadership and shared leadership in tandem rather than as opposites. Second, the functional approach studies leadership as a set of roles and functions that can be distributed within a team (Fernandez et al., 2010; Morgeson et al., 2010).

In the second approach, "pooling leadership at the top," the leadership distribution is restricted. The restricted approach focuses on the sharing of formalized leadership at the level of the organization's top management (Döös & Wilhelmson, 2021; O'Toole et al., 2002). In this approach, influence is distributed only to a small group of people occupying highly hierarchical positions, and the emphasis is on collective decision-making processes.

The third approach, "spreading leadership across levels over time," examines the distribution of leadership at all levels of the organization, and even beyond (Spillane, 2005). This enables us to think about the process of influence from a broad, even non-human, perspective, in which leadership can be embodied in processes, structures, and artifacts. This approach is more often used to study the distribution of leadership in post-bureaucratic organizations (Lee & Edmondson, 2017).

Finally, the fourth approach, "producing leadership through interactions," draws on the work of Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995; Uhl-Bien, 2006) to show that leadership is a social phenomenon that is the product of social interactions between individuals. Consequently, it is more appropriate to speak of leadership rather than leaders (Crevani et al., 2010) in the sense that individuals are not in themselves the bearers of influence. Influence is the consequence of their relationships and the product of their local interactions, and they are merely the repositories of this leadership.

It should be noted that all of these studies, whether conceptual or empirical, are to be seen in the context of a hierarchical organization. The pluralization of leadership must, therefore, be seen in relation to this formal structure, particularly in terms of power relations. Their authors largely neglected this political dimension, particularly within the relational and 'spreading' leadership movements. However, it is highly likely that the presence of a hierarchical structure has a potentially facilitating or inhibiting effect on emerging leadership and the propensity of individuals to take on leadership roles (Denis et al., 2012). Consequently, the removal of this structure is expected to have a significant impact on the pluralization dynamics described above. Studying the phenomenon of LS distribution within SMOs is, therefore, a potentially enlightening project in terms of the role played by the hierarchical structure in the decentralization process.

2.1.2. Distribution of leadership roles in collective leadership

Despite their differences, these approaches challenge leadership as an individual property to describe through the concept of roles (Carson et al., 2007; Friedrich et al., 2009). These roles are distributed, enacted collectively, or shared within a collective of human or non-human recipients (Crevani & Endrissat, 2016).

Drawing on role theory literature (Burke, 2010; Morgeson et al., 2010; Shuffler et al., 2010), we identified three categories of roles: the driving role at the organizational level, the catalytic role at the team level, and the supportive role at the individual level.

At the organizational level, the leader has a driving role: he or she defines a vision of the future and the values that underpin it and also acts on the general philosophy of the organization and its implicit and explicit rules. Thus, by proposing a vision focused on the future and innovation, and communicating mission and values, the leader tends to create an organizational culture conducive to employee commitment. Setting clear, motivating objectives and clear

project planning are also important aspects of this role. Finally, exemplarity is a key characteristic of driving leadership.

At the team level, the leader's role is to act as a catalyst, stimulating cooperation and collective creativity. In this role, the leader encourages and challenges employees' ideas, participation, debate, mutual support, proactivity, and even chaos and complexity in their interactions.

At the individual level, the leader plays a supportive role; he or she aims to foster intrinsic motivation. In this role, the leader monitors the employee without imposing strict controls, gives meaning to his or her mission, preserves feelings of freedom, and encourages autonomy and initiative.

2.2. SELF-MANAGING ORGANIZATIONS: COLLECTIVE, NON-HIERARCHICAL LEADERSHIP, EXTENDED TO THE ENTIRE ORGANIZATION

2.2.1. Self -Managing Organizations (SMOs)

The traditional hierarchical organization, inherited from the Taylorian precepts of division of labor and vertical power relationships, has been decried for many decades because of its dehumanizing effects and inefficiency in meeting contemporary challenges, whether strategic, technological, economic, societal, or environmental (Burns & Stalker, 1961; George et al., 2016; Hamel, 2011).

Over the last few decades, a surge in efforts by less hierarchical organizations has appeared and has been popularized (Carney & Getz, 2009; Hamel, 2007; Laloux, 2015; Robertson, 2015) among practitioners and scholars. Lee and Edmondson (2017) distinguish three categories in the literature about these recent experiments : *post-bureaucratic, humanistic, and democratic organizations*. *Post-bureaucratic* approaches will favor organizational level transformations and analysis, such as the "organic" type of Burns and Stalker (1961), and such companies aim

to improve flexibility, knowledge creation, and innovation. *Humanistic management* approaches will favor empowerment and self-managed teams and thus will focus on the individual and team levels, aiming to improve satisfaction, motivation, and commitment, and, as a result, individuals and team performance. *Organizational democracy* approaches focus on labor-management relationships, especially in manufacturing contexts, trying to improve individual experience at work and motivation, autonomy, and empowerment. Whatever the category, Lee and Edmonson (2017) point to the lack of clear distinction between radical and incremental efforts to organize less hierarchically and give a definition of *"self-managing organizations"* (SMOs), a radical form of decentralized organizations. SMOs are characterized by three key features: 1/complete decentralization of authority and suppression of reporting relationships between managers and subordinate, 2/formalization of the system, and 3/organization-wide implementation. These organizations are studied under various concepts and names (Mattelin-Pierrard et al., 2020): holacracy (Robertson, 2015), teal organizations (Laloux, 2015), F-form or liberated companies (Carney & Getz, 2009), and spaghetti organizations (Foss, 2003).

2.2.2. Collective leadership in the context of SMOs: opportunities and challenges

The emergence of SMO as a radical form of alternative organization, removing the traditional role of the individual leader (embodied by the manager), brought up to date the concept of collective leadership and offers a unique opportunity to study its mechanisms, effects, and limits.

On the one hand, the context of less hierarchical organizations offers a unique opportunity to study the distribution of power. The surge in firms adopting this new form of organizing calls for further research on the distribution of leadership roles in this context. Indeed, managers are the key figure of hierarchical organizations (Fayol, 1949; Weber, 1971): they ensure that work

is accomplished by direct reports and managing interdependencies across roles (Adler, 2001; Burns & Stalker, 1961; Mintzberg et al., 2003), establishing goals, and solving conflicts (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Williamson, 2000). In SMOs, however, their role is radically questioned and removed, along with the hierarchical reporting relationship between managers and subordinates, and an alternative system design distributes roles and responsibilities more widely, while the decentralization of power is pushed to its limits (Carney & Getz, 2009; Laloux, 2015; Lee & Edmondson, 2017; Robertson, 2015). Managers face the challenge of repositioning themselves, to evolve to a new role of leader (Holtz & Zardet, 2022), abandoning their formal managerial position to move to an expert position, or a mix of both. Conversely, employees can be elected to hold leadership positions without endorsing formal managerial authority. The shift from a hierarchical form to an SMOs is a real challenge, as the empirical literature highlights (Ackermann et al., 2021; Picard & Islam, 2020; Schell & Bischof, 2022; Sferrazzo, 2020), and needs to be better described and understood using a multilevel approach (Lee & Edmondson, 2017).

On the other hand, collective leadership is multiple, ambiguous, and relational in nature and represents a unique challenge for organizations and its members.

While this trend is promising for leadership research, some authors warn of the risk of a "new romance of leadership" (Denis et al., 2012; Sergi et al., 2012). Rather than a unified theory, collective leadership is presented as an alternative to the myth of the leader-hero, which is considered deleterious to the organization and its members. Consequently, the main authors of collective leadership have focused on the positive effects of this type of leadership to the detriment of an in-depth understanding of its dynamics. If, like Edwards and Bolden (2023), we consider that the intention of more positive leadership should be encouraged, we believe that the darker side should not be obscured. Recently, several authors argued that collective

leadership can reinforce or produce power imbalances and inequalities (Empson, 2020; Fox & Comeau-Vallée, 2020). Therefore, we believe that studying the dynamics of leadership role distribution in the context of SMOs is essential to understanding collective leadership. In these radically less hierarchical companies, opening up to leadership is accompanied by internal power struggles. In an recent article, Shymko and Frémeaux (2022) point out that the "fantasy of freedom" proposed in SMO philosophy reflects the quintessence of neo-liberalism. Instead of nurturing solidarity and collaboration between players, the personal freedom promoted in these organizations encourages an entrepreneurial spirit and competitive individualism.

The transition from a hierarchical structure to more collective leadership presents difficulties that should not be underestimated when distributing leadership roles. For example, Poli and Gabriel (2024) identify two main risks. In an extended conception of collective leadership, distribution could also cause confusion and a lack of clarity, resources, and recognition in non-hierarchical organizations. On the other hand, a more restrictive conception of collective leadership could reinforce the motor role to the detriment of the other roles.

Therefore, our research question is: "What are the modalities and conditions for the distribution of the leadership roles in a SMO, what tensions may arise from them ?"

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. GENERAL APPROACH

We used a multiple case study method (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2018) to answer our research question. On one hand, the case study approach is best suited to achieving a sufficient level of understanding of distributed leadership, a complex phenomenon, and paying particular attention to the context in which it is implemented (Yin, 1984). This method allows the generation of theories based on contextualized data (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). However, multiple case studies are reputed to be more convincing and robust than single case

studies (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2008). They follow the logic of replication (Yin, 2008), that is, each case represents an experimental situation and a unit of analysis in its own right, which can be contrasted with another. This replication logic implies 'theoretical' rather than 'representative' sampling. The selected cases must exhibit both similarities and differences ("experimental conditions"). By contrasting these differences, we can learn a great deal, gain a better understanding of the influence of context, and produce theories that are easier to generalize.

In this study, we compared three selected SMOs based on the principles of theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). As such, they matched the three criteria mentioned by Lee in his article (Lee & Edmondson, 2017), allowing to label them as "SMOs": radical suppression of any hierarchical relationship between manager and subordinate, organization-wide decentralization, and a formal system maintaining decentralization over time.

Moreover, they presented promising differences offering potentially instructive contrasts, responding to the "polar types" configuration (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007): two corresponding to a *humanistic* type and another to a *post-bureaucratic* management to evaluate the possible similarities and differences between the modalities of distribution of leadership roles. The first one, Aepsilon, is a French small independent company, the second, Greatsense, is an SSE organization (Social and Solidarity Economy), and the third, HEA, is part of Thales, a large worldwide French company. In their objectives (commitment) and values (trust, empowerment) and their focus on the individual level, Aepsilon and Greatsense correspond to a *humanistic* type of SMO. Aepsilon was created on a traditional hierarchical model and opted in 2015 for a "liberated" model. For their part, Greatsense has always adopted a collective leadership mode, fundamentally in line with their values, as a *humanistic* type, but initially in a "pooled" configuration (10 leaders), and extended it to the whole organization in 2018, to try

to solve coordination and efficiency problems, threatening their survival, which corresponds to the purpose of a *post-bureaucratic* organization. By contrast, HEA correspond fully to a *post-bureaucratic* type of SMO: oriented towards innovation, facing a big economic crisis, and adopting a formal system affecting the whole department as a means of restoring growth. Another source of contrast lies in the decentralization system itself, as they were really different, as we will develop in the Results section. Furthermore, at the time of collection, in 2019, the climate of Aepsilon and Makesense was degraded, while it was positive in the HEA, suggesting that the choices made had different effects. Figure 1 summarizes the initial differences between the three cases.

The collected data consisted of unstructured interviews, ethnographic observations, and documentation (Table 2). The data analysis was conducted in several steps. First, we reconstituted the story of each case and identified the key modalities and multilevel dynamics of the distribution of different leadership roles (driving, catalyzing, and supporting). We then compared the three cases based on the observed principal dimensions. At the end of this contrast, we will be able to identify the tensions and paradoxes of each adopted system in relation to their respective contexts. Finally, we propose a generalization of our results in the form of a conceptual model of the distribution system: we will call it the "distributing leadership dispositive." We mobilize Foucault's concept of "dispositive" (1980) to frame the distributed leadership dispositive as a heterogeneous network of elements oriented towards a goal, emphasizing the interplay of material, institutional and ideological dimensions—roles, processes, and values—that collectively shape leadership distribution in self-managing organizations. This model aims both at conceptualize and represent the modalities of distribution of the leadership role and their main conceptual dimensions, in an SMO, and at operationalize this distribution, during the transformation process, allowing to think about ways to "channel pluralization" (Denis et al., 2012) and avoid the pitfalls of collective leadership.

3.2. PRESENTATION OF THE CASES

Aepsilon is a French IT consultancy company with 25 employees, founded in 2009 by Franck, a former consultant for major groups. The origin of this business project was the desire to offer a different model to serve the well-being of its consultants. Approximately 15 consultants are based on the customer's premises, with the rest of the staff based on head office handling administrative, sales, HR, and internal software development activities. Since its creation, growth has been strong, and the company has gradually built a hierarchical structure around four managers and Franck. In 2015, in response to a lack of commitment and a sense of belonging among consultants, Franck decided to adopt the liberated enterprise model. In 2019, at the time of data collection in 2019, numerous dysfunctions had been identified and corrective measures were being considered. The key organizational principles of Aepsilon are presented in Table 1.

Greatsense is a French Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) organization founded in 2010 by two entrepreneurs. It has diversified its activities over the past decade, engaging in social entrepreneurship, citizen engagement, entrepreneurial support, incubator development, and investment funds. With its presence in seven countries and a workforce of over 120 employees, the company exhibits robust social and economic performance, generating an annual turnover of 4 million through various business activities. Historically, the company's organization was based on a team approach without a CEO, relying on a small group of business unit founders who operated by consensus (Leadership working group report). This collaborative, decentralized decision-making culture has persisted across various governance models, culminating in the 2018 model being still in use. Influenced by Frédéric Laloux's (2015) and F-form models (Carney & Getz, 2009), this model is founded on trust, transparency, and power equivalence applied throughout the company. The key organizational principles of Greatsense are presented in Table 2.

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Thales AVS France, which integrates most aeronautical activities, is a global business unit of the electronics group, Thales. It is home to several business lines, including Flight Avionics (FLX), which employs 5,300 people. HEA, one of the FLX's three business segments, is dedicated to the helicopter market. It has approximately 80 employees, the vast majority of whom are engineers. Thales organizations are highly bureaucratic, driven by the strict and numerous procedures and norms of risk management. Until 2016, the organization was characterized by vertical, top-down leadership. Against a backdrop of severe economic crisis, Christian, the vice president (VP) of HEA, opted for the Teal Model of Laloux (2014) and launched a radical organizational transformation, named "liberated HEA," which will run until 2019. The key organizational principles of "liberated HEA" are presented in Table 3.

Table 1 Characteristics of the three cases studied

	Aepsilon	Greatsense	HEA
Embededness	Independant	Independant	Part of a large hierarchical group
Activity	Digital Services Company	Social entrepreneurship	Sales in the helicopter industry
Economical and organizational context	Strong growth, but high turnover	Strong growth, but lack of shared vision and efficiency	Economic crisis, heavy bureaucracy
Expected results of the transformation	Loyalty and belonging	Efficiency and structuration	Economical survival
Type of SMO (Lee 2017)	Humanistic	Humanistic => Post-bureaucratic	Post-bureaucratic

The empirical material collected combines ethnographic observations (recorded in a research journal), performed during one week of full immersion in Aepsilon and HEA, and 150 h of observations at Greatsense. A total of 72 semi-structured interviews (all recorded and fully transcribed), internal documentation, and online materials (social networks, blogs, podcasts, interviews, and conferences) were collected. The table below summarizes the number of interviews, the number of people interviewed, and the breakdown between leaders, employees, and among the latter, the number of former line managers for our two case studies.

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Table 2 Description of the field data

Case	Aepsilon	Greatsense	HEA
Immersion	One full time week March 2019	2020-2022 (150h)	One full time week May 2019
No. of team members	25	120	90
No. of people surveyed	16	20	18
Liberating Leaders	3	3	2
Members	13*	17 **	16***
Nb of interviews	28	20	24

* including 2 ex-managers **No managers in the previous organization *** including 3 ambassadors/directors and 1 former middle manager

4. RESULTS

In the first part, we will describe the three cases, in three independent tables, following four sections: the historical context of their transformation, the key organizational principles of the new organization, the way the leadership role categories (driving, catalyst, and support) were distributed, and finally, the multilevel consequences, focusing on the tensions and paradoxes that have emerged in the wake of the transformation. For each Table, we will now provide a synthesis, making explicit links between, on the one hand, the distribution of leadership roles and their possible shortcomings (driving leadership, catalyst leadership, and support leadership) and the tensions observed at different levels of analysis (organizational, collective, and individual). Then, in a summary table, we will expose and contrast the main characteristics of the three cases and analyze and interpret the significant similarities and differences between them. In the third section, we suggest a theoretical model of the leadership role distribution in ahierarchical context and show the importance of what we call the "*distributive dispositive*" in taking on the different leadership roles and, therefore, in ensuring the good functioning of the organization.

4.1. LEADERSHIP DISTRIBUTION IN EACH OF THE THREE CASES

The distribution of leadership roles within each case highlights significant gaps that contribute to the systemic, organizational, collective, and individual tensions observed in its functioning.

The transformation at Aepsilon (Table 3) was driven by employee disengagement and a mismatch between traditional hierarchical management and the company's values of entrepreneurship and trust. The hierarchical system was replaced by a minimalistic system based on trinomials and small peer networks, but no collective system was implemented, directly contributing to multilevel tensions. First, at the systemic and organizational levels, driving roles were nominally distributed among influencers, but in practice, Franck retained a significant influence. His limited communication of vision and strategy reduced his impact, while symbolic artifacts like "MyAepsilon" and shared inspirational resources failed to create a unifying framework. This lack of cohesion led to systemic tensions, including a "phantom hierarchy," where Franck's residual authority perpetuated perceptions of hierarchy. Second, at the organizational level, the absence of a clear, shared vision left employees struggling to navigate their roles independently, hindering initiative-taking and contributing to a loss of bearing and negative feelings. Second, at the collective level, catalyst roles were effectively fulfilled by trinomials. They facilitated intellectual stimulation, mutual support, and problem-solving but were limited in scope, focusing only on individual issues. This narrow focus of the formal system contributed to collective tensions, with polarization emerging between those close to Franck and others feeling marginalized or abandoned. Third, at the individual level, the supporting leadership roles were effectively redistributed through the trinomial, providing critical psychological safety and career development support and enhancing trust and legitimacy in assessments. However, the uneven clarity of support roles and the absence of collective regulation led to role ambiguity, creating frustration and a sense of injustice among

employees who perceived themselves as excluded or disadvantaged by polarization. This lack of clarity and perceived inequity deepens individual tensions, amplifying feelings of dissatisfaction and disengagement. In summary, the incomplete and uneven distribution of leadership roles in Aepsilon failed to provide the strategic coherence, collective coordination, and individual support necessary for a successful transition.

Greatsense (Table 3) was already a non-hierarchical organization and transitioned to a liberated model emphasizing decentralization and collective decision making, aligning with its ethos of individual freedom and responsibility. However, critical gaps in the distribution of leadership roles caused significant tensions, that contributed to tensions at various levels. First, at the systemic and organizational level, the "raison d'être" was intended to play a central driving role, providing the guiding framework for decision-making. However, its lack of concreteness hinders its ability to guide day-to-day actions or prioritize objectives effectively, leading to organizational tensions. The persistence of informal historical leaders at the center of strategic decisions introduced a "phantom hierarchy," undermining the egalitarian ideals of the model. Second, at the collective level, catalyst roles were divided between informal historical leaders and formal cross-functional roles in HR, budgeting, and communication. These roles faced legitimacy challenges, as the influence of historical leaders clashed with the organization's move away from hierarchies. Combined with a lack of shared vision, this hindered coordination and reinforced individualistic culture. Third, at the individual level, support leadership roles, carried out by SDAs and operational referents, are aimed at empowering individual initiatives. However, individualistic culture created an environment in which leadership was seen as the ultimate contribution, placing undue pressure on employees to take the lead. This focus results in excessive workloads and a lack of recognition of the required effort. HEA's transformation (Table 4) into a "liberated" organization was based on a complex, multilevel leadership model. First, at the systemic and organizational level, being

embedded in the hierarchical structure of Thales is a first source of ambiguity that we called "organizational schizophrenia": employee navigate a dual reality: being "liberated" internally while adhering to hierarchical norms in external interfaces. Also, the Base, formed by ambassadors (ex-directors, created to reinforce the vision (driving role) faced contested legitimacy, contributing to the second source of ambiguity: "phantom hierarchy" where authority is ambiguously retained and perceived by certain individuals, whether ex-managers or employees. Moreover, the uneven allocation of driving roles, such as sponsors and captains, weakens the clarity and coherence of the organizational vision. Finally, while the Constitution institutionalizes vision and mission, taking over this driving role, its limited use in daily operations undermines its impact. Second, at the collective level, catalyst roles are facilitated by collective modalities, effectively taking over, maybe even more, the roles previously endorsed by directors. HEA's approach to conflict resolution and the use of "squads" for ad hoc problem-solving fostered pockets of innovation and adaptability. However, the "circle" vision weakens the focus on trade expertise. Decision-making complexity arising from the advice process further complicates the coordination. Finally, at the individual level, support roles, including coaches and elected assessors, aim to create trust and enable professional development. However, their uneven distribution and lack of training leave many employees feeling unsupported or abandoned. The Role Marketplace, while intended to empower individuals, fails to deliver on its promises, contributing to a lack of recognition and increased workload. This imbalance fosters individual tensions, as employees grapple with hyperreflexivity and the ongoing demand to improve processes without sufficient resources or support. Overall, the positive results observed at the collective level suggest that the HEA model holds promise, but the inadequacies in distributing leadership roles directly impact the liberated model's effectiveness.

Table 3 - Aespilon: a minimal system for a partial distribution of leadership roles

Vignette	Verbatim
Context: a lack of commitment and belonging, in a context of growth	
2009-2014: Creation and structuring Franck founded Aepsilon in 2009 in Sophia Antipolis. The company grew rapidly, around Franck, Roman (project leader) and Sarah (HR). A layer of middle management was established, with four team leaders overseeing 15 consultants.	*"We were getting into classic management mechanics. Year after year, we saw the frustration of the consultants mount. (Franck, leader 1)*
2014: Crisis and reevaluation In September 2014, Aepsilon faced a wave of resignations, revealing a lack of employee engagement and sense of belonging. The leadership trio realized the limitations of traditional management, which clashed with their values (entrepreneurship, freedom and trust), inspired by Getz "Freedom Inc." book	*"The further we got into the development of the company, the more it came into conflict with my way of being, my way of managing myself [...] it was against my way of thinking. [It was against my way of thinking". (Sarah, leader 2)*
Sept 2015: Liberation and transformation After a year of reflection behind closed door, inspired by the concepts of Liberated Company, the trio of leaders launched the "MyAepsilon" project, in a radical way. During a collective meeting, they abolished middle management and implemented the new system.	*"It was MyAepsilon, because I really wanted this feeling of belonging to a movement, to the company too, and to have this image where everyone brings a little bit of their stone to the building, to the development of Aepsilon." (Sarah, leader 2)*
Key principles of the new organization	
The project is based on based on **key values**: trust, freedom, transparency, right to make mistakes and entrepreneurial mindset. The hierarchical system is replaced by a network of "**trinomials**": each employee chooses two fellow "**influencers**". These trinomials make decisions on raises, assignments, training and annual appraisals. Three rules: consensus, customer satisfaction and financial health. **Collaborative tools** have been set up to facilitate information sharing and collaboration.	*" The aim was to abolish everything that can hinder an individual's performance and give them the freedom they need" (Franck, leader 1)* *"We've done 2 things: we've transformed individual management and, we removed the role of the manager who controls, validates, the pyramid where there's an escalation, and someone who decides. That's all we've done. (Franck, leader 1)*
Distribution of leadership roles	
Driving roles: Intended Intended to be taken over by influencers, but in practice, largely assumed by Franck. However, the lack of communication of his vision and strategy, his impact remains limited. Artefacts like the project identity (MyAepsilon), shared inspirations (books, videos, corporate liberation references) help convey values and a vision of a "liberated company", but their diffusion remains limited.	*"There's a real desire to move forward, and not to use old technology etc. [...] to try out slightly different approaches, in terms of discourse and so on. [...] And so it's a little bit in every stratum."*
Catalyst roles: The trinomial fosters intellectual stimulation, reflexivity, mutual support, and problem-solving. However, its scope is restricted to three people and focuses mainly on individual issues.	*"Because I think they're good thinkers." (Romain, Plateau Consultant, Associate) "Whenever I have doubts, they're the ones I turn to". "And it's with them, in fact, that I'm making my way in the end. Because between the three of us, we can decide which opportunities to seize, which things to improve."*
Supporting role: The trinomial provides significant support to employees by creating a "time-space" that ensures psychological safety, trust, and attention to their career development.	
Tensions when implementing collective leadership	
Systemic effects: setting up a "network" of influencers leads to a real redistribution of decision-making power and influence, but Franck is still the most frequently designated. *Phantom hierarchy:* persistence of a sense of hierarchy. Ex: Franck's status as a legal manager is still perceived by some, even though he no longer exercises direct hierarchical power.	*"At first, everyone had Franck or Romain, because they were the leaders of the company [...]. But the more new people we had, the more these trinomials changed."* *"And to think that I'm delegating to my boss, well, it's still a bit weird." (Agathe, Support Team)*
Organizational tensions: *Loss of bearings/lack of vision:* everyone has to find their own way, without a manager, but without a unifying vision either. The absence of rules makes it difficult to take initiative.	*"It's not easy to understand what's expected of us. So much autonomy, so much decision-making power, well it's important, we're a bit scared!"*
Collective tensions: *Polarization of the collective:* between those who are close to Franck, enthusiastic and self-determined, and those who are further away, feeling lost and abandoned. *Anomie:* lack of regulation of roles and responsibilities leading to conflicts, and to inequalities in access to information and resources. Those furthest from the center are paralyzed.	*"Either you manage to make a little space for yourself and things go well, or you're hyper-excluded, and what's more, you're spied on and judged [...] so after experience, I said to myself, but... I thought it was a fine sham !"* *"Except that, at some point, some wanted to go there, and some wanted to go there. [...] because the principle was "he who knows, does". Except that you have to be lucid about your skills."*
Individual tensions: Increased trust and legitimacy of individual assessment by influencers, but *Role ambiguity* due to the lack of clarity about of roles and responsibilities and rules for collective regulation (anomie), *Sense of injustice and frustration* for the "losers" of polarization.	*"It's the people who are able to tell what I'm doing as a mission, who know how I work (...) I want someone who's able to tell me "No that's not right."*

Table 4 – Greatsense: a distribution of power pre-empted by a historical constellation

Vignette	Verbatim

Context: implementation of the liberated enterprise in an SSE organization

2014-2018 - Independent communities: Originally, Greatsense was presented as a community made up of several associative structures founded and managed independently by an entrepreneur. Decision-making was shared between the founders of these structures. In 2016, an attempt at harmonization was made, paving the way for an overhaul of the model in 2018.

2018 - Switching to the liberated company model: leadership is decoupled from power, and thanks to the advice solicitation system, anyone can make a decision to move the organization forward. The model is inspired by F. Laloux's Teal model, from his book 'Reinventing organizations".

"We'd read Laloux and thought: wow, that's great, let's propose that to the incubator. There were maybe ten of us in the incubator, so we said, let's propose it to the team, tell them we don't want to decide anymore and that we want to solicit opinions." (Interview Sophie, historical leader)

Summer 2018 - Emergence of informal, discussed leadership: in front of several problems of coordination and vision, a group of five people self-proclaim themselves "historical leaders" at an organizational seminar. Together, they take on key leadership roles and attempt to restructure the organization around a shared vision and pillars.

Summer 2021- Leadership fragmentation: a "Strategy" workshop is set up, initially designed to clarify both the organization's vision and the role of the historical leaders. However, the Strategy project also highlighted a split between two competing visions within the organization, and the existence of several influential sub-groups.

Key principles of the new organization

Key values: freedom and individual responsibility. **Elimination of hierarchical levels**: no boss. Job titles are freely defined. **Election without applicants**: employees themselves choose the people who will represent them when making strategic choices, particularly in terms of organization. **Decentralisation of decision making**: Advice process as a majority decision-making process. **Governance bodies** without decision-making powers. Importance of the **raison d'être**. The **Process Committee** is the guarantor of the organisation's processes and model.

"All decision-making processes must serve the company's raison d'être and values" (extract from a training course on governance and decision-making).

Organisational values:

"Be free as much as you're responsible" .

"Try, learn and share".

Distribution of leadership roles

Driving role (ORG): The "raison d'être" who takes on this role and who is in effect thought of as the framework for collective behavior and decision-making, in co-leadership with the historical leaders within the framework of the "Strategy" workgroup ("chantier").

Catalyst role (COLL): Informal level: "historical" leaders who are recognized for their inspiring personalities. At the formal level, the role is taken on by cross-functional HR, budgeting, sales and communications roles.

Support role (IND): SDAs, who enable everyone to take initiatives for themselves, the group or the organization. At circle level, this is the role of the operational referent.

"The principle of SDA is to encourage individual initiative. And individual initiative is highly empowering.

"The operational consultant is neither an N+2 nor a manager. His/her role is to support the person he/she is following in his/her development of professional skills and in the achievement of his/her objectives. (Extract from the Makesense charter)

Tensions when implementing collective leadership

Organizational tensions: Lack of a clear vision: the raison d'être is not perceived as concrete enough to guide day-to-day actions, prioritize strategic objectives, and coordinate the various teams. Fantom hierarchy: despite the transformation, the small group of informal leaders position themselves at the heart of strategic decisions, synonymous for some members with a return to the pyramid model.

Collective tensions: Lack of legitimacy for emerging leaders: in particular, the legitimacy and importance of historical leaders in an organization that takes away all managerial roles is not recognized by the collective. Coordination difficulties linked to the absence of a collectively shared vision, and to an individualistic culture.

Individual tensions: An **individualistic culture** focused on taking the initiative at the organizational level tends to create a "leadership culture", in which the ability to create and lead behind oneself is recognized as the best form of contribution to the organization. **Pressure and workload**: leadership demands energy, time and skills that are not felt to be enviable by all employees. **Lack of recognition** of this workload.

"But... I don't necessarily feel like it's concrete enough to guide you. It's a compass, but really north is far what."

"Why did you pretend, you didn't pretend, but why did you propose HR hats, budget hats if in the end it's always the same people who get together and make decisions? Why didn't this reorganization take into account this need for leadership? I don't really know, but for me, there's a big paradox here."

"Because we can't all be leaders, we can't all have the same contribution because we don't all have the same skills".

Table 5 - HEA: a sophisticated system for a balanced distribution of leadership roles

Vignette	Verbatim

Context

Before 2016 - Highly buraucratic organization and culture: VP (Antoine) + functional department, in a standardized aeronautics industry. HEA in need of change, with a SME spirit.

"Thales, it's the culture of the leader."

"It's like glue, [about bureaucratic process] everyone is caught up in this magma."

2016-2017 - Economic crisis and managerial impulses: Economic crisis threatening survival. Renewal of top management less authoritarian.

"It had been presented as "if we don't do anything, we're dead!""

2017 - "Liberating" trigger and co-construction of "Liberated HEA": Antoine reads F. Laloux's book, a revelation ans decides to "liberate" HEA. A pilot group (10 employees) emerges. For 3 months, this group engaged all members in a co-construction of the new organization, in 8 workgroups.

"Because in the world we're going into, the model where everything is decided by a few thinking heads, it doesn't work anymore."

"At first, I said to myself, "Well, that's a load of crap! [...] And then I thought, shit! There really is something."

2018 - Implementation and adjustments: Launch of "liberated HEA", learning and adjustments, until "Liberated HEA" is phagocyted into a larger-scale hierarchical organization.

Key principles of the new organization

Multifunctional **circles**, focused on key clients, self-organized (purpose, objectives...) and formalized in a **Constitution**. New (elected) **leadership roles** are created: circle captains, coaches, ambassadors, trade referents, sponsor. Positions are replaced by "roles": the **Roles Marketplace** enables people to occupy roles according to their desires and skills. Collective decision-making by **soliciting opinions and consent**. **Squads** can be used to create ad hoc groups to solve new problems. Appraisals with freely chosen **evaluators**. The **Base** (sponsor+ambassadors) ensures the overall coherence among the circles.

"We've told everyone... you can have an idea, you can decide to implement it. It's only the objection that can stop you from doing it."

"In forming the Base, the idea is to put seniority back at the heart of the unit. It must ensure coherence at HEA level, beyond the business vision of each circle. For me, the Base becomes a sort of committee of wise men".

Distribution of leadership roles

Driving roles: Vision and mission are institutionalized in the Constitution, and animated by different roles (sponsor, captain...). But the roles are unevenly held. The Constitution ultimately little mobilized on a day-to-day basis. The Base ensures the coherence of the circles' visions, forming the "HEA" vision, but its legitimacy is contested.

"After that, I imagine people do pick and choose, in the constitution." (Antoine, VP HEA).

"The ambassadors felt they had been robbed of their power somewhere. They felt useless."

Catalyst roles: The different collective modalities (squads, solicited decision-making, meetings, conflict resolution…) allow for expression and exchange, creative problem solving, participation, and coordination. The Roles Marketplace enables roles to be taken as needs arise. Coaches ensure that the collective dynamic is maintained. "Liberated cafés" offer areas for free and voluntary debate.

"Some members of the circles seem critical of the creation of the Base. They don't see its relevance, and worse, they perceive a return of hierarchical presence with "power over."

"We did assistant squads, we did mission squads, we did squads on everything and nothing... but on subjects that were a source of frustration or they wanted to think about. So that's interesting."

Supporting roles: elected assessors create a climate of trust. The Role Marketplace doesn't keep its promises of professional development. As the new support roles (coach, referent) are held unevenly by individuals, employees sometimes feel abandoned. Squads encourage individual initiative.

"The annual appraisal goes better now, with my circle captain. Luc has no direct interest, so the feedback is franker and more constructive."

Tensions when implementing collective leadership

Systemic tensions: "Schizophrenia": the double constraint of having to act "liberated" internally, while being "hierarchical" at interfaces (customers, Group functions). Phantom hierarchy/roles ambiguity: persistence of a sense of hierarchy. Sometimes, Ambassadors go back to hierarchical practices.

"The problem is always the same [...] it's HEA liberated, in an unliberated world. It's that you don't have a dual personality, but almost."/ "There's a kind of organizational schizophrenia... we find ourselves having to fill in all the boxes anyway."

Organizational tensions: Vision and drive fade: Ambassadors are sidelined. The Base is being called into question. The "circle" vision prevails over the organizational objective and the "trade" dimension of expertise. In the end, the Constitution is little used on a day-to-day basis. Role dilution: new elected leaders emerge, but sometimes the roles have difficulty finding candidates or are "diluted" because they are assumed by several people.

"There are authoritarian decisions, it's a form of betrayal of the system." / "The ambassadors are more involved in supporting and helping the circles."/ "Those who wanted to become captains didn't always have a good experience, because in the end they realized that it was new unaccounted-for workload."

Collective tensions: Coordination problems: increased interdependence and weakening of the "trade" dimension. Complexity: "liberated HEA" is superimposed on the old formal hierarchical organization. decision making, due to the new process of soliciting advice and consent.

"The problem is that when I'm on vacation, nobody does my work. [...] nobody knows what their business counterparts are doing". / "Then, you say to yourself, well, the mess is going to have to work!"

Individual tensions: Increased workload and lack of recognition (financial or in terms of resources), Lack of individual support, particularly for professional development, feeling of abandonment of individuals by their managers. Hyper-reflexivity: processes are constantly reviewed to continuous improvement.

"Well, nobody took over the role, so I had to cumulate a little for a while..." / "I think we really need to go further in supporting people involved. We've seen a lot of great energy dry up." / "You can't stay permanently in an open loop asking questions, launching squads and reviewing this, that and the other - it's not possible! At some point you have to deliver!"

4.2. COMPARISON OF THE THREE CASES

The comparison of the 3 cases has enabled us to identify key dimensions that explain the more or less successful redistribution of leadership roles following the removal of the hierarchy.

4.2.1. Context of the transformation

First, the context and stake of the transformation are important determinants of the actual distribution of leadership. Indeed, depending on these parameters, the transformation leaders, their beliefs, inspirations, and purpose will play a decisive role. Franck (founder of Aespsilon, case 1) want his employees to share his vision of the world and the meaning of work, leading to their commitment to Aepsilon. Consequently, he has no interest in relinquishing the driving role (vision, strategy, and raison d'être of Aepsilon) or the design of the new organizational structure, which he will think alone, although he is taking on board two close partners. On the contrary, at HEA (case 3), the "liberation" project is seen as instrumental for the survival of the department, as a mean to escape the heavy bureaucratic system of Thales. For Antoine (VP of HEA), taking a back seat and distributing the driving role is the only way to give the organization a chance to identify new growth drivers as they emerge. At Greatsense, the decision is paradoxical from the outset. It is by taking decentralization to a more radical level that leaders intend to remedy organizational problems, which already seem to be linked to decentralization. Even if decentralization is consistent with the humanist philosophy of its founders, it is being pushed to its limits, both strategically and systemically, turning the organization into a veritable SMO. This transformation represents a major risk to leaders. Indeed, while the small historic group of leaders reform informally and take over reins in the face of mounting difficulties, they no longer have the legitimacy to do so, exposing them to new difficulties.

4.2.2. The implication on the level of analysis

Let us now examine how these dimensions relate to the type of organizational framework put in place, and the levels of analysis involved by it. At Aespilon, the challenge is to build consultant loyalty, and therefore, concerns the individual level. In addition, the ideology advocated by leaders, who are also designers, places fundamental importance on individual freedom and entrepreneurship. This combination gives rise to a system, the "trinomial" entirely focused on the individual and his or her capacity for entrepreneurship, betting on individual initiatives. Without vision and social organization, this individual action is paralyzed.

Whereas at HEA, the issue is organizational survival, and the ideology very much focused on the collective, with a "collectivist" inspiration, the OPALE model (Laloux, 2014): the emphasis is therefore more on the collective level and the result is a design very much focused on cooperation, coordination, banking on collective intelligence, to the detriment of the individual level,

By contrast, Greatsense is a blend of the two. The focus is on cooperation (collective level), while the ideology is the same as that of Aepsilon, emphasizing entrepreneurship and leadership (individual level). The result is a system aimed at solving the identified problem, thus targeting cooperation (inspired by the "collectivist" Teal model, as at HEA), while the overemphasis on initiative and responsibility puts pressure on the individual, without the organizational level (vision, objectives...) being able to guide his or her initiative.

At the end of the chain, the effects are consistent with the respective investment degrees at different levels. At Aepsilon, the stakes and ideology are aligned with the individual level, and the system is coherent, focusing on the individual but neglecting the collective and organizational levels. Individual comfort is thus initially provided, but with initiative guided by no shared vision or sense of purpose, the individual and, by extension, collective action is

paralyzed; the collective becomes polarized, and individual frustration and malaise grow. On the other hand, in Greatsense, there is a disconnect between collective challenges and organizational ideology. The system is designed for collective coordination, but struggle to build a collective vision that would guide the collective action at the organizational level. As in Aespilon, individual actions and social dynamics are paralyzed. Ultimately, HEA is the only organization that aligns with the stakes, ideology, and system. The latter, which is highly formalized, relies essentially (but not exclusively) on the collective and organizational levels, generating personal frustration but ensuring collective dynamics and, ultimately, organizational performance.

4.2.3. Moderators of collective leadership in the three cases

Other factors also reinforce these effects, probably by acting as moderators. These include the design mode (shared or not), the implementation mode (brutal or progressive), the level of sophistication (low, moderate, high), the level of formalization (low, moderate, high), the presence of formal "focal" leadership roles. Aepsilon illustrates the negative impact of a closed-door design associated with an abrupt launch and a lack of formalization: the gap in information and appropriation of the concept is large and buy-in by employees is far from obvious. What's more, since the system was minimalist and informal (which is supposed to leave plenty of room for individual freedom), the presence of only one new official leadership role ("influencers") only imperfectly relayed the leadership roles formerly held by managers. In contrast, at HEA, a system with many new "focal" leadership roles, enriched by numerous formal "relay modalities," enables better redistribution of leadership roles. What's more, collective development over several months, through a "pilot" team, ensures that the new system better meets leadership needs at all levels, is more readily accepted and appropriated.

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Ultimately, all the dimensions presented here contributed to the more or less effective distribution of the various leadership roles at the different levels of the organization and helped to explain the effects observed, whether positive or negative.

Table 6 provides a detailed overview of the leadership distribution characteristics and impacts across the three organizations: Aepsilon, Greatsense, and HEA.

**Table 6 Comparison of the three cases according to the main dimensions of analysis**

	Aepsilon	Greatsense	HEA
Features of the new organization			
Stake	Commitment = individual)	Coordination problem solving = collective	Economic survival = organisational
Ideology	Individualistic (entrepreneurship, individual freedom)	Individualistic (entrepreneurship, indivudual freedom)	Collectivistic (collective intelligence, collaboration)
Main level focused by the design	Individual	Individual	Collective and Organizational
Mode of design	Founder only with two close partners	Collaborative at first, restrained to a group of 5 then	VP => Pilot team => Collaborative
Implementation	Sudden, top down		Progressive, cosonstructed
Type of dispositive	Minimalistic	Multilevel, sophisticated	Multilevel, sophisticated
Formalization	Very Low	High	High
New formal leadership roles	Influencers	Multiple new roles	Multiple new roles
Spreading levels			
Driving roles	Low	High	High
Catalyst roles	Limited in scope	High	High
Support roles	Limited in scope	High	Low
Impacts of the transformation			
Organizational level	---	---	--
Collective level	---/+	---	+++
Individual level	---/+	-	--

4.3. PROPOSAL OF A CONCEPTUAL MODEL: THE *LEADERSHIP DISTRIBUTING DISPOSITIVE*, A PRAGMATIC APPROACH OF RADICAL DECENTRALIZATION

By linking these observations, the notion of a "leadership distributive dispositive" emerges. By formally distributing the leadership roles formerly assumed by hierarchical managers, this dispositive meets the needs of the organization at all three levels of analysis. More precisely, each of its "distributive modalities" will take on one or more leadership roles, and through these

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roles, meet needs at all three levels of analysis. The distributive dispositive is thus defined as the set of its different modalities and more or less covers all leadership roles formerly occupied by hierarchical managers.

Figure 1 The leadership distributive dispositive

Context, stake, objective, ideology of the historic leaders, change management
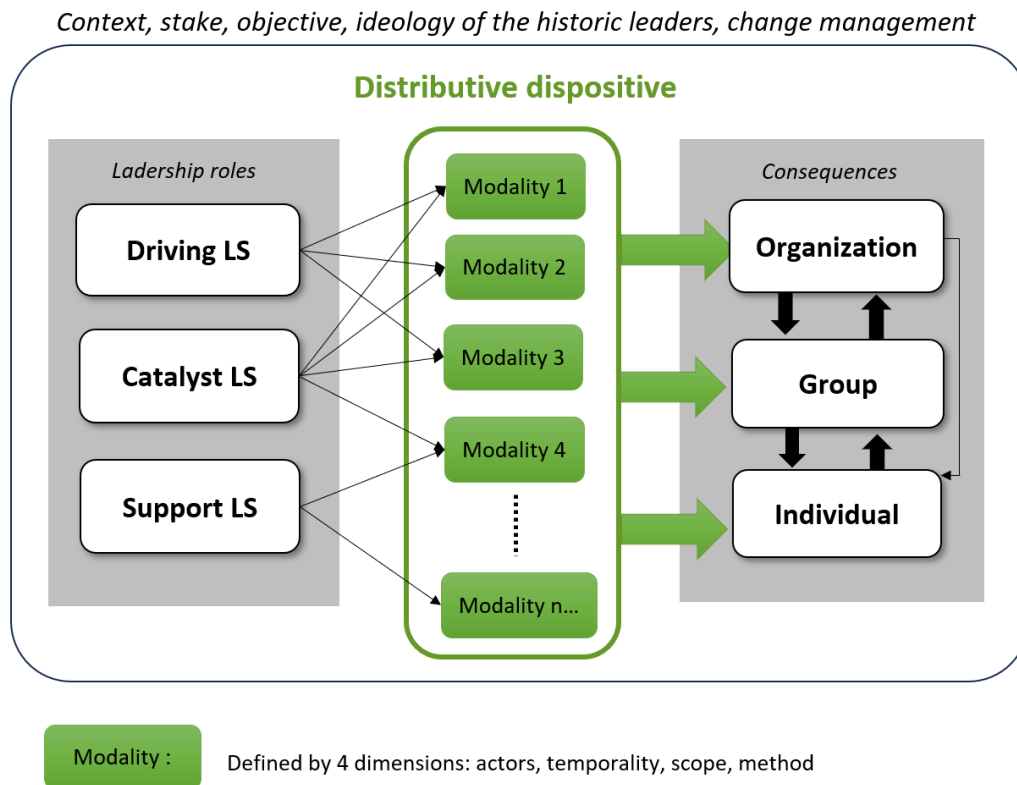
Four key criteria allow to define these "distributive modalities":

Scope: This defines the nature of the questions to be addressed in the modality in question (subject, field of application, type of questions, etc.). This may concern a specific field of study.

Organizational and strategic: Traditionally, the preservation of middle management and top management can be brought back into play through more collaborative arrangements. For example, strategy remains in Franck's hands at Aepsilon, but at HEA and Greatsense, it's discussed collectively, by a group of representatives.. These procedures help bring about organizational, strategic, and business model innovations.

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Operational: the scope concerns operational issues, "work", the team's activity linked to the company's primary mission. At HEA, the circles are the structural units that take charge of this perimeter, and AICs are meetings devoted to sharing and discussing the circle's activities. At Aepsilon, software development is conducted on the shop floor, and discussions are formalized through daily meetings. The operational scope of external consultants is untouchable because it is in the hands of the customer. At Greatsense, operational issues are discussed within teams, that coordinate with each other informally afterwards.

Functional: Support activities (HR, finance, marketing, etc.). The plan must specify how these subjects are to be handled, including recruitment, business expertise, tools, and methods. This scope is covered by business meetings and the role of the HEA business referent. At Aepsilon, this scope is often informal and takes place within the mutual adjustment of the teams: the HR and sales functions, with ad hoc meetings materializing as needed (CSR meetings), and institutionalizing when the need proves stable ("post-it time" or Com-RH meetings). Greatsense, those roles are formalized from the beginning, since the organization is structured of autonomous teams specialized in one domain of activities.

Individual: This includes questions related to salary, assessment, career development, and individual satisfaction. For example, we find the trinomial at Aepsilon and the new interview modality, the role marketplace at HEA.

Multiple: certain modalities do not a priori concern any particular perimeter and can therefore relate to any of the above. This is the case with the "squads" and the process of decision making by soliciting opinions, which can cover any perimeter. Squads enable the system to maintain a "safety valve" in the event of a problem that is not covered by any specific modality.

Actors: This criterion designates the people who are involved and hold a particular responsibility with regard to the modality or who participate in it. The former can no longer be

hierarchically designated. For example, they may be elected, voluntarily committed, or even a part of a process (such as a rotating mandate). Participants must be selected based on their potential contribution to the purpose of the modality. In HEA's squads and solicitation of opinions, the most concerned or expert people are designated as relevant, while in Aepsilon's Ateliers+1, any willing person is welcomed to participate. In Greatsense, both criterias of expertise and willingness are important to take on leadership roles. From a creative point of view, the diversification of points of view, volunteerism, competence, and legitimacy are important criteria that are conducive to the emergence of creative solutions.

Temporality: A modality can be ephemeral, routine, but temporary, routine with no fixed duration, or definitive. Evolutivity is an important temporal criterion (a modality is not necessarily fixed in time, unless it is existential), and ambidexterity (openness of subjects vs. temporary refocusing) is important in maintaining a buoyant, non-sclerosing dynamic that respects the maturation time required for individuals to assimilate changes. For example, at HEA et Greatsense, soliciting opinions is a permanent feature, whereas squads are only on request, as are the solicitations of influencers at Aepsilon outside the annual interviews.

Methods: Designate the places, tools, indicators, animation techniques, resources, etc. that will be mobilized to implement the modality. This must be adapted to the other criteria. Allocating sufficient resources is important, such as time, budget, and physical space. Democratic facilitation methods encourage collective creativity. For example, Aepsilon's workshops include participative facilitation methods, time for individual reflection, time for deliberation, a vote, and a report circulated to all employees. At HEA, the adoption of the Klaxoon collaborative tool has helped democratize meetings and encourage participation.

These four criteria correspond to the four questions that theoretically arise during design when defining a modality: **who? what? when? how?** Designers influence the distribution of

leadership roles in answering these questions. The modalities used to answer the four questions are detailed in Table 7. The set of different modalities will have to cover all leadership roles more or less exhaustively to have a positive effect on the functioning of the organization.

Table 7 Criteria for defining the modalities of the leadership distributive dispositive

			Characteristics of the modality	Example of a modality
WHAT?	Scope	Organizational and strategic	The organization and its processes (including the device itself)	Reviews at Aepsilon, squads the constitution at HEA
		Operational	Operational activity	Circles, ACMs, at HEA, daily meetings at Aepsilon
		Functional	Support functions	Business meetings and the business referent at HEA, 'post-it time' at Aepsilon
		Individual	Salary, position, career, desires, ideas…	The Aepsilon trinomial, new interview procedures, the HEA role marketplace
		Multiple	Various issues	Soliciting opinions, reviews and squads
WHO ?	Actors		The players responsible for the modality and the participants	Soliciting opinions: the stakeholders are those who are directly affected, not the hierarchical superiors.
WHEN ?	Time		Frequency, duration or lifetime of the modality	Influencers called only, when required but annuel review once a year. Soliciting opinions at HEA: an ongoing process. Squads on request…
HOW ?	Methods		Meeting facilitation techniques, communication tools, information and other necessary resources	HEA : Captain elections with or without candidates, two rounds of tables, argumentation, vote. Conflict resolution procedure.

5. DISCUSSION

This work shed lights on the challenge of implementing collective leadership in its most radical form, that of an SMO, either from a hierarchical form or an already collaborative form (Crevani et al., 2007; Denis et al., 2012; Gronn, 2002; Kummelstedt, 2023; Lee & Edmondson, 2017), and suggest a way to overcome them, through a conceptual model called "distributive dispositive leadership".

5.1. THE PLURALITY OF RADICAL COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

This article offers a rare case comparison, called by several authors in the field (Lee & Edmonson 2017; Denis et al. 2012) to show the possible contrasts between different experiences

of adopting a collective and radical approach to collective leadership: contrasted systems, actors, and results. Our results reinforce the idea that behind the definition of collective leadership lies a multiple and changing reality (Denis et al. 2012). The three organizations presented here have implemented it through very different dispositives, actors, objectives, and results.

At Aepsilon, the distribution is partial and restrictive, reflecting the second ideal type described by Denis et al. 2012: "Pooling leadership capacities at the top to direct others" focuses on empirical situations in which two, three, or more people jointly work together as co-leaders of others outside the group. Power remains concentrated in the hands of one person, supported by a few others who have an entrepreneurial vision of the organization. On the one hand, this partial distribution guarantees faster and more efficient decision making. However, it also generates resistance and conflict. On the other hand, the willingness to leave room to on dividual freedom and initiative might suggest the typical "Producing Leadership Through Interaction", but the absence of a collective regulatory mechanism makes the actual room for informal hierarchy to emerge, akin to a sort of oligarchy, leading to the polarization of the collective. The liberation of the company, coupled with an ideology of freedom and democracy, feeds fantasies that sometimes clash with reality. Poorly defined and explained, and coupled with an individualistic focus, distribution can serve individual rather than collective interests, leading to conflict and frustration.

At Greatsense, the implementation of collective leadership predominantly aligns with the third stream described by Denis et al. (2012), "Spreading leadership within and across levels over time", but through reduced modalities. This stream reflects the decentralized nature of leadership, as demonstrated by the reliance on the raison d'être and cross-functional roles to drive organizational coherence and strategic decisions. However, this distribution also exhibits

characteristics of "Pooled Leadership," as historical leaders retain influence over strategic decisions, creating a "phantom hierarchy." This dynamic highlights the coexistence of shared and centralized but informal authority within the organization. Additionally, elements of "Producing Leadership Through Interaction" are present, through emerging competing visions, reflecting, like at Aepsilon, the importance of individual freedom as a central value, aiming to foster initiative, but giving room, without appropriate framework, to emerging visions, questioning the legitimacy of each other. These overlapping modalities suggest that Greatsense navigates a complex interplay of leadership streams, demonstrating the plurality and fluidity inherent in collective leadership practices in the context of SMOs.

At HEA, the distribution of leadership roles is made possible by the presence of a sophisticated organizational structure and is typical of the third stream, "Spreading leadership within and across levels over time" (Denis et al., 2012), which takes place in a humanistic SMO. This is evident in the use of mechanisms such as the Constitution and multifunctional circles, which distribute leadership roles and responsibilities across different levels of the organization over time. However, elements of "Pooled Leadership" also emerge, as the Base team ensures coherence across circles, acting as a centralized point for alignment, despite occasional challenges to its legitimacy. Furthermore, reliance on interactive processes such as squads and solicited decision-making aligns with the fourth stream, "Producing Leadership Through Interaction," where leadership emerges relationally through collective practices and dialogue. This combination highlights how HEA blends structured and emergent approaches to leadership distribution, balancing formal frameworks with dynamic interaction-based processes.

Our study extends Denis et al. 's (2012) findings to better understand the contributions and limitations of each current in the context of SMOs. It highlights how the openness of the SMO concept, once the structuring hierarchical principles are removed, allows for a large plurality of

distribution modalities and actors. Moreover, contextualizing collective leadership in the context of SMOs, we offer a radical extension of the concept of "leadership constellation", introduced by Denis (2001), observed in a hierarchical context. A "leadership constellation" is a (generally small) dynamic group of individuals (generally managers), who share leadership responsibilities, with each member playing a complementary role, and whose effectiveness depends on maintaining internal harmony, organizational support, and alignment with the external environment. Hence, SMOs offer the vision of leadership constellation but extend to the whole organization (Lee & Edmondson, 2017), where everyone can become, not exactly a manager, but a leader. In this line, this research offers a new contextual comprehension of the difference between "aggregates" and "constellations", underlined by Döös & Wilhemson (2021). Indeed, Hodgson et al. (1965) argued that role structures may vary on a continuum, where constellation and aggregate are the two poles. To support this conceptual stretch, from a limited vision of collective leadership to hir radical view, and to account for our empirical observations, we proposed the theoretical framework of "leadership distributing dispositive", which models distribution according to four parameters: actors, temporality, scope, and method. This dispositive approach synthesizes the important parameters of the distribution and simultaneously highlights the plurality of distribution models.

5.2. THE LIMITS OF COLLECTIVE LS: MAINTAINING ESSENTIAL COVERAGE OF THE ORGANIZATION'S LS NEEDS WHEN IT BECOMES AHIERARCHICAL

One of the implications of this conceptual stretching is to question the limits of such a distribution. These limitations have already been mentioned in the literature (Chreim, 2015; Denis et al., 2012; Poli & Gabriel, 2024; Sergi et al., 2012). By decentering from individuals to open up to a broad conception of leadership, the very notion of leadership risks being emptied of its essence, and leadership roles become diluted in the collective (Poli & Gabriel, 2024), leading to a unique paradox in collective leadership: the authority paradox. This paradox is built

on two contradictory issues of collective leadership: on the one hand, the need to legitimize sources of power, since there is no such thing as authority without legitimacy. On the other hand, the need to ensure that these sources of authority are multiple and shared. The more power is shared, the more it is diluted in the collective, and the more difficult it becomes to find its source. Shared authority can therefore also be a source of confusion, lack of legitimacy and, consequently, inefficiency. Indeed, he results showed that catalyst leadership (at the team level) seemed to be favored in the liberation of HEA to the detriment of driving roles (organizational level) and supporting roles (individual level). Leadership roles are potentially affected by lack of clarification, resources, coaching, or recognition.

Conversely, several examples support the idea that dilution is not inevitable. First, the distribution of member appraisals (support role) to a wider population than just the manager has reinforced the legitimacy and relevance of feedback for appraised employees. In addition, the allocation of captain roles (in itself, a catalytic role) based on an election principle strengthened the legitimacy of those elected. Finally, soliciting opinions effectively helped legitimize the decisions taken by the collective.

Alongside this first risk of leadership dilution, we have also observed a second phenomenon, which we have called the "phantom hierarchy". This concept illustrates the persistence of hierarchical asymmetries (Koistinen & Vuori, 2024) in self-managing organizations (SMOs) due to cultural inertia. It is to be distinguished from the informal hierarchy, whose emergence and coexistence with the formal hierarchy has been observed and theorized by Diefenbach (2011). Unlike a "present" hierarchy, phantom hierarchy represents traces of past formal structures that linger culturally, even after formal removal. This highlights the need for a gradual transition to new organizational forms. In Aepsilon, Franck, the founder, embodies the phantom hierarchy. Despite stepping down as a manager, his role as a legal

representative and symbolic leader sustains his authority, leading to paradoxes between employee autonomy and their reliance on his decisions. Leadership distribution via trinomials was undermined by Franck's shadow over key decisions. At Greatsense, historical leaders reappeared informally to address coordination and vision gaps during decentralization. Though they lacked formal legitimacy, their influence reflected the enduring hierarchical patterns, complicating the transition and creating ambiguity around leadership legitimacy. In HEA, the Base, intended to ensure coherence across circles, was perceived by some employees as a re-centralization of authority, echoing traditional practices. Residual bureaucratic norms and unilateral decisions created dual realities of liberation and hierarchy, fueling tensions and organizational dissonance. Across these cases, phantom hierarchy highlights the challenges of decentralization, as cultural inertia and symbolic authority impede the full realization of self-management.

Finally, contrasting these three cases shows the importance of maintaining appropriate coverage of leadership roles when designing the distributive system, at the risk of seeing leadership gaps or fantom hierarchy appearing with potentially disastrous consequences. Therefore, this coverage depends on the legitimacy and relevance of the modalities of the distributive dispositive, which we will now discuss.

5.3. THE LEADERSHIP DISTRIBUTIVE DISPOSITIVE: PREVENTING THE TENSIONS AND PARADOXES OF RADICAL DECENTRALIZATION

This case comparison has also the merit to allow for a more robust conceptualization and theory building and allowed us to propose a conceptual framework that we called "leadership distributive dispositive". The notion of the "distributed leadership dispositive" draws on Foucault's concept of "dispositive" (1980), which encompasses a heterogeneous ensemble of material and symbolic elements, ranging from practices and processes to artifacts and discourses that structure power relations. In the context of self-managing organizations

(SMOs), this conceptual lens allows us to capture the dynamic interplay between ideological constructs, such as organizational values and missions, and material modalities, such as formalized roles, decision-making frameworks, and technological tools.

In this sense, this article adopts an original approach: it does not just focus on the consequences, positive or negative (Döös & Wilhelmson, 2021), whether studying collective leadership or SMOs (Picard & Islam, 2020). It adopts a constructive critical stance, acknowledging the positive consequences, and focusing on negative consequences, proposing first of all to understand the antecedents that may explain these problems; we have seen that the stakes and objectives of the project, its level of formalization, its mode of conception (participatory or not) and its ideological focus on a particular level of analysis can have a significant impact on the results. Beyond this initial contribution, we proposed to conceptualize a *response* to the problems observed through a proactive approach to the construction of the distributive device. Hence, the distributing dispositive is both a conceptual framework and a managerial tool: a map for navigating a complex transformation, helping liberating leaders to think about their self-managing organization project, and to make them endure over time. It recognizes that leadership power dynamics typically take multiple, simultaneous forms/configurations, and may produce unintended and unanticipated effects, such as follower resistance (Collinson, 2020; Chreim, 2014). Hence, it completes the work of Döös & Wihelsom (2021). Their review highlights how the formal and informal sides of the leadership constellation (namely, form and work) link antecedents (necessary and enabling) and outcomes (intended or not). The distributive dispositive makes explicit the modalities of both sides (the form and the work) of the constellation, and the way they enable their extension to the whole organization.

5.4. A COMBINATION OF HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN MODALITIES

The three case studies illustrate the multiplicity of the modalities composing the leadership distributive dispositive, combining human and non-human dimensions. They show how leadership roles can be occupied by people but also by non-human modalities, such as processes (e.g., decision by consent) and symbols or artifacts (e.g., constitution) (Raelin, 2016). Hence, they reveal the opportunities and challenges of the radical vision of collective leadership. For example, in Greatsense, reliance on raison d'être as a decision-making framework demonstrates the crucial role of non-human artifacts in collective coordination. However, its lack of concreteness exposes the limits of such an approach, necessitating interventions by historical leaders to stabilize strategic decisions, illustrating the essential role of focal leaders in situations of complexity and uncertainty (Denis et al., 2001). Similarly, at HEA, the Constitution and the "Roles Marketplace" function as non-human relays to structure responsibilities and foster autonomy. However, challenges to their legitimacy underline the difficulty in maintaining a balance between these mechanisms and direct human involvement. Finally, at Aepsilon, Franck's persistent influence, despite the introduction of trinomials and the lack of formalization of influencers' roles, highlights the need for focal, formal leaders, even in a theoretically liberated structure.

These examples echo the work of Denis et al. (2012) on the importance of combining vertical and horizontal dimensions to avoid drifts, such as paralysis or disorganization. Moreover, they confirm Raelin's (2016) and Collinson's (2020) reflections on the growing role of non-human modalities–values, artifacts, and processes–in collective leadership. For instance, non-human elements such as a shared raison d'être or a codified constitution serve as guiding frameworks for collective action, whereas human actors play roles that operationalize and adapt these principles in practice. While these non-human relays enable a "deheroization" and democratization of decisions, they also present risks of "dehumanization" and a "dilution" of

collective leadership, particularly when they are not accompanied by sufficient human mediation to manage tensions and conflicts. These cases show that the combination of human and non-human factors, in the distributive dispositive, including the key role of focal leaders in giving meaning and direction, is both a strength and a weakness in the implementation of radical collective leadership (Boira Lopez & Connelly, 2024; O'Donovan et al., 2021). By articulating these two types of modalities, the distributed leadership dispositive offers a pragmatic approach to analyzing and facilitating the radical decentralization characteristic of SMOs, addressing both the tensions and opportunities that arise from this unique organizational form.

6. CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES OF RESEARCH

This study offers several theoretical contributions to the literature on collective leadership by opening the "black box" of the extended leadership distribution process and its limits. In this research, we explore the dynamics of implementing collective leadership in response to a strategic imperative or a humanistic vision of management (Getz, 2009; Laloux, 2015) in the context of two original and radical less-hierarchical organizations (SMOs), thus nuancing the approaches focused exclusively on the liberating leader and/or on employees' experience. We propose to rethink the very nature of role bearers, whether they are represented by "human" or "non-human" modalities, within an ad hoc dispositive. From a practical point of view, this study proposes avenues to accompany the transformation and distribution of leadership roles in an SMO context. The comparison approach proposed in this study allow leaders and managers to better understand, on the one hand, the complexity of the liberation process itself, its impact on the transformation of leadership roles, and the tensions that can result from it, and on the other hand, the centrality of the distributive dispositive and the importance of a design that meets the needs of the organization. The leads and reflections formulated in the discussion are intended to enlighten and guide them in their liberation projects at all stages of the process.

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8. APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Mapping of the leadership roles according to the various modalities of the organizational dispositive at Aepsilon

		Device Aepsilon (Phase 1)					Additional device Aepsilon (Phase 2)						
		MyAepsilon project identity	Concepts and key references (Getz, Corp. Hacking…)	Trinomial	Influencer	Collaborative tools	Raison d'être and strategic vision	New cultural artifacts : Laloux, ecology…	Workshops +1	Big Feedbacks	New reviews	Coordination meetings : daily meetings, post-it time, com-RH	Engagement barometer
Driving role	Clear and motivating objectives, for…				▨					■			
	An inspiring and meaningful long-ter…		■		▨		■	■		■			
	Values and Culture - Sharing the org…	■	■		▨		■	■		■			
	Planning: clear but flexible structuri…				▨	■				■	■		
	Exemplarity	■			▨					■			
Catalyst role	Intellectual stimulation/debate of id…			■	■				■				
	Encouraging participation-Involvement			■	■				■			■	■
	Confidence in team members' ability			■	■					■		■	
	Social skills: communication - socia…			■	■							■	
	Support for new ideas (tangible man…			■	■							■	
	Allocation of tasks, recognition of c…			■	■								
	Political skills (network of ambassad…			■	■								
	Guarantees the necessary freedom…			■			■						
	Ensuring access to resources and e…						■				■		
	Encourages interdependence, intera…			■			■						
Support role	Individual attention (recognition)/Ski…			■	■								
	Fair and non-threatening assessme…			■	■								
	No unnecessary pressure				■								
	Freedom-Autonomy-Empowerment			■	■								

Appendix 2 Mapping of the leadership roles according to the various modalities of the organizational dispositive at HEA

		Modalités du dispositif de libération HEA																
		Raison d'être & values	Constitution	Multi-function circles	Satisf. Surveys	New roles	Roles marketplace	Base	Objectives Forum	Circle Meetig	Weekly Captain-Ambass. meeting	Monthly Captain-Ambass. meeting	Monthly Business Reviews	Participative tools	Decision by consent	Squads	Conflict resolution methods	Choice of assessors and self-objectives
Driving role	Clear and motivating obje…					Capitaine		■										
	An inspiring and meaningf…	■	■	■		Sponsor		■				■						
	Values and Culture - Shar…	■	■			Sponsor												
	Planning: clear but flexible…		■	■		Capitaine				■	■							
	Exemplarity					Sponsor												
Catalyst role	Intellectual stimulation/d…					Capitaine				■								
	Encouraging participation…		■			ach/Capita				■						■		
	Confidence in team mem…					ach/Capita										■		
	Social skills: communicat…			■		/Référent				■								
	Support for new ideas (tar…					ach/Capita				■						■		
	Allocation of tasks, recog…							■										
	Political skills (network of…					r/ Ambass												
	Guarantees the necessar…		■			/Ambassa									■			
	Ensuring access to resou…					Capitaine		■										
	Encourages interdepende…			■						■						■	■	
Support role	Individual attention (recog…			■		/Référent	▨											■
	Fair and non-threatening…						▨										■	■
	No unnecessary pressure						▨							■				■
	Freedom-Autonomy-Emp…		■				▨							■			■	■

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