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Leadership in project-based organizations: Dealing with complex and paradoxical demands

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CHAPTER 5

CHOOSING YOUR WORDS CAREFULLY:
LEADERS' NARRATIVES OF COMPLEX
EMERGENT PROBLEM RESOLUTION

ABSTRACT

In their leadership role, project and program managers use language as a vital tool in shaping their projects and programs. Especially in more novel projects and programs, the ways in which leaders frame issues through their use of language will have an important impact on how these issues are approached and resolved by members of the project team. In this study we explore the narratives of project and program managers in complex emergent problem resolution. We analyze interview based data to show the storylines leaders construct regarding which groups are more or less important and the tensions between these groups, whether they frame the impact of outsiders as positive or negative, and how they portray the role of conflicting perspectives in complex emergent problem resolution. We discuss the practical implications arising from our analysis of leadership narratives in the management of projects. Finally, we describe the limitations of the current study and opportunities for future research.

1 INTRODUCTION

The project management literature has its roots in the engineering sector and is frequently characterized as having a strong functionalist and instrumental perspective (Blomquist, Hällgren, Nilsson, & Söderholm, 2010; Turner & Keegan, 2001). This has resulted in a focus on functional tools, the importance of defining sequential project phases, and an emphasis on the efficient achievement of predetermined goals within clearly defined time, budget and quality constraints (Cicmil et al., 2009). Despite great efforts to understand and determine how projects can best be managed, many projects do not finish on time and within budget, do not always end up where their initiators thought they would. Even when they achieve their predetermined goals, they are not always considered a success by the people involved (Bartis & Mitev, 2008; Boddy & Paton, 2004; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Projects can generally be characterized as unique, novel and transient (Turner & Keegan, 1999). Novel projects often involve the development of customized, complex products consisting of interrelated sub-systems that require new knowledge (Hobday, 2000). The challenges of communication in an uncertain and ambiguous situation are especially apparent in more novel projects in which the goals and methods to attain them are not well defined (Turner & Cochrane, 1993). A major challenge in projects, especially more novel ones, is solving complex emergent problems, as they do not involve working towards a fixed point with proven methods, but require project leaders and participants in the project to constantly try to develop an understanding of the situation and the methods that are needed to reach a moving target. For example, Mintzberg (1979) stresses the importance of informal communication to underpin processes of mutual adjustment among team members in uncertain organizational situations.

In ambiguous situations, language has a particularly important role in shaping the emergent reality through collective processes of meaning making which are underpinned by communication (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Boje et al., 2004; Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Phillips & Oswick, 2012). How projects are perceived and the way in which leaders and participants deal with emergent problems is thus heavily influenced by the language use of leaders. For example, whether a leader categorizes an event as an opportunity or a threat influences how others respond (Dutton & Jackson, 1987). Whether projects are described by the leader as routine or ground-breaking, and whether others with an opinion about the project are described as a nuisance or as an important source of new ideas, depends upon how leaders frame the project and the role of others. These narratives are likely to be especially important and powerful in projects where methods for attaining goals, and goals themselves are unclear, as the project manager and the rest of the project team will be confronted by an ongoing stream of emergent issues that have to be dealt with throughout the

duration of the project. The narrative that emerges in collective meaning making is more flexible in unclear complex situations as the narrative proposed by the project manager is likely to be more fluid and negotiable than might be expected when project goals and methods are clear.

In this study we aim to develop a better understanding of the role of leaders' use of language, and in particular the narratives leaders create on how projects and programs are carried out. Firstly, we highlight the so-called linguistic turn in management and organizational theory (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) and its implications for leadership in projects and programs. Secondly, we draw attention to the important role of leaders' use of language in projects by empirically exploring the narratives project managers and program managers draw on when dealing with complex emergent problems. Finally, we discuss the implications of leaders' language use generally, and creation of narratives specifically, for the ways in which projects and programs are carried out.

1.1 The linguistic turn in management and organizational theory

One of the most influential developments in organizational studies of the last few decades is the linguistic turn (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). This perspective on organizing places the role of language in action and organizing center stage in understanding organizing processes (Boden, 1994; Weick, 2004). Instead of merely seeing language as a mirror of reality, language is viewed as a force shaping how processes occur and events emerge (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Boje et al., 2004; Phillips & Oswick, 2012). The constitutive effects of language for organizing processes takes precedence over a focus on organizational structures in this perspective (Chia, 1996). When seen as a mirror of reality, language can be regarded as true when it correctly reflects reality and false when it incorrectly reflects reality. However, the linguistic turn moves away from the idea of a pre-existing reality of stable organizations, and draws our attention to the way in which organizational members construct events through interaction (Phillips & Oswick, 2012). From this perspective, the communication of organizational members about the ongoing stream of evolving issues they are confronted with in their work does not merely represent facts. People in workplaces interpret what is going on and test these interpretations on others (Weick, 1979). And through these collective processes of meaning making they enact organizational realities and actively shape the problems they are trying to deal with, language therefore creates opportunities for action that in turn constitute processes of organizing which we then recognize as self-evident (Cunliffe, 2001).

Though studies of organizations increasingly focus on language to shed light on complex organizational phenomena (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Oswick et al.,

2000), this perspective is still relatively new to the project management literature. Many have pointed to the importance of good communication for project success (Henderson, 2004; Hyvari, 2006; Loosemore & Muslmani, 1999; Pinto & Pinto, 1990; Reed & Knight, 2010; Turner & Müller, 2004), but a view of language as constructing (instead of merely representing) project events is a more recent development in the project management literature.

Some authors, who emphasize the importance of language as shaping projects, propose an alternative perspective in project management research that revolves around the actuality of projects by focusing on the lived experience of practitioners (Cicmil et al., 2006; Cooke-Davies et al., 2007; Packendorff, 1995). This entails a shift in focus from the development of normative, prescriptive theories and studying what should happen, to a focus on the development of descriptive theories on the basis of studying what is actually happening and focusing on leadership practices, including linguistic practices, as an important part of creating everyday project realities (Packendorff, 1995). Project actuality research takes seriously that what people do in projects is embedded in, and shaped by, social processes of interaction and communication (Cicmil et al., 2006). Thus, the project is seen as co-constructed in everyday communicative interactions (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2007), and can be studied from a perspective informed by the complexity sciences by focusing on complex responsive processes of interaction in projects (Cooke-Davies et al., 2007).

This view of project management includes an appreciation of the ongoing emergence of events, through processes of social interaction, and the linguistic framing of events and projects (Winter et al., 2006). For example, Lindgren and Packendorff (2007) explore the narratives that co-construct projects and individual identities in theatres. Another project actuality study by Hodgson (2002) highlights the central role of language in shaping identity by exploring the disciplinary effects of project management as a professional discipline. Focusing on more tangible outcomes of the development of narratives Fincham (2002) shows how evolving narratives of success and failure in IT development in financial service firms are reflexive mechanisms that shape projects, for example by facilitating the mobilization of resources.

1.2 The importance of narrative processes in projects

Narratives are defined as any spoken or written account of connected events (Oxford English Dictionary Online Definition of Narrative). The processes of collective meaning making in organizational life shape, and are shaped by, the narratives that prevail within organizations. In a study of managerial communication during strategic change processes in a retail organization, Sonenshein (2010) adopts a perspective on narrative as 'a discursive construction that actors use as a tool to shape

their own understanding (sensemaking), as a tool to influence others' understandings (sensegiving), and as an outcome of the collective construction of meaning'. His study demonstrates how narratives can be a 'means by which we organize and make sense of our experience' (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012), and narrating can provide a context for meaning making (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001), while narratives are also outcomes of collective meaning making processes. For example, if a leader describes a project stakeholder as a helpful partner, followers may respond to this narrative by contributing ideas to develop further cooperation with this stakeholder. The relationship is seen in a more positive light by all parties and a narrative of effective collaboration is further constructed that can actively shape how the project unfolds over time.

The development of narratives in projects is, however, not a straightforward process. Work in projects and their overarching programs involves solving complex emergent problems. The program in itself is usually instigated to solve an overarching complex emergent problem, and throughout the process of dealing with this problem multiple unexpected issues are likely to arise. Because of this, projects and programs, and especially those that are characterized by high levels of uncertainty, involve ongoing struggles over meaning in which meaning making processes involve the development of competing narratives that can take projects and programs in different directions (Alderman, Ivory, McLoughlin, & Vaughan, 2005; Boddy & Paton, 2004; Veenswijk & Berendse, 2008).

The active and reflexive co-construction of narratives framing a project or program can focus all participants on how they understand the project and the actions and priorities that are agreed upon as necessary and desirable. For example, working together to construct a coherent narrative helps project participants collectively reflect on the nature of the problem and solve problems identified as a result of that collective reflection process (Ochs, 1997). Project teams can reflectively reframe problems and on that basis develop potential solutions (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006). In this process the frame proposed by one participant, for example the project manager, can, on the one hand, open up possibilities for others to see new frames, view the relevance of their past experiences in a different light, and combine it in new ways thus producing novel solutions (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006). On the other hand, frames can also encourage convergence towards a solution that is familiar to project members based on past collective experiences. The point is that the framing of project problems, based on shared narratives, influences how projects proceed and events take shape over the course of the process of solving complex emergent problems. The way that leaders use language and develop narratives is therefore of potential importance to understanding how projects and programs unfold and are conducted in everyday project based organizing.

1.3 Language and leadership

A focus on the constructive function of language generally, and narrative specifically, has significant implications for the study of leadership by making visible how people shape problems together through language and highlighting the role of leaders in this process. Leaders can influence how others perceive the situation and how they respond to it by framing the situation in a specific way (Levin et al., 1998; Shamir et al., 1993). For example, leaders draw attention to specific emergent patterns and in doing so shape wider participation (Plowman et al., 2007), shape employees work experiences by connecting espoused values to enacted values (Smith et al., 2010), and enact leadership practices, such as prompting cognitive shifts and naming and shaping identity, that bridge different perspectives (Ospina & Foldy, 2010).

Framing problems through language can be seen as a dynamic process through which people construct these problems in interaction (Dewulf et al., 2009). In this process of mutual influence, managers have an important role in shaping frames and narratives. Due to their formal leadership role, project and program managers are in a privileged position to influence the meaning making processes of their teams, for example by introducing new narratives that can enable others to see issues in a new and different light (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). However, though their central position in collective meaning making enables them to significantly influence collective meaning making, they don't independently determine what narrative is constructed, as narratives are constructed in interaction with others and in turn shape the actions of all those involved (Deuten & Rip, 2000).

In the context of project work, Lindgren and Packendorff (2009) point to the importance of studying leadership in terms of how it is practiced in everyday interaction. By doing so, the role of project managers can be re-imagined as consisting of more than the implementation of project plans, and can be seen from a broader perspective that incorporates consideration of their social, political and ethical roles (Cicmil et al., 2009). For example, in an empirical study of megaprojects, Hatcher, Chang and Kim (2012) explore the metaphors project and program managers use to describe their contemporary leadership role, ranging from master and commander in battle field to a dysfunctional family in chaos and from boundary protector in an entrepreneurial environment to time broker in multi-temporal organizations. If project managers can use such different ways of describing their leadership role, it is plausible that this has an impact on the framing of complex emergent problems they are confronted with in different ways. These narratives are an important research focus as they help to construct the reality of project participants and the progress of projects and programs.

Complex problems call for leaders to organize for the development of answers by project team members in day to day interactions (Fairhurst, 2009). For example,

leaders frame and enrich organizational interpretation of unusual events by encouraging both divergence and synthesis of interpretations among members of their teams (Beck & Plowman, 2009). In this sense leadership can be viewed as the management of meaning (Fairhurst, 2009; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Leaders need to understand that people continuously make sense of their situation in both formal and informal interaction, leading to multiple, often contesting, narrations (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012). Contested narrations can be seen as a challenge for project leaders attempting to steer projects in a certain direction. A strategic understanding of language and narratives and their role is useful for project and program managers as it opens opportunities for shaping emergent narratives and in so doing shaping the progress of projects. Exploring narratives of emerging problems invoked by project and program leaders can therefore shed more light on the ways in which the language of leaders can shape projects and programs generally, and complex emergent problems specifically.

1.4 The current study

In order to further develop our understanding of the constructive role of the language of leaders in projects, and especially in complex emergent problems, we carry out an exploratory analysis of the narratives of project managers and program managers in novel projects and programs in which the methods and/or goals were not well defined. In this study we explore the ways in which leaders frame complex emergent problem resolution when the need for collective meaning making processes arise. We focus on the narratives of project and program managers because of their central position in constructing meaning throughout projects.

In the current study we address the following research question: How do leaders in project-based organizations construct complex emergent problems through language, what is the nature of their constructions, and what are the possible implications of their constructions for the resolution of complex emergent problems? Our aim is to analyze how leaders' language use and leaders' narratives frame emergent problem resolution. We show that leaders construct different storylines regarding which groups should benefit from the project or program, the role of outsiders, and the role of conflicting perspectives in complex emergent problem resolution. We discuss how the different storylines underpin the narratives and shape the progress of projects and programs.

2 METHOD

We conducted 11 semi-structured interviews with managers at different hierarchical levels of five projects and programs. We purposefully selected these interviewees on the basis that they work in novel projects and programs in which they are frequently faced with complex emergent issues. The interviews were conducted using an interview protocol focused on drawing out narratives of dealing with complex emergent issues in the current project or program (see Appendix 4 for the interview protocol). All projects and programs were ongoing at the time of the interviews to facilitate recollection of events as interviewees were still involved in the process of dealing with some of these complex emergent issues and were still actively developing narratives around them. On average, the interviews lasted one hour and 20 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 232 pages of transcript.

Just as language constructs reality in projects, the interviews themselves can also be seen as construction work as our interviewees construct a version of the project (Alvesson, 2003). This construction of the project might be biased as interviewees emphasize what they perceive as socially desirable. We attempted to deal with the presence of social desirability bias (Nederhof, 1985) in the interview accounts, emerging from respondents constructing the projects to reflect their role in a particular desirable way, by asking interviewees to give concrete examples and specific illustrations so we could develop an open rapport with the respondents about the specifics of the narratives they used to manage complex emergent problems and to go beyond surface accounts and jargon (Alvesson, 2003).

Table 1. Sample description

Program number	Type of project	Interviewees: Project manager (PM), Program manager (PgM), Portfolio manager (PfM)	Gender interviewees: F (female)/ M (male)
1	Infrastructure	PM & PgM	M, M
2	Infrastructure	PM & PgM	M, M
3	Organizational change	PM, PgM & PfM	M, M, F
4	Organizational change	PM & PgM	M, F
5	IT	PM & PgM	M, M

After importing all transcripts into NVivo 9 we first coded all interviews to identify any utterances relating to narratives used to manage complex emergent projects. This can be seen as a first order analysis in which we coded the interviews

for narratives using the language of the interviewees and identified descriptive codes on the basis of the words, expressions and terms used by the interviewees (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, we developed pattern codes based on the similarities and differences between interviewees in terms of their words used to frame aspects of dealing with complex emergent problems. This helped us to identify both common narratives and distinctions between different narratives. We continued with this coding process, gradually refining the narratives by identifying different storylines which provided a finer level of detail in terms of separate and distinct facets of the broader narratives. We refer to these as storylines within the broader narratives. In a recursive and iterative process of moving between interview data and the emergent codes we identified three core narratives and their related finer storylines presented here below. In this process of coding we also analyzed numerical patterns in order to examine how much data each separate narrative and storyline attracted. This process helped us to detect patterns of salience of the narratives and the associated storylines across the data set as a whole, and allowed us to focus on those narratives and storylines that were discussed most across the interviews and per respondent.

3 RESULTS

Through the process of analysis described above, we identified three core narratives drawn on by each and every interviewee when discussing how they dealt with complex emergent problems in their projects and programs. Each of these narratives comprises three or four finer storylines that represent different aspects of how to frame complex emergent problem resolution (see table 2 for an overview of the narratives and storylines and the pattern of references across all interviewees). As can be seen in table 2, interviewees largely drew on more than one storyline for each narrative.

In this section we describe the narratives and their underpinning storylines and show how they were used by respondents to frame complex emergent problems and how to solve them. First, we discuss how leaders framed different groups as important foci for complex problem resolution and highlight how they discussed the tensions between the interests of these groups. Second, we illustrate the ways in which leaders framed the impact of outsiders as positive or negative. And finally, we show how leaders framed the role of conflicting perspectives in the resolution of evolving issues.

Table 2. Pattern of references for narratives and storylines across all interviewees

	PM1	PgM1	PM2	PgM2	PM3	PgM3	PFM3	PM4	PgM4	PM5	PgM5	Total references
1 Importance of different groups												46
Client	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	7
Employer	1	0	0	0	2	4	0	3	5	0	0	15
Program	4	4	0	1	1	1	3	0	1	1	1	17
Project	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	7
2 Impact of outsiders												81
Delay and complicate	10	4	3	4	4	10	1	3	5	2	0	46
Inform and support	6	1	2	0	5	2	2	2	2	0	0	22
Co-create CEP solution	3	0	1	0	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	13
3 Management of conflicting perspectives												73
Align perspectives	2	5	3	0	3	3	1	1	1	2	1	22
Nurture conflicting perspectives	6	5	2	2	0	2	3	2	3	1	4	30
Iterate between aligning and nurturing conflicting perspectives	4	4	4	2	0	3	1	0	0	3	0	21

Note: The numbers in brackets represent the total number of references for each narrative, i.e. the sum of references for all storylines that make up the narrative.

3.1 Narrative 1: Importance of different groups

The first narrative pertains to the importance of different groups. Complex emergent problems can be dealt with in multiple ways that are more or less beneficial for different groups. Through their language use our interviewees framed some groups as more important than others. We identified four storylines, each framing another group as most important. Groups that were framed as an important focus by the project and program managers included the project, the program, the employing organization and the client (for illustrative quotes see table 3).

Table 3. Storylines of narrative 1: Groups framed by leaders as important focus in complex problem resolution

Focus	Illustrative quotes
Client	‘But I do say, “in the end we are in service of society and we form an organization that, ultimately is not for ourselves, for our personal interests”.’ (Project manager 3)
Employer	‘So we also think in us-them in this organization. “It’s their problem, it’s their question”. (...) While we should actually say “no there are problems of [this organization]”.’ (Project manager 4)
Program	‘Those meetings off course serve to put forth that greater shared interest.’ (Portfolio manager 3)
Project	It’s possible that in the team one is busier than the other for a while, but then you just help your friends. (...) We understand each other and they compensate for each other.’ (Program manager 5)

The interests of the different groups were perceived to be at times nested and conflicting. When these interests seemed to conflict, project and program managers often explicitly framed one group as more important than the other group in resolving complex problems. For example, they would specifically favor the program over the project (see table 4 for more illustrations). In these project-based contexts, tensions between the interests of different groups are perceived at different levels. First of all, and similar to what can be expected in line organizations, tension was perceived between the interests of sub-units and the interests of the whole organization. For example, a project manager framed the whole organization as more important than its sub-units:

.....

‘It’s important to take a look at the [organization] level: “What do we need as [this organization]?” And that’s difficult, because of what I said, we are all divided, on the basis of those budgets, into expertise, and tempted to approach all issues from that perspective.’ (Project manager 4)

.....

However, in these project-based organizations multiple other tensions were experienced that went beyond the tensions that could be expected in traditional line organizations. These included tensions between the interests of the project and the program, between the program and the employer(s) and line managers of team members involved, between the program and its client or contractor, and specifically for organizational change programs between the program that represented the new employer and the current employer (see table 4 for illustrative quotes of how leaders frame these tensions).

Table 4. Tensions between groups framed by leaders as important focus in complex problem resolution specific for project-based organizations

Tensions	Illustrative quotes
Program versus project	<p>'I'm more the ambassador of that team. (...) The other day we had an issue that needed to be fought over with the directors and then I do that.' (Project manager 2)</p> <p>'Ultimately it's best for project, that's what we're aiming at. Not best for contract [i.e. sub-project]. So, everything that's in favor of the total project has to come before what is best for each contract. And off course that's difficult, because a contract manager is responsible for the contract.' (Program manager 2)</p>
Program versus Employer(s)/Line	<p>[The program manager wanted to re-assign a number of people from the program to another program he was involved with.] 'But those were not all available, because he wanted to get that out of my team, and no, I got in the way of that.' (Project manager 2)</p>
Program versus contractor/client	<p>'And we talked about this with the contractor. From the shared interest, like "guys, you have to be able to work together in a good way at all levels and we have to try to prevent these types of hiccups".' (Project manager 1)</p>
Organizational change program (representing new employer) versus current employer	<p>'You're dealing with directors that want to defend their own [organization] (...), but you have to look at the bigger interests of the [new organization] that is going come.' (Portfolio manager 3)</p>

3.2 Narrative 2: Impact of outsiders

Through their language, project and program managers create insiders and outsiders by highlighting their membership of the project, the program or their employer. This created changing in-group compositions and at the same time changed the way outsiders were framed and who was designated an outsider. The way in which project and program managers subsequently discussed the impact of other groups had an impact on the involvement of those groups in the resolution of complex emergent problems.

To illustrate, our results demonstrate that leaders constructed positive and negative storylines when talking about the impact of ‘other groups’ on complex emergent problem resolution. In a first storyline, leaders framed outsiders as having a negative impact on complex emergent problem resolution by delaying and complicating the process (see table 5 for illustrative quotes of this storyline). In this storyline others were, for example, incoming project team members, other functional sub groups in the program, the other organization in a merger, the client, or the contractor. This negative way of framing others ranged from pointing out some small issues to constructing seemingly irreconcilable differences. For example, some leaders pointed out that the involvement of more people, though useful, takes up more time than handling an issue with less people.

.....
‘People on the work floor know it and like to participate in such a project. So we really chose the development approach. With as most important advantage a good design that is supported, and with the disadvantage that it takes long, it costs more time.’ (Program manager 4)
.....

The analysis revealed how project leaders framed the impact of others more negatively than done in the previous example by highlighting the need to constantly make sure the other group doesn’t act in unwanted ways.

.....
‘I don’t give fines because I like it, or because I need the money, I give you fines or address you because ultimately I want you to show a certain kind of behavior. (...) And that means continuously thinking, talking, and choosing.’ (Project manager 1)
.....

Another way in which leaders framed the negative impact of others on complex emergent problem resolution was by highlighting the underlying tensions between groups that emerged whenever a difficult situation arose.

‘And then you see that the gap becomes bigger again under pressure’.
(Program manager 3)

In the second and third storylines, leaders constructed the positive impact of others on complex emergent problem resolution by providing information and support or co-creating solutions (see table 5 for illustrative quotes). As an illustration of the second storyline, a portfolio manager aimed to bring together people from different programs to share their ideas:

‘How do you keep [this profession] moving, or how do you get movement where necessary, or how do you (...) connect people with each other, how do they know the good things they have thought of and how do others know about it.’ (Portfolio manager 3)

A quote from a project manager who explained how people from different groups can work together to create better solutions illustrates the third storyline of the positive role of others in co-creating solutions to difficult issues:

‘I see a strong commitment from employees when they see the total picture and know that we are all working toward the same goals instead of it being sub-islands. That also makes the work more fun, I believe. I think I also see that you get better solutions together, because it just works. (...) And I also see that people find each other more easily.’ (Project manager 1)

Table 5 Storylines of narrative 2: Constructing the impact of others on complex emergent problem resolution

Storylines about the impact of outsiders	Illustrative quotes
Delay/Complicate	<p>'Then, everyone digs themselves deeper into their foxholes, so you can't find a way out anymore. And those are things you have to pay close attention to as management; "what is going on now?":' (Program manager 1)</p> <p>'And when something stupid happens you notice really quickly (...), people talk very negatively about it, and that's immediately along the lines of "they are all crazy in [the one location], or along the lines of (...) "you see? You can't trust those [people from the one location]":' (Program manager 3)</p> <p>'What you notice in particular is that it is not strange that during every phase that new people joined they wanted to re-do the definition phase.' (Project manager 4)</p>
Inform/Support	<p>'Looking back, that was a moment where we made a turn, with which we got stuck and needed help from outside to get it together again for ourselves.' (Program manager 3)</p> <p>'We did go and take a look at other organizations: How do they do these types of trajectories?' (Program manager 4)</p>
Co-create	<p>'So there are all kinds of incentives in it to get people to look ahead and to let them talk about "what are you going to do in the future". And they have to do that together, so the contractor and the client together. Well, that's unique, that never happens. But it forces them to talk to each other, and that is what I want.' (Project manager 2)</p> <p>'Look, you are a big organization, but you have to organize small. So, bring people together. If people know each other and know the problems they run into, they are usually willing to solve that together. There's no one here who's like "I'm going to disrupt matters and I'm going to work against a solution". (...) But it's all from not communicating, communicating badly, misunderstanding of each other's interests or situation.' (Program manager 4)</p>

3.3 Narrative 3: Management of conflicting perspectives

When faced with new issues, leaders framed the role of conflicting perspectives in the process of resolution in different ways. They framed the role of conflicting perspectives as positive, negative or both. Each way of framing the role of conflicting perspectives in complex emergent problem resolution came with a different storyline about the management of these conflicting perspectives. The storylines that emerged from our interviews were aligning perspectives, nurturing conflicting perspectives and iterating between nurturing and aligning conflicting perspectives (see table 6 for illustrative quotes of these storylines).

First, conflicting perspectives were framed as having a negative influence on the resolution of emergent issues. This storyline suggested the importance of aligning

perspectives by having clear, transparent structures for the project and how it should be run. For example, one program manager framed conflicting perspectives as potentially leading to project team members diverging from the course of the project as intended and the need for clear structure to guide project team members perspectives on priorities, actions and project direction so they avoid 'going off course':

'Have clear structures. In complicated structures people don't have something to hold on to, don't know how things run, are going to sail on their own compass. And that's often not the course you want as a project manager. So be really clear, and really transparent.' (Program manager 1)

For this program manager, clear project structures reduce the dangers inherent in conflicting perspectives emerging regarding the course and direction of a project that a project manager wants, whilst when structures are too complicated and not transparent this danger is higher.

Conflicting perspectives were also framed as having a positive influence on the process of resolving evolving issues. In this second storyline leaders constructed the importance of nurturing conflicting perspectives. For example, one project manager framed the perspectives of others as important for reflection upon each other's actions:

'Just discuss what the possibilities are and look at are there new possibilities, are there other possibilities? Who can do that? Who has another idea? So it's more... by searching for possibilities and by listening to each other and trying to look for alternatives, instead of saying "this is how it has to be done".'

(Project manager 1)

A third storyline was distinguished in which conflicting perspectives were framed as both positive and negative for the resolution of complex problems, constructing the importance of iterating between nurturing and aligning conflicting perspectives. For example, a portfolio manager stressed the importance of both nurturing and aligning conflicting perspectives. On the one hand, she explained about the importance of nurturing conflicting perspectives by stressing that different stakeholder groups 'have to constantly be in consultation with each other', and that her role was to 'broaden the conversation' by involving more people. On the other hand, she also stressed the

importance of aligning perspectives by explaining she also saw her role as ‘letting unity emerge’ by organizing meetings to bring people involved in different programs of the portfolio together.

‘Because then you discuss a topic together, a topic you are all working on, and you hear from each other how you think about it and then you also see that unity is important. Everybody agrees that you can’t arrange something in 10 different ways because then that isn’t clear for anyone, so how do we do it then.’ (Portfolio manager 3)

Table 6 Storylines of narrative 3: Constructing the role of conflicting perspectives on complex emergent problem resolution

Storylines about resolution strategies	Illustrative quotes
Align perspectives	<p>‘What we said was “Let’s get closer to that contract again”. Not to keep each other accountable, but to get clarity about who has to do what. And at a certain moment someone said like “Yes, but the contract is not clear about this”. Well, then we have to decide about that now, because then how do we interpret it? Well, then we agree about that and do it that way.’ (Project manager 1)</p> <p>For example, a project manager explains how he organizes ‘meetings to search for, confirm, and sometimes create connection, and mail rounds in between to keep each other informed’. (Project manager 3)</p> <p>‘We steer on planning, on budget and on scope of the project. (...) Planning is on orange, because we are running out of schedule. (...) Green is nothing to worry about, orange is beware, red is it’s on fire.’ (Program manager 4)</p>
Nurture conflicting perspectives	<p>‘Well, then we tell each other “guys, we have to hold a mirror in front of each other at moments like that, and dare to confront each other and to reflect like ‘gosh, are you doing that in the right way, or do we have to become a bit more loose, or a bit more tight’”.’ (Project manager 1).</p> <p>‘The other day we discussed such a reorganization plan. That just has so much more value, that we look at it all together, because everyone looks from another perspective.’ (Portfolio manager 3)</p> <p>‘Then you discuss something with each other in a workshop-like thing. And that doesn’t mean that our way is brought forward like “you have to do it that way”, but we present our way and they mirror that to their own way of working and see whether that is applicable for them or not. And then you notice that with certain topics they are further than us, and in other topics we are further than them. Then you can learn a little from each other.’ (Project manager 5)</p>

<p>Iterate between aligning and nurturing conflicting perspectives</p>	<p>'One week we have the risk meeting, so that's mainly about what type of risks have occurred, and then you talk about "who is going to solve this? And how do you expect to solve this? And (...) what do you need in order to do this?" Then a proposal is made. We have put that together as a team, and then, the other week, we have project team meeting, and that's much more a decision-making meeting. (...) And with that you separate decision-making from problem exploration.' (Program manager 1)</p> <p>'Then they explain everything, give answers to the questions, and well, we have a discussion for an hour and a half. Actions emerge from that and those actions are written down, those are quickly sent back and forth: "Is this alright, are these the actions?" And the next time it is checked whether those actions are being performed.' (Program manager 2)</p> <p>'We went to sit on the moor together for a day, and two things happened there. The quality of the plans got better (...). And parallel, because we discuss so much it also directly created alignment between those project groups.' (Project manager 4)</p>
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4 DISCUSSION

In the current study we draw attention to the constructive role of language, and the pivotal role of leaders' narratives, in leading projects and programs. We describe three salient narratives project and program managers draw upon when faced with complex emergent problems and illustrate the different storylines they construct that frame these problems in different ways. These different ways of framing the issue and process of resolution shape the project in different ways in processes of collective meaning making. As leader's narratives play an important role in the development of collective meaning making, the storylines that are developed by leaders can have a major impact on the ways in which complex emergent problems are constructed and resolved, and thus potentially the success of the project and program.

In this section we discuss the possible implications of these narratives and storylines by theorizing the ways in which these different narratives and storylines can shape reality. The first narrative we identified shows that determining the goals of the project, and specifically determining which groups should benefit from the project is not a straightforward process. Leaders highlight different groups as important foci in complex emergent problem resolution and frame the tensions between groups. Our results support the idea that complex problem resolution is not just a matter of finding the best solution, but also involves the question; best for whom (Keegan & Boselie, 2006)? As the issues that arise can be dealt with in a number of different ways, the way in which leaders construct their narrative can affect collective meaning making and the decisions and actions that flow from this process (Bartel & Garud, 2009; Deuten & Rip, 2000).

By framing a specific group as most important leaders shape the solutions to the

problems in ways that are favorable for that group. They focus attention, resources and energies on one particular solution at the expense of potential other solutions and in so doing give guidance to project members about how to tackle potentially conflicting demands. This resonates with the literature on organizational culture that outlines how the culture of a group emerges around the way members respond to critical incidents and the role of leaders in shaping these responses (Schein, 1990; Schein, 2004). Leaders can, for example, shape responses to complex emergent problems by focusing attention to specific threats, articulating a new direction, and seducing others to adopt new behaviors (Schein, 1990).

Whether leaders frame the project, program, employer or client as most important and the way in which they construct tensions between the interests of different groups can have a significant impact on outcomes, especially since many groups in project-based contexts are not fully nested in one organization, but cross organizational boundaries. This can lead to unevenly distributed outcomes across the organizations involved. This relates to issues of social and intergroup relational identity. To which group do people belong, and how does that group relate to other relevant groups? Studies of social identification show that a sense of belongingness to a group has important consequences for attitudes and behaviors towards the in-group and out-groups (Tajfel, 1974). Intergroup relational identity has been identified as a group's relationship with other groups (Hogg, van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012). It is expected that collaboration between different groups is enabled by the development of an intergroup relational identity (Hogg et al., 2012).

The second narrative shows that project and program managers frame the impact of other groups on complex emergent problem resolution in different ways. In this narrative other groups are framed as delaying or complicating the process, providing information and support, or co-creating the solution. The way in which leaders talk about other groups can have an important impact on the way in which these groups are framed by project team members and whether their perspectives are taken seriously in the resolution of complex emergent problems. In most projects and programs success depends upon collaborative efforts of different groups, both within and across organizations. In this context, a major leadership challenge is to prevent disruptive conflicts between groups (Hogg et al., 2012). By portraying other groups as delaying or complicating the process, leaders set the tone and might influence project team members to develop a negative attitude towards other groups. This can be explained by processes of in-group out-group dynamics through identification and stereotyping.

The positive storylines of this narrative in which other groups are framed as providing information and support, or co-creating the solution resonates with the literature on intergroup collaboration and the role of leadership in co-creating identity. To achieve effective collaboration, leaders have an active role in shaping

social identities, so in order to mobilize all groups involved they can aim to create a category that includes all of them (Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005). However, as the development of a new superordinate social identity can easily be perceived as a threat to the current social identities, leadership can also aim to develop an intergroup relational identity that acknowledges differences between groups but brings them together around their mutual relationships (Hogg et al., 2012). This last leadership strategy can be seen as a way to bridge differences without reducing them (Ospina & Foldy, 2010). By framing other groups in a positive way leaders can stimulate the development of a positive relational identity between groups that can foster collaboration.

Whether others are framed by leaders as outsiders or group members, their narratives can portray the role of conflicting perspectives in complex emergent problem resolution in different ways. The third narrative we identified relates to the way in which leaders frame the role of conflicting perspectives in the process of resolving issues. One way of framing conflicting views is to emphasize their negative implications and to stress the importance of aligning perspectives for complex emergent problem resolution. Conflicting perspectives can be described as disintegrative tendencies that pull the group apart, by looking at the literature that focusses on the negative aspects of conflict, such as decreased satisfaction, liking of other group members and intention to stay in the group (Jehn, 1995). Leaders in project-based organizations face the challenge of overcoming disintegrative tendencies by combining different perspectives from team members with different backgrounds and the different groups that have a stake in the project (Hobday, 2000).

Consensus can enable smooth implementation (Jehn & Mannix, 2001) and aligning conflicting perspectives could help prevent disruptive forms of conflict such as relational conflict. A potential problem with aligning perspectives is that although shared understanding provides a valuable base for concerted action, changes in the environment call for continuous adaptive sensemaking (Bogner & Barr, 2000). If this alignment goes so far as to create a fully shared mental model, it can inhibit this adaptability and complexity of understanding as they can lead people to focus on similar environmental stimuli, interpret them in similar ways, and create blind spots for other stimuli (Uitdewilligen, Waller, & Zijlstra, 2010).

Leaders can also emphasize the value of conflicting perspectives. This can enable a flexible process of resolution in which team members describe tension as a source for adaptation and improvement. The work by Boddy and Patton (2004) suggests that project leaders can deal with competing narratives in a productive way by valuing them as a potential source of strength. The potential positive effects of conflicting perspectives are supported by research on the positive effects of moderate levels of task conflict on creativity, innovation, and performance (De Dreu, 2006; Farh, Lee, & Farh, 2010; Jehn & Mannix, 2001), and on the role of leadership in stimulating

tension between different perspectives to enable movement of thought and adaptive outcomes (Stacey, 2010; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

A third storyline in this last narrative relates to the importance of both conflicting and aligned perspectives. This way of framing effective complex emergent problem resolution involves iterating between enabling different perspectives and aligning perspectives, which can make it possible for the team to work both flexibly and efficiently. This is similar to the model developed by Beck and Plowman (2009) that highlights both nurturing conflicting perspectives and aligning perspectives as important in guiding interpretation of events. Leaders can, for example, use language to stimulate and surface conflict, or provide meaning through sensemaking (Plowman et al., 2007). More generally, this is in line with the literature on opposing action strategies, which shows that dissent and consensus can strengthen each other by promoting both knowledge generation and integration (Gebert et al., 2010).

The language use of leaders and narratives and related storylines that we found when we interviewed project and program leaders go beyond ‘merely words’ and have, as we argue here, theoretically important effects on how project teams function and approach complex emergent problems. Narratives function to structure responses to complex problems, and the recognition of the work they do is an important issue when it comes to understanding project and program leadership. The results of the current study draw attention to the different ways in which leaders frame the resolution of complex issues and the different ways in which these can shape the project and program. It is therefore important that project and program managers are aware of their central role in shaping projects through language. This awareness can lead to a better understanding of the consequences their language has for the success of projects or programs.

Further studies of why, when and with what effects narratives are used will bring further insight into the practical implications of language and narratives in project leadership. Future studies may examine what narratives and storylines have the most positive effects on the resolution of complex problems. Such insights can help project and program managers to choose their words carefully. In addition, they can analyze the effectiveness of narratives in different contexts, and also in terms of different time based aspects of project and program management. This could help leaders to assess their situation and shape emergent narratives in specific ways and effectively time the use of specific storylines.

4.1 Limitations and future research

In this study we have identified leaders’ narratives for resolving emergent issues in projects and programs and discussed what these narratives can do from a language

constitutive perspective on organizing processes. We can see from the results that leaders often draw on more than one storyline underpinning a narrative, but the results don't allow for a distinction of what type of leaders are most likely to draw on what type of storylines, how this differs for different contexts they work in, in what ways different storylines are combined, how these narratives develop over time, how this is influenced by collective meaning making, and how leaders' narratives shape reality through collective meaning making. This raises new questions of why these narratives are used, when they are used, and with what effects. These are important issues to further explore in future studies.

The generalizability of our results is limited by the number of interviewees. However, the goal of this study, as in similar studies on narratives and projects (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2007; Thomas & Buckle-Henning, 2007), is to generate internally valid findings through a rich exploratory analysis. In the current study we have explored the role of language in leadership of novel projects and programs through interviews with project and program managers. Though this has allowed us to shed light on their narratives of how they frame complex emergent problem resolution, we have to keep in mind that the perspective of the manager is only one of many that shape meaning together, and that the language these leaders use in the interviews can differ from the language they use when they interact with others in and around the project and program. Future research is required to further build on these insights and develop more knowledge on the existence, extent and implications of such differences.

Future research can also build upon our current exploratory study by including people with a wider range of roles in projects, programs, and line organizations through interviews or observation of evolving processes of meaning making around upcoming project management issues. First of all, future research could further examine how leaders' narratives are perceived and responded to by others. Secondly, studying these collective meaning making processes through observation while they are ongoing can be an important route to finding out more about the intricacies, temporal aspects, and interactive elements of these processes, and their effects. Overall, this can lead to more insight into the role of leaders' language in projects and programs.

Finally, the project management field has much to gain from further development of a language perspective on the construction of project reality. Taking a further linguistic turn in project management can help us move beyond aims to reflect that reality, and towards more insight into the ways in which this reality is constructed in processes of project-based interaction. We hope that the current study further encourages researchers and practitioners of project management to explore and reflect upon the role of language in the construction of project realities.