

# THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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## Abstract

The increasing popularity of collective leadership amongst leadership scholars has resulted in a surge in publications yet we know little about *how* organisational leadership is collectively constructed.

This research aims to contribute to our understanding of how leadership is discursively constructed in a collective setting. Drawing on the concept of discursive constructionism this research explores the phenomenon of leadership as a collective construction. Discursive construction analysis methodology has been developed to address some of the challenges associated with researching a dynamic, context-specific, and multi-level phenomenon, which is capable of addressing the irrevocable connection between leadership, power, and culture.

The leadership meetings of an independent UK law firm over 12 months have been recorded and analysed in order to explore the ways in which leadership is constructed as a collective phenomenon. In order to analyse the data a bespoke methodology has been designed and implemented which brings together aspects of conversation analysis, thematic analysis, and thematic deconstruction.

The findings demonstrate the complexities and nuances of what Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) termed big 'D' Discourses, and identify strategies the participants used to affect the influence of Discourse, whilst also exploring the ways in which Discourse influenced the effectiveness of the participants' contributions to leadership. Using the concepts of deontic and epistemic orders, stance, and status the power dynamics of the organisation are explored through a fine-grained analysis of the *discourse* used in the construction of leadership. The findings contribute to our understanding of collective leadership by revealing some of the strategies actors use to encourage and discourage collective contributions to leadership, the ways in which power dynamics are played out between individuals discursively, and the effective (and ineffective) ways in which actors affect their own, and others, positions in relation to power. All of this is considered in relation to the influence of Discourse, which explores the nuances and complexities of collective leadership as a discursive construction.

The core contributions arising from the research are firstly, the identification of the strategies used by actors to influence *Discourse*, namely *challenging*, *limiting*, *supporting*, and *building momentum*. Secondly, to demonstrate that the nature of *Discourse*, rather than being the ground on which leadership is based as the extant literature suggests, is a more complex, nuanced, and intangible concept for which a more appropriate analogy may be coloured lights presenting the arguments in an infinite number of possible ways, each of which may be interpreted differently by each participant. The third contribution is to identify specific strategies participants in the study used to contribute to the collective construction of instances of leadership. The fourth core contribution is the identification of the strategies employed by the actors to influence their own and other's stance. These contributions shed some light on the discursive practices used to construct collective leadership in an organisational setting.

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## 1. Foreword

I have argued throughout this research that researchers are not the 'tabula rasa' Glaser and Strauss (1967) encouraged us to be, adopting the perspective that the researcher cannot be objective as so many other scholars before me, have done (e.g. Clarke et al, 2018; Harraway, 1991; Ybema et al., 2019). It therefore seems prudent to begin the thesis with a statement of positionality to place the research in context.

In 2001 I graduated with a degree in Psychology and started a career in sales progressing quickly into managerial roles. Whilst I had an ability to meet targets and generally to exceed expectations it was not a career I found fulfilling. After 6 years in sales, I considered a career in law hoping that this would provide a little more intellectual stimulation. I completed the Graduate Diploma in Law in 2008 whilst funding this year of my life playing poker professionally. Short stints of work experience in the legal profession convinced me that I wasn't suited to a career in law so I carried on playing poker professionally and during this time started my first company in 2009. I sold this company in 2013 and used the proceeds to purchase some investment property and to start a residential letting agency. The company grew quickly and by 2018 was managing hundreds of properties with offices in three cities but with my wife also running a company and with us having three children, we had too much going on and I decided to sell.

I started my MBA the following year. During the first few classes on leadership, I came to realise that far from being taught how to lead or what I should and should not do as a leader (as I had naively expected), we actually know very little about the phenomena of leadership. My initial disappointment turned to intrigue as I realised the range of knowledge out there waiting to be discovered. I gave more of my attention to the field of leadership studies than the other modules on my MBA partially because I found it interesting and partially because the modules on economics and finance were relatively straightforward. Financial models such as the techniques to value a company (the discounted cash flow, or the capital asset pricing model), or the ratios used by analysts to

determine a company's likelihood of success, were easy enough to grasp but appear to be of limited practical value. As Kahneman's (2011) research amongst others has demonstrated, the models no more enable financiers to pick stocks or predict values than random chance. Similarly, I felt that many of the popular models of leadership failed to meet with my experience of running a company. Learning about transformational leadership, for example, did not give me the skills to lead in a given scenario. In fact, more often than not learning about a specific model of leadership left me with more questions than answers. I found the models and theories of leadership interesting and in some cases even convincing on the surface but they didn't fit with my personal experiences of leadership and practical applicability was limited as a result. As an entrepreneur (or former entrepreneur) this was particularly frustrating. The sentiment was well expressed by venture capitalist Ben Horowitz, who at the start of his book *The Hard Thing About Hard Things* wrote:

“The hard thing isn't setting a big hairy audacious goal. The hard thing is laying people off when you miss the big goal. The hard thing isn't hiring great people. The hard thing is when those “great people” develop a sense of entitlement and start demanding unreasonable things. The hard thing isn't setting up an organizational chart. The hard thing is getting people to communicate with the organizational chart that you just designed. The hard thing isn't dreaming big. The hard thing is waking up in the middle of the night when the dream turns into a nightmare.” (Horowitz, 2014, p. ix)

As I moved on to my master's thesis, read more widely, and considered some of the critiques of various models and theories it struck me that so many of the models and theories of leadership fail to take into account the complexities of the practice of leadership, the pressures under which managers operate, the complexities of dealing with people with differing motivations, interests, and values. In essence, they sounded good in theory but offered little in the way of practical applicability. Authentic Leadership Theory, for example, sounds great but is a deeply flawed concept (e.g. Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Einola and Alvesson, 2021b; Pfeffer, 2015; Tourish, 2019) and whilst I still think the

concept of authenticity in leadership is relevant (Stephenson, 2023b) the presentation of a model of leadership as a one-size fit all leadership solution is not convincing. Similarly, Charismatic and Transformational Leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Weber, 1947) sound good in theory but could also be used to explain the leadership styles of infamous leaders like Jim Jones (of the Peoples Temple cult), Jeff Skilling (of Enron) or even Adolf Hitler (Tourish, 2013) and could equally be considered as a form of manipulation or ‘coercive persuasion’ (Tourish et al., 2009). Even if we set aside this argument, the empirical evidence for the effectiveness of these leadership styles is weak (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). In fact, as Spicer et al (2016) note it is usually the case in leadership studies that intellectualism is not supported by empirical reality.

As I came to consider pursuing a Ph.D. in the field of leadership I became more aware of some of the issues in the field of organisational studies. Dennis Tourish’s (2019) book *Management Studies in Crisis*, and Noam Chomsky’s (2014) *The Death of American Universities* explained, or perhaps partially explained the focus of the extant research. Publication in the ‘right’ journals had nothing to do it seems with the practical applicability of the research. *The Fall of the Faculty* by Benjamin Ginsberg (2013) and *University Inc.* by Jennifer Washburn (2006) added a deeper and darker level of understanding. This is not to say that the papers on theory development or various models of leadership were irrelevant or somehow of lesser quality, it was simply that I wanted to go in a different direction.

To contribute to the field as best I could I considered what I knew, whom I might study, and how I could best access the data that would make a meaningful contribution. The most obvious answer was to conduct the research in my wife’s law firm. In doing so I could gain access to information that other organisations might be unwilling to share, with an organisation that I know well. It seemed obvious and indeed in other fields of study, it is obvious. Phillippe Bourgois’s (2003) seminal text *In Search of Respect* was achievable because the researcher had relationships with (and therefore gained the trust of) his participants and their families, in the field of anthropology, where positivism

is less influential (Steinmetz, 2005), it is accepted that researchers will have relationships with their participants, if they don't before the study they will do afterward (Tett, 2021). Whilst some scholars are beginning to appreciate this perspective in other fields (e.g. Ellis, 2007; Tillman-Healy, 2003) the dominance of positivism in leadership studies continues to permeate into the other paradigms (Tourish, 2019). The hegemony of positivist assumptions, as George Steinmetz (2005) described it, or "positivist recalcitrancies" as Clarke et al. (2018, p.34) refer to the trend, are something that this research addresses head-on. In an attempt to produce the most significant contributions possible, I have stuck with the decision to carry out the research in my wife's organisation, arguing that this provides a rare and meaningful perspective in addition to access to data that has proven notoriously difficult for independent researchers to access (Carroll et al., 2017; Samra-Frederick, 2003).

## 2. Introduction

The study of leadership has moved through several overlapping phases (Denis et al, 2010; Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2018; Crevani et al., 2010). There are several comprehensive summaries of these stages either as they have progressed chronologically (e.g. Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2018) or individually (e.g. Yukl, 1989, 2011), it would therefore, appear to be redundant to provide another, but for the sake of context, a very brief consideration of the study of leadership to date is provided. This leads to a discussion of some of the criticisms of the research carried out, a consideration of what might be missing from the study of leadership, why it is missing, and what might be done to address these issues, thus framing the purpose and aims of this study.

### 2.1 The phases of leadership

The traits and behaviours of individual leaders dominated the research in the first phase (for a review see Stogdill, 1948) and to a lesser extent continue in contemporary studies (e.g. Judge et al., 2002; Xu et al., 2014) but even early researchers like Stogdill (1948) concluded that trait theories are insufficient to explain leadership comprehensively.

As far back as the mid-1970s (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen and Cashman, 1975) researchers started to formulate what is now known as leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, essentially highlighting the importance of the role of followers in leadership (see Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995) for a review).

In the 1960s through to the 1980s (and beyond) situational or contingency theories of leadership developed suggesting that there is no single, correct means through which leadership should be conducted but that the style of leadership should be adapted to the situation (e.g. Fiedler, 1967; Hersley & Blanchard, 2007; for a review see Yukl, 1989).

The late 1970s and 1980s saw the initial phase of the heroic leadership models, in which scholars popularised leadership models based on positive psychology such as transformational leadership (Bass, 1985, 1990; Burns, 1978) and charismatic leadership (House, 1976,1977). This phase lasted

well in to the 2000s with Authentic Leadership Theory (Gardener & Avolio, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

The turn of the millennium saw more of a focus on collective leadership (CL) models such as distributed leadership (e.g. Gronn, 2002), shared leadership (e.g. Pearce & Conger, 2002), and relational leadership (e.g. Uhl-Bien, 2006) a trend which continues through to the present with an increasing number of publications in this field year on year (Bolden, 2011). There have also been calls to study leadership as it occurs in practice (Carroll et al., 2008; Raelin, 2011, 2016) and an increasing acceptance of the social constructionism ontology which gained popularity in the 1960s with Berger and Luckman's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality* but gained traction in leadership studies, particularly during this phase (e.g. Fairhurst & Grant, 2010) and specifically, as a discursive construction (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Fairhurst, 2007; Tourish & Jackson, 2008).

In 2003 Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) commented that despite the volume of research output relating to leadership studies, we know very little about it. This can be contrasted with a statement from 2024 in which one of the authors of this statement adjusts their position. Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher argue that "Considerable progress has been made in the field of leadership in recent years" (Haslam et al., 2024, p.1). As Haslam et al. (2024) go on to explain viewing leadership as the traits, behaviours, characteristics, etc. of the individual formal leader in an organisation is not only misguided but potentially detrimental to the organisation and to society as a whole as the next section will discuss.

## 2.2 Some of the issues with leadership research

From the earliest leadership studies (e.g. Carlyle 1840), to the present day (although less so in academic literature) there is a common understanding that leadership is an "elite activity practiced by those precious few people who have god-like skills, abilities, and talents." (Haslam et al. 2024, p. 6). This pernicious and inaccurate axiom of leadership studies and popular leadership literature (Halslam et al. 2024) has resulted in trends that seem well suited to the elite group claiming this



talent. For example, in 1965 a CEO of a top American corporation on average earned about 21 times as much as the average worker, by 2020 this had increased to 351 times the earnings of the average worker (Mishel & Kandra, 2021). The justification for such extreme inequality, as Haslam et al. (2024) argue, lies in the fallacies that; it is the individual leaders who are responsible for the success of the organisation; there are specific traits all leaders have; there are specific things all leaders do; we can all recognise a great leader; all leadership is the same (a blatant disregard for context); leadership is a special skill limited to special people; Leadership is always good, everyone in the organisation, and beyond benefits; and people can't cope without leaders. Whilst Haslam et al. (2024) concede that their axioms, or fallacies, are presented in their most extreme forms, and that often when cited they are softened with caveats such as, 'most', 'typically', and 'frequently' the effect is no less detrimental.

As popular literature on leadership has picked up on the academic research from the heroic leadership phase these myths are perpetuated (Maskor et al., 2022). Not only then, has the persistence of the fallacies and inaccuracies of past research held back progress in the field of leadership studies its pernicious effects are permeating the practice of leadership and leadership development.

The first axiom, that individual leaders are responsible for the successes of the organisation explains the trend, noted by Tourish (2014) that the focus of leadership research is generally on the main formal leaders, much less so the management team, and even less still those lower on the hierarchy who get little if any consideration for their efforts. The reality though is that the influence of individual leaders is far less than such studies would suggest. Einola and Alvesson (2021a) found that junior members of staff in an investment bank had difficulty identifying the leaders in the organisation, citing instead, the influence their line managers had on them. Smith et al. (2020) found a similar trend, identifying the leadership of more junior scientists to be far more influential than the leadership of formal leaders. Fransen et al. (2023) found that athletes identified the informal leadership of their peers to be far more influential than the formal leaders' roles in their

development. It is the misguided focus on the individual that Beer et al. (2016) attribute to the high failure rate in leadership training programmes. It may also explain Pfeffer's (2007) critical observation that management research does not typically affect the practice, an observation made by many (e.g. Grey, 2009; Tourish, 2019).

The axioms concerning the specific traits that all leaders have and the specific behaviours that all leaders engage in have been discounted by most academics and as Schedlitzki and Edwards (2018) succinctly explain in a brief summary of trait theory, despite a large volume of work on the subject researchers have been unable to form a consensus. Not only then do the axioms appear to be false, but the suggestion that most people are not capable of leadership for want of these elusive traits and skills appears to be detrimental.

The ideas that we can all recognise great leaders and that leadership is the same no matter the context, implies that a great leader will be great in any context, something which is demonstrably false (Goodall & Pogrebna, 2015; Haslam et al., 2024; Lord & Hall, 2005; Mumford et al., 2007).

Context, as will be discussed in more detail in the literature review, is an essential component of the study of leadership as many have noted, changes in the context will cause changes in leadership (Empson 2020; Locke, 2003; Osborne et al., 2003; Sanfuentess et al., 2020; Sweeney et al. 2019).

The conceptual view of leadership as the purveyance of an elite group upon the masses has been shown to be damaging in a multitude of areas (e.g. Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). It may, for example, justify the inequalities in remuneration for CEOs mentioned above but at the cost of employee motivation, engagement, and enthusiasm (Steffens et al., 2020).

The penultimate axiom, that leadership is always good, appears to be based on the tautological argument that leadership is good, if it isn't good it's not leadership (one can then pick their terminology from a list including 'dictatorship', 'bullying', 'coercion' etc.) (Hannah et al., 2014). The roots of this argument are often attributed to Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) who made the claim that authentic transformational leadership required a "moral foundation of legitimate values" (p. 184),

without this the actor was said to be engaging in 'pseudo transformational leadership'. What these 'legitimate values' are, is clarified by the authors from the start of the paper, they are "the major themes of the modern Western ethical agenda" (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999, p. 183). One may well question whether it is ethical to suggest that only Western ethics meet the criteria.

Cuilla (1995), in considering whether leadership always needed to 'good', termed the dilemma 'the Hitler problem', noting that Hitler was not a morally good leader but was indisputably an effective one. In consideration of whether leadership is 'good', Alvesson et al. (2017) argue that one must be specific about who and what it may be good for. Failure to address these questions may lead to the perpetuation of concepts that only serve the elite.

The last of the axioms is that people need leaders and can't cope without them. This is heavily ingrained in our culture (Bregman, 2020) but not supported by the research. As demonstrated above, leadership is not typically about the influence of the formal leader, the collective aspect of leadership is consistent across time and culture (Edwards, 2015) and often leadership is more effective without formal leaders (e.g. Reicher, 2001; Sutherland et al., 2014). In fact, there is considerable evidence that leaders, especially when setting a poor example, lead to disengagement. US presidential elections provide a good example, according to the Pew Research Center (2023), only 37% of eligible voters in the US voted in each of the 2018, 2020, and 2022 elections.

The models of leadership developed in the late 1970s through to the early 2000s largely based on the axioms considered above are still popular in leadership training courses (Beer et al., 2016) and popular literature (Maskor et al., 2022) today. Whilst there are indications that the academic literature is moving away from these concepts it appears prudent to ask why these leadership concepts have come into being in the first place. I propose that the issues may be rooted in the historical methodological approach to leadership.

### 2.3 The historical methodological approach to leadership studies

Whilst still the dominant epistemology in the field of leadership (Bryman, 2004; Fairhurst, 2007; Klenke, 2008; Stentz et al., 2012; Sutherland, 2018; Yukl, 2011) positivism's influence on the study of leadership appears to have been diminishing for some time (Lakomski, 1999). The polemic 'paradigm wars' of the 1990s (Braidotti, 2013) were more detrimental to positivism in some fields (e.g. anthropology) than in others (Steinmetz, 2005) and in the case of organisational studies the roots of positivism were deep. The exchange of ideas between Pfeffer (1993) and Canella and Paetzold (1994) during the paradigm wars to some extent summarises the perspectives of both sides. Pfeffer (1993) arguing for a body of elite scholars to ensure that only one paradigm survives in the field, and that non-conformist works be condemned to obscurity with no credible journal being willing to publish them, can be contrasted with Canella and Paetzold (1994) arguing that knowledge is a social construction and that no scholar can make the claim that their preferred variant of knowledge is superior to any other.

We cannot say that positivism won or lost the paradigm wars in the field of leadership studies. It retains its position as the dominant paradigm but as Fairhurst et al. (2020) noted in their review of research in the field of CL whilst the bias was toward positivist ontologies, the majority of the research was qualitative.

As has been demonstrated in the 'phases of leadership' section of this chapter, the early phases had more of a positivist bias with the focus being on the traits and behaviours of individual leaders, largely overlooking context and the relational nature of the phenomenon. Whilst this bias has lessened it remains and methodologies viewed as the most credible in the field are still ill-suited to the study of leadership as a multi-level (e.g. Bolden et al., 2023); dynamic (e.g. Pearce & Conger, 2002; Sweeney et al., 2019) and context-specific (e.g. Empson, 2020; Osborne et al., 2003) phenomenon. As Maupin et al., (2020) noted, there is a dearth of methodological approaches suited to studying leadership when viewed through a collective lens (Ospina et al., 2020).

In order to provide meaningful, practically applicable research that can dispel the myths surrounding leadership resulting from the application of positivist epistemological approaches, we must, as Clarke et al., (2018) have argued, ‘unlearn’ the hegemony of positivist assumptions which permeate the most basic principles of research (Steinmetz, 2005).

Of particular importance in the context of this research, I would argue, as others have done before me (e.g. Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021; Clarke et al 2018; Charmaz, 2014; Denzin, 2007), that the concept of a researcher as a ‘tabula rasa’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), or in any way objective or unbiased is inappropriate, naïve, and has the potential to be detrimental. It is not therefore the goal of this research to reveal an objective truth or to simplify the findings in order to present them as a holistic or comprehensive theory.

This research aims to explore the discursive construction of leadership, viewed as a collective phenomenon. Rather than aiming to explain the phenomenon with an overarching theory, or to simplify the concept, the research aims to embrace and explore the complexity and nuance of CL whilst providing significant, theoretical, practical, and methodological contributions.

#### 2.4 The goals of this research and establishment of the research question.

This research is largely based on the call from Fairhurst et al. (2020) for more research to help us understand how leadership is collectively constructed. As mentioned above, this presents a significant challenge and perhaps explains the dearth of research on this topic, in that the methodologies in the field are ill-suited to such a study.

The primary aim of the research is to identify some of the ways in which language is used to construct leadership in a collective setting by exploring the intricate interplay of language between participants.

Setting aside what Clarke et al. (2018) termed “positivist recalcitrancies” (p.34), I decided that the best way to overcome the challenges of observing leadership in action, especially in a longitudinal study,

would be to conduct the research in an organisation run and owned by my spouse. This approach has significant advantages, discussed in more detail in the Methodology chapter, but of particular note is the access to materials that other researchers would find very challenging to access, if possible at all (Carroll et al., 2017; Samra Fredericks, 2003). Whilst any pretence at objectivity is cast aside in opting to conduct the research in this manner, I was under no illusion that this would have ever been a possibility (for any researcher), so this aspect of the disadvantage was perhaps less of a concern that it might have been for a researcher with more positivist tendencies. That is not to say that the effects of conducting the research in my wife's organisation were ignored or overlooked, quite the opposite, in place of aiming to be objective, the research aims to be reflexive.

The details of this reflexive approach are considered in more detail in the Methodology chapter but the principle is that since the researcher is responsible for constructing the research and thereby affects the findings (Ybema et al., 2019) an understanding of the ways in which this may occur is fundamentally important to the methodology.

The establishment of a research question was comparatively straightforward:

**'How is organisational leadership collectively and discursively constructed in a small law firm?'**

However, as the Methodology chapter details, creating a suitable method and analysis technique to investigate the phenomenon proved challenging. Many of the methods and analysis techniques, even if not directly rooted in positivism or post-positivism, are heavily influenced by them (Clarke et al., 2018; Steinmetz, 2005). Through a number of false starts, trial and error, and a lot of research on prospective techniques, a methodology has been developed capable of exploring CL whilst dealing with the challenges identified by Maupin et al. (2020) of the dynamic, multi-level, context-specific nature of CL, whilst concurrently enabling the researcher to consider the influence of power and organisational culture.

Addressing Haslam et al.'s (2024) critique of those models, theories, and concepts within the leadership literature, which despite their well-exposed flaws and inadequacies continue to influence the study of leadership to its detriment by presenting leadership as a possession of the elite, this research aims to provide practical feedback to all members of the organisation, irrespective of their status in the hierarchy.

## 2.5 The importance of power and culture in the study of collective leadership.

As mentioned above, the frequent trend of simplifying phenomena appears to be a permeation of positivism in wider research. Positivist researchers have advocated breaking phenomena down in order to identify relevant variables and the dominance of the paradigm seems to have influenced researchers more widely with an abundance of work claiming to reduce complex phenomena into very simple tables (e.g. Ospina et al, 2020; 2022), patterns (Simpson et al., 2018) or other summaries. Often the researchers identify the oversimplification of the concepts explicitly and explain that the goal is to explain the concept simply in order to further our understanding (e.g. Ospina et al. 2020; 2022). There is of course merit to such an approach and without the scholars cited as examples and many more my understanding of the subject matter would be significantly reduced, as I am sure, is true for others. It is important though, that scholars adopting this approach acknowledge it, and that the temptation to present complex phenomena as solved, or comprehensively explained, in this way be avoided, failure to do so as Haslam et al. (2024) have shown, has potential to be detrimental.

An additional reason for the simplification of complex concepts appears to be the methodologies deemed credible. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria for qualitative research for example, although widely used today, has clearly been influenced by positivism. The first criterion 'credibility' suggests that research is of better quality if the reader can be confident in the 'truth' of the findings. The implication then is that there is an objective truth that the researcher draws from the findings, something which interpretivists, post-structuralists, post-modernists, and many others would

immediately find troublesome. The second criterion, 'transferability' suggests that the quality of research is improved if the findings can be transferred (or have applicability) to other scenarios or contexts. As has been demonstrated above, in the case of leadership, we know that when the context changes the leadership changes, so striving for transferable findings appears to be anything but a worthy aim. The third criterion is 'dependability' which suggests that the quality of research is improved if the findings are consistent and could be repeated. The applicability of this criterion to research such as this project is surely limited. Ethnographic research cannot be repeated because the context would change and with it the findings. The fourth criterion is 'confirmability' suggesting that the greater the degree of researcher neutrality the greater the quality of the research. This idea of a researcher being neutral, or a tabula rasa (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) has been extensively shown to be to a fallacy (e.g. Clarke et al., 2018; Harraway, 1991; Ybema et al., 2019).

We have then a situation in leadership studies in which researchers are encouraged to simplify complex phenomena through the advocacy of methodologies designed to do so, evaluative criteria that rewards the practice, and the positivist influence in most areas of the field which suggests that complexity and nuance detract from the overall credibility research.

I have rejected these norms and heeded the calls from scholars I respect and admire to consider CL as a complex and nuanced phenomenon (e.g. Bolden, 2011; Edwards and Bolden, 2023; Empson, 2020; Fairhurst et al. 2020; Tourish 2019), and to ensure the exploration of the discursive construction of CL includes a consideration of the influence of power dynamics and organisational culture, this is covered in detail in the literature review.

## 2.6 The thesis structure

The thesis is presented with the following chapters;

1. Introduction:



The introduction provides a summary of some of the issues in leadership research, considers why this has happened, and presents an outline of the goals of the research.

## 2. Literature Review:

The second chapter reviews the literature on CL, and the relevant aspects of power and organisational culture identifying some of the gaps that the research will address.

## 3. Methodology:

The Methodology chapter begins with a consideration of research philosophy generally, before explaining the specific ontological and epistemological position in this research. This leads into a discussion and more detailed consideration of the establishment of the research question and aims of the research, building on the brief mention of these areas in the introduction. The methodology in this research has been specifically designed for this research, as such a consideration of some of the underpinning methods and analysis techniques that influenced this process are considered at length, along with explanations as to why these methods and analysis techniques were chosen over other seemingly similar alternatives. The importance of context in this research is difficult to overstate, and consideration is given to the rather unusual context (in terms of my relationship with the organisation) and the resultant ethical concerns. The last section of this chapter deals with the actual methodology detailing a step-by-step guide and explanation of the process.

## 4. Findings:

The findings are presented in three sections in order to provide a structured explanation. The sections are constructed by the researcher and do not reflect the nature of the findings, but are determined in part by the analysis techniques used to generate the findings.

## 5. Discussion:

The Discussion chapter revisits the extant literature covered in the literature review and considers the relevance of the findings in relation to it. The main contributions from the research are presented, and the strengths and weaknesses of the research are also considered.

#### 6. Conclusion:

The final chapter offers conclusions and suggestions for further research.

Included in the appendices are codebooks, a list of the annotations used from the Jeffersonian Transcription System, and an organisational chart that shows the hierarchy of the organisation.

### 2.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have briefly considered the phases leadership research has been through and considered some of the issues that face contemporary scholars, particularly in terms of methodological concerns. The aims of the research and development of a research question were explained, and consideration was given to the importance of considering culture and power in relation to CL. This provides the perspective and context in which the literature review was carried out.

### 3. Literature Review

Having considered the phases through which leadership studies have passed in the previous chapter, I move on to consider the extant literature on collective leadership (CL) in detail, starting with a consideration of the increasing popularity of the concept, I move on to consider some of the different ontological approaches to CL and the characteristics of the phenomenon which have made the study of CL particularly challenging. I then consider the literature on CL that most specifically relates to this study; CL in the context of SMEs, and CL as a social construction. Subsections 3.5 and 3.6 of the chapter consider the extant literature in relation to power dynamics and culture (respectively) in relation to CL in order to demonstrate their importance and relevance to this and other studies relating to CL.

#### 3.1 The increasing popularity of collective leadership

There is an inherent ambiguity as to what is meant by leadership, as Ford et al (2008) put it, “There is a vast body of literature on [leadership], although the precise thing that is studied, written about and practiced remains elusive.” (p. 28). CL, far from being an exception, exemplifies this ambiguity, as Robinson and Renshaw (2021) put it, “collective leadership is ravaged by contradictions and a plurality of definitions” (p.3). Alexy (2020) reviewed 120 papers on CL and found 121 definitions. Stogdill’s (1974) oft-cited claim that there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are scholars defining the term is as true for CL as any other area of leadership. This, though is perhaps not as surprising as it first appears. CL is an umbrella term covering a multitude of models, theories, and perspectives. If we adopt the ontological position advocated by Gronn (2009) that leadership has any number of potential configurations, we can position CL rather than as a definable term or concept, as the degree to which leadership is shared or distributed within the organisation. A multitude of competing and conflicting definitions would not only be expected it would provide support for this perspective.

CL covers those theories, models, and perspectives which, rather than focusing on an individual 'leader' (the leader-centric approach), take into account the potential for multiple contributors. CL covers shared, distributed, dispersed, relational, co-leadership, and other forms of plural leadership but for the purposes of this thesis the distinctions between the varying theories are of less importance than the overall perspective of leadership as a collective process.

The origins of CL are often attributed to Gibb (1954) who referred to distributed leadership in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*. Others (e.g. Schedlitzki & Edwards, 2018) cited Benne and Sheats's (1948) reference to the diffusion of leadership functions. Many (e.g. Pearce & Conger, 2003) attribute the concept to Mary Parker Follett (1924) who suggested that rather than assigning a leadership role to an individual, the person best suited to the challenge step into the leadership role. The variations seem to depend in part on whether it is CL as an umbrella term, or a specific variant of it that is being discussed.

In his highly influential review, Bolden (2011) points out the ideas behind distributed (and collective) leadership have been around for thousands of years. Bolden cites Oduro (2004) who found accounts of distributed leadership dating back to 1250BC. Matyszak (2017a, 2017b) references CL in his studies of the ancient society of Sparta, and the concept probably dates back further. Gareth Edward's (2015) research into anthropological accounts of leadership among indigenous cultures led him to conclude that the "ideals of distributed and collective leadership are not confined to modern organisational discourse. Instead, they are deeply rooted in a variety of indigenous cultures across the world" (p.345). Marc Hurwitz (2018) has gone so far as to demonstrate that it is not even a phenomenon unique to humans, some species of fish, and wolves are cited as having demonstrated distributed leadership.

So, attempts to define the concept of CL or to trace its roots lead us to rather ambiguous conclusions, and yet the popularity of CL continues to grow. Figure 3.1 builds on Bolden's (2011) demonstration of the increase in popularity of CL. Bolden showed an increase in the number of

publications relating to CL, distributed leadership, and shared leadership between 1980 and 2009.

Figure 1 demonstrates how this trend has continued, as the study of leadership has moved into what has been termed the 'post-heroic' phase. Kelly (2014) points out (as did Bolden, 2011) that the move toward CL and away from the more authoritarian or heroic leadership models is in keeping with the Western ideology of democracy through which we accept that participation is preferable to instruction.

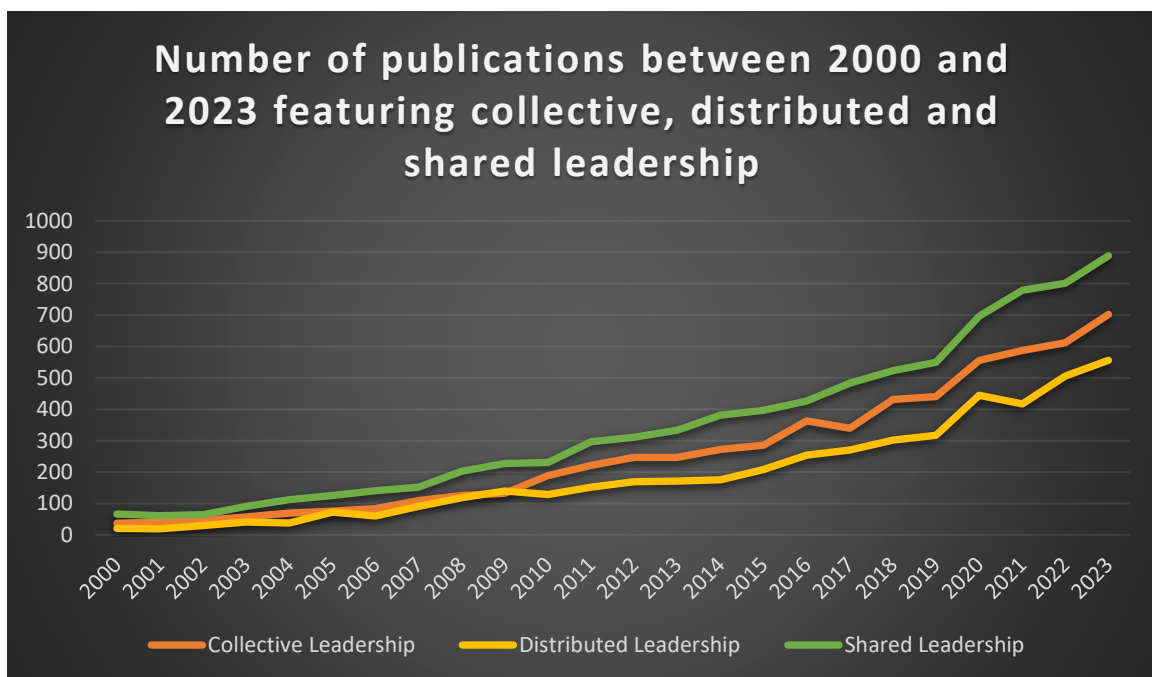


Fig. 3.1 Publications on Scopus Database

With the growth in popularity of the concept of CL came an increase in models and theories that could be included under the umbrella term. These models were often defined, sometimes with variations between scholars, and sometimes the models were used interchangeably making attempts to clearly define and differentiate the concepts unproductive in terms of furthering our understanding (Bolden, 2011).

Gronn (2009) responded to the increasing number of models falling under the umbrella of CL with an article in which he argued that what we think of as 'distributed leadership' is often a 'hybrid configuration'. Rarely do we see organisations that have an entirely lateral leadership configuration

nor do we tend to see organisations that have a purely hierarchical configuration in which each decision, each act of leadership, must flow from the top down. The question for Gronn, and many others, is not which model of leadership is most suitable for a given context but to what extent should the leadership be distributed? Gronn's 2009 article was described by Schedlitzki and Edwards (2018) as "a rallying point for those commentators searching for 'post-heroic' leadership alternatives" (p. 180).

Denis et al (2010) built on the ideas of Gronn and others and from their own observations described the "*dynamic, collective, situated and dialectical* nature of leadership" (P. 68 original emphasis) in what they termed 'plural leadership'. This view of leadership fits well with the social constructionist ontology, as Fairhurst and Grant (2010) argued, social constructionist approaches to leadership eschew leader-centric approaches, instead viewing leadership as a co-constructed phenomenon involving an array of social actors. It is perhaps then not a coincidence that the rise in the popularity of constructionist ontologies has been particularly prevalent since the turn of the millennium (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010). Viewing leadership as a phenomenon co-constructed through the interactions of social actors, places a heavy emphasis on the importance of communication, whether language or other non-verbal communication (Fairhurst, 2007, 2009). Those scholars adopting this ontological perspective might argue that all leadership is collective (Foldy and Ospina, 2022) since all leadership is "socially constructed through interaction, emerging as a result of the constructions and actions of both leaders and led" (Smircich and Morgan, 1982, p. 258). Many scholars are now advocating the study of leadership in action not the study of individual leaders (e.g. Crevani et al., 2010; Cunliffe and Erikson, 2011; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006; Sweeney et al., 2019).

Kelly (2014) advocates a move away from the consideration of leadership as a distinct object of analysis and argues that the only thing that stops leadership from losing all meaning is the language used to construct it. With the move toward a socially constructed, relational ontology comes the problem of how we study leadership (Kelly, 2014). Gail Fairhurst and her colleagues have been

particularly influential in this field (Fairhurst, 2007 and 2009; Fairhurst and Grant, 2010; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Fairhurst et al, 2020), essentially suggesting that through the study of organisational discourse (both in the sense of the everyday language used to bring about leadership and in the construction of the culture of an organisation in which the leadership resides) we can research leadership in action. However, as Kelly (2014) points out the volume of potential data confronting a researcher is overwhelming, and selecting what is and is not of importance is a monumental challenge.

As Sutherland et al. (2014) argue, if we are to observe instances of leadership, we need to decide what constitutes leadership in order to make meaningful observations. It is tempting then for researchers to avoid the challenge of identifying specifically what they mean when discussing leadership, indeed Rost (cited in Palmer and Hardy, 2000) noted that two-thirds of the extant literature does not define leadership. Stogdill (1950) made an early attempt to define leadership, he saw it as an influence process within an organisation with the aim of achieving pre-set goals. There has been little progress in improving upon this definition since, despite numerous attempts (Ford et al., 2008) and any attempt to do so is easy to critique. As Alvesson and Spicer (2012) argued, in consideration of the many definitions within the extant literature, leadership “may mean almost anything to anyone” (p.384).

Alvesson and Spicer (2012) distinguish between leadership – “influencing the thinking, values and emotions of followers” and management “working directly with instructions, structures or results as means of influence” (p. 368) and acknowledge that leadership may be necessary for the function of organisations as some form of authority is generally required. Indeed to promote values, supported by many of the critical theorists such as autonomy and emancipation within organisations, having some form of leadership to promote these values may be an important factor (Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007). It is with this in mind, and despite the persuasive arguments put forward by scholars such as

Kelly (2014) that leadership is not a term which can be defined, that a consideration of the literature surrounding defining 'leadership' and 'collective leadership' follows.

### 3.2 Conceptualising collective leadership

Ospina et al. (2020) presented what they termed a 'map of the terrain of collective leadership' acknowledging that the "terrain is expanding and becoming increasingly difficult to traverse" (p. 441). Ospina et al.'s map is essentially a two-by-two matrix in which researchers may consider CL either a type/model of leadership or a lens through which leadership may be studied. On the other axis, the researcher may view CL as either residing in the interpersonal relationships of group members or residing in systemic dynamics.

The view that CL is a *type* of leadership is often associated with those approaching the topic from a positivist ontology, which despite the recent increase in the popularity of social constructionist approaches (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010), remains the dominant approach in leadership (Alvesson, 2013; Bryman, 2004; Fairhurst, 2007; Klenke, 2008; Stentz et al., 2012; Sutherland, 2018; Yukl, 2011).

The positivist and neo-positivist approach to CL has generally sought to explore whether configurations of CL yield superior performance (e.g. Carson et al., 2007; Hoch, 2014; Hoch et al., 2010; McHugh et al., 2013; Pearce & Sims, 2002; Wang et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2015), to reveal the antecedent conditions of CL such as personality traits of the actors (Carson et al., 2007; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2016; Jain & Jeppesen 2014; Meuthel et al., 2012; Pearce & Herbig, 2004; Zhou & Vredenburg, 2017) or to demonstrate outcomes of CL such as reduced levels of conflict, greater consensus building, higher levels of trust and cohesion, (Bergman et al. 2012; Mathieu et al. 2015) and task satisfaction (Drescher & Garbers, 2016; Serban & Roberts, 2016).

A classical positivist approach should yield results which create "universalistic and generalisable" results (Sutherland, 2018, p. 265), from research that takes an objective and neutral stance (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). In this regard, in the field of CL as with leadership more generally, the positivist



approach has fallen far short of the standards the researchers aspired to (e.g. Cummings, 1981; Yukl, 2011). For example, whilst Muethel et al. (2012) identified a high ratio of females in an organisation to be an antecedent condition for CL, Mendez and Busenbark (2015) found no such correlation. Team size is another area that has yielded contradictory results (Sweeney et al., 2019). Unsurprisingly given the innumerable possible configurations under the term CL, the results of the performance of CL have also been mixed (Fausing et al., 2013). That said positivist approaches to CL have not been entirely devoid of merit. The early survey-based research of Pearce and Simms (2002) led to the theory developed by Pearce and Conger (2003) which was a significant contributor to the popularisation of the concept of CL and whilst we may not be able to say with certainty what the antecedent conditions are for CL, or whether it is a more effective form of leadership, we can conclude from the mixed results that the phenomenon is more complex. As Pearce (2004) argued, rather than comparing vertical and shared leadership, we should consider the circumstances under which leadership should be shared, the appropriate methods for doing so, and how shared and vertical leadership can be utilised together for optimum results. Unfortunately though research “grounded in a substance ontology and a representational epistemology” are “of questionable value in tackling research inquiries into the dynamics of ‘how’ leadership emerges over time” (Simpson et al., 2018, p. 645).

The very nature of CL is that it is a dynamic, ever-changing phenomenon, with roles changing over time and being dependent on the context (Denis et al., 2010; Hosking, 1988; Maupin et al., 2020; Sweeney et al., 2019) The oversimplification of much of the work carried out within the CL as a *type* of leadership cell of Ospina et al.’s (2020) matrix neglects the temporal, contextual and multiple levels (Maupin et al., 2020) of CL and is a major drawback of the approach.

A further drawback is that much of the research carried out, in which CL is viewed as a type of leadership is carried out in non-commercial organisations (Sweeney et al., 2019; Cope et al., 2011), with student samples being common-place (Sweeney et al., 2019; Ben-Hafaiedh and Cooney, 2017).

The inherent problems with this are obvious and generalisations cannot and should not be made from non-commercial settings to commercial (Locke, 2003). As Osborn et al. (2002) put it “leadership and its effectiveness, in large part, are dependent upon the context. Change the context and leadership changes” (p. 797).

Empson (2020) provides an excellent example, not just of the complexities and nuances of CL but of the importance of considering the concept in terms of time and context. Empson studied the leadership configuration in a large (top five globally in terms of revenue) professional services firm. With 500 partners sharing the ownership one might assume that the organisation would adopt what Denis et al (2012) identified as the ‘pooling’ of leadership at the top of the organisation, which appeared to be the case in the day-to-day running of the firm (despite the leadership configuration being ambiguous), however as the firm entered a challenging economic climate<sup>1</sup> a hierarchical leadership configuration emerged which had up to this point been “hidden within the ambiguous authority structure” Empson, 2020, p. 76). Empson’s study, reveals a configuration of levels of hierarchical leadership within (and distinct from) the formal hierarchy which resides within what would be viewed as a collective (or pooled) leadership configuration. Any attempt to identify this firm as having CL and compare it to a similar firm identified as having a hierarchical leadership would overlook so many nuances and complexities that it would be unlikely to aid our understanding of what leadership (and CL) is, let alone its effectiveness.

Empson’s study is not unique in its findings, Balkundi and Kilduff (2006) used social network theory to investigate collective configurations of leadership and found that an individual’s position within the hierarchy was not necessarily representative of their level of leadership and influence within a group. Nevertheless, we cannot and should not make generalisations from Empson’s (2020) study, there is no reason to believe that hierarchical leadership configurations are always better suited to dealing with a crisis generally, or to assume that this form of leadership will always emerge in a crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> The 2008 financial crisis.

Tourish (2020) showed how badly some global leaders dealt with the coronavirus pandemic by adopting heroic approaches to leadership and Barton and Kahn (2019) suggest that the anxiety induced by adversity is better handled when shared within a group than when an individual takes sole responsibility (whether voluntarily or by being scapegoated). Similarly Hannah et al. (2009) found shared and distributed configurations of leadership to be better suited to dealing with crises as the emergence of different leaders depending on the challenge being faced improves the group's response.

Sanfuentess et al. (2020), similarly to Empson (2020) demonstrated how leadership configurations can change as the context changes, however, this study demonstrated the opposite shift from a hierarchical to a more collective configuration. Sanfuentess and colleagues considered the narratives of individuals involved in the Chilean mining crisis in 2010, during which 33 miners were trapped underground for 69 days. The panic that ensued immediately after the accident left the formal leader unable and unsuited to lead, through necessity the configuration of leadership became collective, especially during the days in which rescuers were unable to contact the trapped miners. Once the rescuers managed to contact the miners and offer assurances that a rescue was underway the configuration adapted to the change and the hierarchical configuration returned to deal with issues such as rationing food.

The importance of context is also demonstrated by Chreim (2015) whose study of the mergers and acquisitions of four companies showed how the configurations of leadership changed in varying ways (toward or away from collective approaches) depending on the specific circumstances. The complexities and nuances apparent in Chreim's study are compounded by Gronn's (2015) response to the article. Gronn questions for example, when the merger or acquisition can be said to be complete and challenges Chreim's claim that the leadership configurations had 'stabilized'. Instead, the leadership configurations may be thought of as continually adapting and changing in response to

any number of internal and external stimuli (even if very subtly), rather than having changed due to an event.

The alternative ontological position identified by Ospina et al (2020) is to view the concept of CL as a lens through which leadership can be studied. The roots of this approach are often attributed to Gronn (2002, 2009, 2015) whose argument for understanding distributed and CL as hybrid configurations is consistent with the need to view CL as a dynamic and context-specific phenomenon. Gronn's proposal has considerable support within the extant literature. The configurations for Gronn, and others who share the ontological position, are not stable, they change over time and context, and as Magee and Galinsky (2008) note these changes may be most evident when organisations go through some sort of external shock.

Those adopting the alternative view on Ospina et al.'s (2020) matrix, that CL is a *lens* through which leadership may be studied tend to consider the view that CL is a type of leadership as an oversimplification of the concept. Indeed some scholars approaching the study of CL from a positivist ontology, such as Pearce and Sims's (2002), have questioned any clear-cut distinction, finding a combination of shared and vertical leadership to be optimal. As Gronn (2002, 2009) argued there are innumerable potential configurations of leadership with each varying in the degree to which the leadership is distributed or shared. Denis et al (2012) identified four main types of CL and within just one of those areas, 'co-leadership', Gibbeau et al. (2020) identified six sub-types. Therefore to make a comparison between CL and vertical leadership would appear to be a gross oversimplification. Indeed many scholars view leadership as inherently collective (Empson et al., 2023) such as Crevani et al. (2010) who advocate the study of leadership as a process, Raelin (2016) who advocates leadership be studied as practice, and Clifton (2012) whose analysis of transcripts of leadership from naturally occurring settings led him to conclude that leadership is a distributed process, not the possession of an individual.

Another distinction Ospina et al (2020) make is between viewing CL as residing in the *group* or residing in the *system*. This distinction is a little more contentious (as will be discussed) but the essence of the distinction is whether the researcher views leadership as emerging from the interactions of individuals within a group or whether leadership is part of the system itself, in which case looking at individual interactions would be to overlook the patterns and processes at various levels (“teams, organisations, communities, societies, and so on” (Ospina et al., 2020 p. 72)) which create leadership.

Hiller et al. (2006) argue that CL transcends the sum of individual role-taking. In Ospina et al.’s (2020) matrix their position would be lens/system, with the argument being that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, or at least that there are more ‘parts’ in this analogy than could possibly be given adequate consideration.

Robinson and Renshaw (2021) acknowledge Ospina et al.’s (2020) matrix as a valid distinction but an oversimplification. Whilst Ospina et al. (2020) place leadership-as-practice in the ‘lens’ and ‘group’ box of the matrix for Robertson and Renshaw there is another layer “*beyond the group, but not at the system level*” (p.3 original emphasis). For Robinson and Renshaw (2021) to distinguish between ‘group’ and ‘system’ is too absolute when considering a concept which exists “*across and around the group*” (p. 7, original emphasis).

Edwards and Bolden’s (2023) reflections on CL also led them to conclude that the classifications in Ospina et al.’s (2020) study did not sufficiently allow for the complexity of CL, specifically they found the binary distinction between ‘type’ and ‘lens’ did not fit with their perspective. Edwards and Bolden (2023) consider CL an ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau, 1996), nothing more than a label for a group of definitions, meanings, and interpretations that may complement or contradict one another. In Edwards and Bolden’s words, CL is “a meta-level concept that doesn’t seem to fit a ‘group’, ‘system’ or ‘type’.” (Edwards and Bolden, 2023, p. 175). It is, for Edwards and Bolden (2023) and others (e.g. Alvesson, 2019) ideology rather than ontology that shapes CL theory and practice. This ideology,

according to Edwards and Bolden (2023) has a performative (Matri and Gond, 2018), self-fulfilling effect in which the language used to describe the phenomenon constructs the social reality of it.

### 3.3 Collective leadership as a dynamic, context-specific, and multi-level phenomenon

In a special edition of *Human Relations* on the topic of CL (published in 2020) two articles were of particular influence on this research. Fairhurst et al (2020) wrote an article advocating that future research in the field of CL focus on the conceptual nature of the phenomenon, rather than the empirical. They argued that the prevalent positivist focus on issues such as whether CL is better than hierarchical leadership adds little to our understanding of the concept. Rather than viewing CL as a distinct phenomenon from other theories and models of leadership, they suggest that we should consider the degree to which the configuration of leadership in an organisation is collective, citing the earlier work of Gronn (2011). Specifically, Fairhurst et al. (2020) encouraged the researcher to “*decipher the configurations of CL and its power-laced foundations*” (p. 604 original emphasis).

The second article by Maupin et al (2020) advocated three methodological approaches to the study of CL which was capable of taking into account the challenges earlier research has tended to avoid. Specifically, Maupin and colleagues were keen for the research on CL to allow for time, context, and multiple levels. Perhaps the most widely cited definition of shared leadership, from Pearce and Conger (2003) is “a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organisational goals or both.” (p.1). The *dynamic* nature of shared leadership, and more widely speaking of CL, is fundamental to the concept, to consider CL at a single moment in time is to miss an essential component of what CL means. This has also been noted by other scholars’ proposals for future research in the field which call for longitudinal, qualitative research (e.g. Hoch & Dulebohn 2013; Sweeney et al., 2019). Context has also been shown to be key to the nature of CL both before Maupin et al.’s (2020) review was published (Alvesson & Svenningsson 2003a, 2003b; Bolden et al., 2008; Carroll, 2008; Denis et al. 2010) and since its publication (Empson, 2020; Empson & Alvehus, 2020; Sanfuentess et al. 2020).

Yet, as noted by Edwards and Bolden (2023) and Sweeney et al. (2019) context in the study of CL has still been overlooked.

The multi-level aspect of leadership has also been overlooked resulting in a focus on leadership occurring from the top down, and far less research on instances of leadership between peers or instances of leadership flowing up the hierarchy. Northouse (2016) distinguished between 'formal' and 'informal' leadership where the former refers to instances in which leadership flows down through the hierarchy, and the latter refers to peer-to-peer, or instances of leadership moving up through the hierarchy. Fairhurst and Grant (2010) made a similar distinction between 'designated' leaders as individuals in leadership positions on the hierarchy and 'emergent' leaders who engage in instances of leadership despite not holding a commensurate position on the hierarchy.

Scholars such as Yammarino et al. (2012) and Denis et al. (2012) demonstrated in their highly influential article, that CL can take different forms, sometimes within the same organisation. For example, Hambrick (2007); Ensley et al. (2003) and Edmondson et al. (2003) considered CL in top management teams, Denis et al. (2012) later termed this 'pooled leadership', whereas Gibeau et al. (2020) considered 'co-leadership' where one role is shared by two individuals working collaboratively together.

Maupin et al. (2020) proposed three methodological approaches to the study of CL which could take the identified factors into consideration, one of which was organisational discourse analysis. The idea being that through discourse analysis the researcher might offer an explanation (or contribute to the efforts to explain) the ways in which discourse is used to construct and configure CL. Maupin et al. specifically mentioned the importance of considering both big 'D' Discourse and small 'd' discourse.

Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) distinguished between *Discourse* and *discourse* in an attempt to clarify what we mean when using the term 'discourse'. Whilst *discourse* is the everyday use of language, *Discourse* is the cultural, historically constructed expressions of norms, values, and power. These concepts are further explored in the methods chapter, including a consideration of critiques of

the distinction. The limited examples of the ways the two types of discourse have been shown to construct leadership are considered in more detail in section 3.5 below.

### 3.4 Collective leadership in the context of SMEs

As a start-up grows it will inevitably reach a size at which the founder must share leadership responsibilities to at least some extent (Ensley et al., 2003) and as such an SME is an ideal place to explore the emergence of CL (Cope et al, 2011). Whilst a common theme in popular business literature the idea of the entrepreneurial hero is a myth (Reich, 1987), it is the team effort that determines the success or failure, not simply the efforts of a lone founder (Reich, 1987) and the concept of leadership in this context should be viewed not as an individual effort but as a process arising through the relationships within a social system (Uhl-Bien, 2006). As Cooney (2005) put it, “It is arguable that despite the romantic notion of the entrepreneur as a lone hero, the reality is that successful entrepreneurs either built teams about them or were part of a team throughout” (p. 226).

Indeed some research suggests that ventures founded by entrepreneurial teams achieve faster growth than ventures founded by individuals (Ben-Hafaiedh & Cooney, 2017; Birley & Stockley, 2000). There has even been the suggestion that the bigger the team, the more growth is expected (Levie & de Borst, 2017). That said firm conclusions should not necessarily be taken from the aforementioned studies as Levie and de Borst’s research, for example, was based on predicted growth, rather than actual growth.

Research has also suggested that a diverse range of personality traits in the founding team contributes to the success of the venture (Harrison et al., 1998, 2002; Schoss et al., 2017), As with so much of the research carried out on entrepreneurship, however, the authors did not carry out the research on entrepreneurs themselves, instead they opted to research students using a start-up simulator. Furthermore, the assessment of personality traits was based on the participants’ assessment of their own personalities. So, whilst assertiveness, empathy, willingness for leadership,



and passion for work were identified as personality traits correlated with success we might question whether the findings are transferable to entrepreneurs in a commercial context.

Research in the field of CL in SMEs has tended to focus on answering the question of whether CL improves performance, with a tendency to suggest that it does (e.g. Coc et al., 2003; Day et al., 2004; Mehra et al., 2006). Some suggest CL is a more effective model of leadership in some contexts but not others (e.g. Carson et al., 2007; Pearce et al, 2004) and others suggest the optimal approach is a hybrid of collective and vertical leadership (e.g. Ensley et al., 2006) but there is a dearth of research into *how* CL comes about (Fairhurst et al., 2020).

Cope et al. (2011) argue that start-ups have an inherent problem embracing a collective approach to leadership. The authors put forward some speculative suggestions to explain this but as with so much of the literature on entrepreneurship, the phenomenon is considered as if all entrepreneurs face the same challenges. Arguing that a collective approach to leadership is a one-size-fits-all all solution, as Cope et al (2011) rather conservatively put it is “simplistic” (p. 278).

Cope et al.'s (2011) suggestions for the resistance of entrepreneurs to the adoption of more CL approaches begin with a suggestion that the entrepreneur may be unaware of the alternative. Whilst it seems quite plausible that many entrepreneurs will not be familiar with the academic concept of distributed leadership (the specific phenomenon Cope and colleagues were considering) the idea that entrepreneurs generally speaking are unaware that there is a possibility of them sharing the leadership role with others and delegating leadership responsibilities seems unlikely. The second suggestion; that the business has succeeded without it so far so the entrepreneur is reluctant to change, appears more credible, as does the last; that existing relationships within the business would need to change which they argue meets resistance. Perhaps a trend identified by both Phelps et al. (2007) and Perren and Grout (2001), that entrepreneurs need to defend their business from failure, better explains the reluctance of some entrepreneurs to distribute, share, or otherwise adopt a CL approach. For many entrepreneurs leading SMEs, failure (of which, according to research carried out

by the European Commission in 2011 there is a 50% chance in the first five years) would be catastrophic, with bankruptcy being a strong possibility (European Commission, 2011). For an entrepreneur to place their trust in others when faced with such pressure is something they're unlikely to do lightly. Kinoti et al. (2017) found that by far the biggest challenge the entrepreneurs in their study encountered was the lack of cooperation from other group members. When faced with challenges like this and considered from the perspective of the entrepreneur, the challenges associated with adopting CL are clear. The emphasis Cope et al. (2011) place on explaining the entrepreneur's reluctance to adopt a collective approach to being down to a lack of leadership experience (Kempster & Cope, 2010) is perhaps only a partial explanation. Considering the practical challenges faced by entrepreneurs it is no wonder that there is a preference for maintaining control, even if sharing the responsibility may improve performance.

### 3.5 The social/discursive construction of leadership

Berger and Luckman (1966) popularised the idea of reality being a social construction, and this became an increasingly popular ontological approach to the study of leadership around the turn of the millennium (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010), with particularly influential articles being written by Grint (2001) and Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a). The ontological approach fits well with the post-heroic study of leadership and its popularity has mirrored that of CL, with a surge in the number of researchers adopting a social constructionist ontology (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010) correlated with the increasing number of publications on CL (see fig. 3.1 above, and also Bolden, 2011), although it should be noted that whilst a constructionist ontological perspective is well suited to CL when viewed as a lens (to adopt Ospina et al.'s (2020) terminology) there are alternative perspectives of CL as discussed in section 3.2).

The social constructionist view that leadership is constructed (or primarily constructed) by language gained particular popularity with the publication of *Discursive Leadership* (Fairhurst, 2007). The following year Tourish and Jackson (2008) encouraged researchers to engage more deeply with the

communication dimensions of leadership and by 2014 Fairhurst and Connaughton commented that there is a growing body of extant literature that shows “communication to be central, defining, and constitutive of leadership” (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014 p.8). This approach was nicely summarised by Fairhurst:

“Discursive scholars represent a constellation of perspectives united by the view that language does not mirror reality, but constitutes it” (Fairhurst, 2009 p. 1608).

Austen (1962) popularised the concept of the performativity of language, that is the idea that language can have an effect depending on the speaker and context. The most commonly quoted example from Austen is the words, ‘I do’ used by the bride and groom in a wedding ceremony. The same words used outside of this context could be relatively insignificant but in the context of a wedding ceremony, when said at a specific time, by the bride and groom, in response to the given questions, the performative effect of the words is of great significance to the actors involved and perhaps to a lesser extent, others who engage with them. As Austen goes on to point out in later lectures, the grammatical nature of the performatives need not be taken literally, in Austen’s own examples, a judge need only say ‘guilty’ to render a verdict, and simply saying ‘done’ might be sufficient to enter into a contract – the seller of a car need not say ‘I accept the offer to buy my car for £10,000’ in order for the word to be performative.

Austen went on to distinguish between types of performatives in language, the *locutionary* – the making of a meaningful utterance, *illocutionary* – an utterance which has force, and *perlocutionary* utterances which have an effect. Gond et al. (2015) explain these distinctions using the phrase ‘there is a bull in the field’. This could be a locutionary act, if it is a fact that there is a bull in the field, it would be a description of the scene and potentially nothing more. It could be intended to caution others which (assuming it had the effect of making others cautious or frightened) would make it an illocutionary act. It could be a perlocutionary act if the utterance causes someone approaching the field not to enter it.

Building on Austin's (1962) work on the performativity of language and also on Mead's (1932) work on the turning points in conversations Simpson et al (2018) defined 'leadership talk' as "talk that is transformative, that changes the trajectories of conversations and that produces new movements in the emergence of practice" (p. 656), for Simpson et al., leadership is not about who is talking, it's about what the result of the talking is. Approaching the study of leadership in the context of Raelin's (2016) Leadership-as-Practice approach, Simpson and colleagues focussed on *discourse* in a top management team and identified five performative effects in the language used to construct leadership, *problematizing* recognises an unsatisfactory present situation, *committing* concretises the present action required, *justifying* normalises the present action as the right or best thing to do in the circumstances, *imagining* considers the future potential and broader possibilities of the present situation, and *recalling* draws on past patterns as a resource to inform present actions (Simpson et al, 2018, p. 651). From these codes they identified 3 phases in the construction of leadership (as they defined it). In the first phase *generating ideas* the actors identified the problems they should be addressing. In the second phase *negotiating a united stance* the leaders reach a consensus on how to address the issue. In the third phase, *moving forward together*, the leaders refine the details of how to implement the change. In approaching the research on leadership this way, Simpson et al. shift the emphasis from *who* is leading or *what* leadership is, to *how* leadership is done and sets the foundation for future work which can bring a consideration of the importance of *Discourse* into our understanding of the construction of leadership as a collective phenomenon (as recommended by Maupin et al, 2020) and also a consideration of power dynamics. Indeed Bourdieu (1991) critiqued many of the scholars building on the work of Austin's performatives for focussing too heavily on the language used. Austin noted the requirements for the actor to have the relevant power, and to be in the correct context, and Bourdieu argued that many scholars neglect this aspect of his work. This critique may partially explain the discrepancies between the findings of studies such as Simpson et al.'s (2018) and the patterns identified by (for example) Carroll and Simpson (2012).

This research will therefore focus on the influence of both context and power dynamics in assessing any identifiable patterns in the language of CL.

Critical scholars adopting the social constructionist ontological position have demonstrated some of the ways in which more negative factors such as racism (e.g. Liu and Baker, 2016), gender inequality (e.g. Calas & Smircich, 1991; Sinclair, 2014), and homophobia (e.g. Walton, 2004) become part of the leadership norms in organisations through the use of language and communication (*Discourse*). For post-structuralists, though, even writing about leadership contributes to its reality (Ford et al., 2008). Gibson-Graham (1996) argued that when scholars depict patriarchal, white, heterosexual males in case studies on leadership, these factors contribute to the reality of what society perceives leaders to be, this they argue may even be the case when the scholars are addressing the issues. Leadership is not necessarily constructed through language in the way that the actors intend, as Ford et al. (2008) point out each individual will view their surroundings, read texts, observe stimuli, etc. in their own way, and therefore each person will view their environment in their own way. It is not just that leadership is constructed by the actors but that the actors are constructed by the leadership as well as any number of other potential influences. No wonder then that so little progress has been made toward understanding how this complex, nuanced, and ambiguous phenomenon is constructed.

We must, as Maupin et al. (2020) argue, consider the effect of *Discourse* on the construction of leadership and yet there is a dearth of literature addressing this. Notable exceptions include Wodak et al.'s (2011) study on building consensus. Wodak et al. noted five strategies for building consensus (or combinations thereof). In the first, *Bonding* the team establishes a group identity. This is achieved largely through the use of 'we' rather than 'I' when expressing group goals etc. but using 'I' when expressing dissent to avoid isolating members of the group. The second strategy, *encouraging* stimulates participation on the given subject (e.g. asking open questions, 'what do you think?' Or leaders remaining quiet to encourage others to speak). A third strategy identified was *Directing* which can be contrasted with the *encouraging* strategy. In this approach the dissenting opinions

were discouraged, dismissed, and/or ridiculed, specifically through the use of interrogation, closed questions, and interruptions. A fourth strategy was *Modulating* in which a sense of urgency may be introduced to encourage consensus (e.g. 'if we don't make a decision soon we will lose our opportunity'). The fifth strategy concludes the consensus building with *Committing* where the consensual understanding becomes a plan of action. Under this strategy the leaders link the commitment of the employee to their organisational, personal, and professional identities, thereby internalising motivation. Whereas modulating is the use of threat to get things moving, commitment is instilling the organisational values in the individual. Wodak et al. (2011) noted differences between leaders adopting authoritarian and egalitarian styles of leadership and identified authoritarian leaders as tending toward a 'directing' strategy and egalitarian leaders opting for an 'encouraging' strategy.

Carroll et al. (2017) carried out a discourse analysis on the transcripts of interviews with board members in an exploratory study aimed at understanding their attitudes toward governance, noting the sometimes paradoxical relationship between caring for the organisation and its members and board governance. They noted four themes from the discourse analysis which they labelled *conformance; deliberation; enterprise; and bounded innovation*. *Conformance* is defined as "the pursuit of conformity, compliance and control" (p. 611) and is made up from the sub-themes (as each of the main themes are) which relate to more specific instances of language under the broader 'conformance' theme. *Deliberation* "denotes care and intentionality" (p.612). *Enterprise* "reflect[s] the ideas of developing new mind-sets and of governance as leadership", essentially the strategic element of the board's role. *Bounded innovation* is the bringing together of the previous three themes and denotes the contradictions and paradoxes that were identified in the research. The authors quote one of their participants as being representative of many directors, under the '*bounded innovation*' theme explaining that governance was "stifling the crap out of innovation" (p.616). Carroll et al. (2017) note that they were unable (due to the reluctance of boards to allow researchers to observe them) to consider how the individual board members attitudes were affected

by bringing them into a collective setting but the themes provide an understanding of the likely paradoxes to be experienced by board members in a variety of settings. Carroll and Levy (2008) noted that managers may respond to challenges by resorting to management over leadership, and Carroll et al. (2017) apply the same thinking to boards in noting that directors opt for conformance over strategy in difficult situations. Carroll et al. (2017) concede that their research is unable to explain why this occurs.

Another notable exception to the dearth of literature on the importance of *Discourse* in the construction of leadership is Connaughton and Daly's (2004) study of the effects of working remotely. In recent years (not least due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic) working remotely has seen a huge surge in popularity, with a study by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) estimating between 33% and 37% of people working in professional services were doing at least some of the time during the period of the study (2019-2020) and with a poll conducted by Statista (2022) reporting that over 87% of respondents considered the ability to work remotely in selecting future employment to at least some degree. Connaughton and Daly (2004) hypothesised that those working remotely would experience feelings of isolation and this would negatively affect their identification with their leader. The hypothesis was not confirmed by the findings suggesting that identification with their leader was not based on physical proximity and that the use of *Discourse* could adequately compensate for physical presence. The quantitative nature of Connaughton and Daly's study offers an interesting generalisation but little on the specifics of how the *Discourses* achieved the result.

Empson and Alvehus (2020), in considering the ways in which a collective leadership configuration was constructed within a professional services firm, noted that individuals gain leadership authority through a process of legitimizing (their position as being commercially successful), negotiating control whilst allowing others a degree of autonomy and manoeuvring between being perceived as having integrity whilst behaving politically. This work on the identity construction of leaders in collective leadership was developed further by Empson et al (2023) who looked at the competing

narratives that socially construct our realities and identities (Rantakari & Vaara, 2017). The competing *Discourses* challenge, contradict, and construct an ever-changing identity. Brown et al. (2021) considered the identity of business school deans as they sought to reconcile their established identities as researchers with their less established roles as leaders and Nyberg and Svenningsson (2014) looked at the conflict between leaders attempting to construct identities as 'authentic leaders' whilst constraining their authentic selves. Empson et al (2023) demonstrate how individuals in a professional services firm balance their identity as leaders with an organisational *Discourse* of collectivity. Clifton (2014) also looked at small and big 'd' discourses in the construction of leadership identities and argued that whilst leadership as a process may occur at all levels in an organisation the degree of influence an individual holds is relative to the identity they construct. Clifton went on to explain that certain job titles will skew the ability to influence toward the more 'powerful' titles such as chairperson or CEO.

“through having most influence in authoring the organisational landscape in the story world, the leader is able to position the organisation and players within the organisation in larger master narratives which account for the process of organising and which, potentially at least, legitimize certain forms of organisational reality and delegitimize others.” (Clifton, 2014, p. 103-4).

However, Clifton is quick to point out that leadership is a process, rather than an entity in the possession of those who have constructed leadership identities. The roles of the actors are not fixed, the ability to influence is not limited to an elite few (even if they have greater ability to do so), as a result 'leadership is inherently unstable, fragmented and dispersed.' (Clifton, 2014, p.112)

There is some evidence to suggest that the ways in which men and women use language is different. A meta-analysis carried out by Leaper and Robnett (2011) found support for the oft-cited conclusion that women use more tentative language (such as hedges, qualifiers/disclaimers, tag questions, etc.) than men but also found that the effect was fairly modest and was more pronounced in studies of



undergraduates and when studies were conducted in research labs. There is also some evidence to suggest that women who use more tentative language in leadership roles are viewed as less likable and influential than women using more assertive language (Bongiorno et al., 2014). Whilst it is not the goal of this research to consider the potential gender differences in the use of language it should be noted as a potential factor of influence and is a suggestion for future research.

Samra-Fredericks (2003) looked at the construction of strategy through discourse analysis and emphasised the importance of considering both small 'd' and big 'D' discourse. The importance of *Discourse* was fundamental to the understanding of the construction of strategy in this study. As Samra-Fredericks put it, "On an everyday level... *Discourses*, as 'ways of reasoning/constituting the social world' are linguistically invoked and 'put to work' by individuals during their efforts to make meaning with others." (Samra-Fredericks, 2003, p. 154 (italics added)). Specifically *Discourses* of 'efficiency' and 'rationality' were identified as being particularly influential in the construction of strategy. More generally the way the actors expressed their identification with the company culture through the use of what Samra-Fredericks termed 'typified categories' that is, language which is used in the organisation typically but which has a specific meaning in the organisation. The use of *discourse* was also prevalent, as with Wodak et al (2011) Samra-Fredericks noted the use of 'I' and 'we' to define groups and boundaries.

Whilst, as Maupin et al (2020) note, there has not been any research that specifically demonstrates the way in which small and big 'd' discourses influence the way in which language constructs leadership in a collective setting, there have been numerous studies which highlight the importance of both types of discourse. Specific examples noted above include the construction of identity (Brown et al., 2021; Clifton, 2014; Empson et al., 2023; Nyberg & Svenningsson, 2014), strategy (Samra-Fredericks, 2003), building consensus (Wodak et al., 2011), working remotely (Connaughton & Daly, 2004) and in developing and constructing collective configurations of leadership (Empson, 2020; Empson & Alvehus, 2020; Empson et al., 2023).

This study seeks to contribute to the gap in the literature by examining *how* specific instances of leadership are collectively constructed through both small and big 'd' discourses and looking at the ways in which the two influence and affect one another, thereby addressing the recommendation of Maupin et al. (2020)

### 3.6 Power dynamics in the field of collective leadership

In adopting the popular view that leadership is a social construction created through the use of language and other forms of communication it is important that the role of power is considered (Humphreys & Rigg, 2020).

Many scholars have commented on the importance of the consideration of power in the study of leadership (e.g. Collinson, 2019; Pfeffer, 2013) and on the absence of such considerations, especially in the field of CL (e.g. Bolden, 2011; Denis et al., 2012; Gronn, 2011, 2015). The same may be said vice versa, with some scholars focusing on power and neglecting the role of leadership (Empson, 2020). Foldy and Ospina (2022) point out that whilst there is merit in the argument that studies of CL have neglected the importance of power, there are many scholars who have contributed significantly to our understanding of power dynamics in CL. The extent to which leadership and power are related makes any attempt at a holistic understanding dependent on consideration of both phenomena. The study of CL is no exception, it requires adequate consideration of power, as Fairhurst et al (2020) argued, "Collective leadership is inescapably embedded within a field of power relationships" (p.605). On a similar note, Empson (2020) suggests that "It is precisely the contestation, negotiation and resolution of power among individuals that renders leadership collective" (p.65).

Fleming and Spicer (2014) considered power as *systemic* (where power is embedded in societally based Discourses and institutions) and/or *episodic* (the direct exercise of power). Whilst the two perspectives may be considered distinct, they are not incompatible and many scholars consider both perspectives within the same article (Foldy and Ospina, 2022). Foldy and Ospina (2022) built on the distinction of Fleming and Spicer (2014) creating a 2X2 matrix specifically relating the consideration

of power in CL. In addition to the episodic and systematic categories of power, Foldy and Ospina (2022) distinguish between the perspective of collective leadership being an *entitative* phenomenon (a separate type (or model) of leadership that can be contrasted with hierarchical leadership, commonly associated with post-positivism) or *emergent* (a perspective commonly associated with interpretivism, in which leadership emerges through interactions and relationships). Whilst it almost goes without saying that the consideration of a phenomenon as complex as CL will never be explained fully by a neat 2X2 matrix (and Foldy and Ospina explicitly concede this point) the simplification of the concept for the purpose of a review of the literature is helpful (see table 3.1). Neither measure is mutually exclusive and indeed many of the articles used to illustrate examples of each cell actually consider both categories of power and/or leadership, but the focus tends to be predominantly on one of the four cells.

	Collective leadership as <i>entitative</i>	Collective leadership as <i>emergent</i>
Power as <i>episodic</i>	<b>Cell 1</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Even in collective leadership individual power matters</li> <li>• Leaders can devolve power to their subordinates by empowering them</li> </ul>	<b>Cell 3</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective leadership can create the collective power necessary for people in marginalized positions to challenge embedded power dynamics</li> </ul>
Power as <i>systemic</i>	<b>Cell 2</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contextual characteristics related to power can influence the possibility and enactment of collective leadership</li> </ul>	<b>Cell 4</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power is intrinsic to the co-construction process.</li> <li>• Attributions affect who can enact collective leadership, how they are viewed and whether they have power.</li> <li>• Collective leadership can create the collective power necessary for people in marginalized positions to challenge embedded power dynamics (same as in the cell above)</li> </ul>

Table 3.1 The 2X2 matrix of categories of power adapted from Foldy and Ospina (2022, p. 7)

Those scholars addressing the relationship between power and CL, Foldy and Ospina (2022) argue, fit into one (or possibly more than one) of the four cells in the 2X2 matrix. In the first cell CL is viewed as a type of leadership, and power is seen as being exercised by individuals who choose to share it

with their subordinates. Scholars adopting this perspective do not see leadership as being shared equally as individuals have varying degrees of power. For example, Currie et al (2011) in looking at DL noted that the DL occurs 'within the boundaries set by other parties' (p. 255). Empson (2020) provides another example in her study of a professional service firm, in her example, those with power asserted a hierarchical leadership configuration, in an otherwise collective configuration (albeit an ambiguous one) when the company faced financial difficulties. The individual's levels of power may come down to factors such as an ability to win clients (Empson & Alvehus, 2020), having tenure (Denis et al., 2001), or being at the centre of particular networks (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006).

In cell 2 the perspective of leadership is again entitative and seen as a type of leadership determined by the actors. Power however is viewed as residing in the characteristics of the organisation, its culture and its norms. The consequent expectations grant more power to some individuals than others, thus power is systemic, not episodic.

Currie and Lockett (2011), for example, noted that the norms in healthcare environments create the power dynamics that determine the extent to which leadership is configured collectively and went on to note that government policies seem to influence the extent to which such organisations distribute leadership.

Cell 3 scholars view collective leadership as emergent, they look at how CL is constructed through interactions and relationships and they tend to look at both episodic and systemic categories of power. A good example of a study coming under this cell is Zoller and Fairhurst's (2007) study of 'resistance leadership' which showed how workers united to refuse to work overtime in spite of management threats (management couldn't fire everyone so the workers exerted their power to get their way). Whilst the focus is on the episodic enactment of power by the workers collectively, there is still a consideration of the systemic nature of power since the workers are directly challenging the norms of the organisation.

Cell 4 focusses on power as a systemic entity, leadership is constructed through shared meaning-making (as is the case in cell 3). Power is considered part of the construction of leadership process and whilst there is a recognition that different people have different degrees of power and therefore varying influence in the construction process (the episodic category of power) the emphasis is on the systemic. Collective leadership can create collective power which enables people in marginalized positions to challenge the embedded power dynamics, as was the case in example from cell 3, the difference being that the focus in this cell is on how systemic power affects this ability.

Gordon's (2010) study of the attempt to distribute leadership in a police force would come under cell 4. The attempt failed due to antecedent power dynamics, essentially the refusal or inability of the actors to separate themselves from 'the way it's always been done'. This was subsequently supported in a review of the metropolitan police by Baroness Casey (2023) which found problems of systemic racism, misogyny, and homophobia to be attributable in part to the unwillingness of the Metropolitan police to receive criticism from external parties and a "we know best attitude" (p.13) which stems from a belief that no-one outside of the organisation could understand its requirements. In a contrasting study by Humphreys and Rigg (2020) leadership was seen to be successfully distributed by the headmaster of two primary schools, at least by the headmaster and the teachers, the researchers viewed the success as an illusion with the teachers buying into the *Discourse* the headmaster had constructed. Holm and Fairhurst (2018) looked at the transcripts of a leadership team. They identified a complex, co-constructed process and argued that leadership is rooted in authority and authority is established through a process of dominance and deference. The interactions between actors over time establish the norms and tacit understandings that determine the degrees of authority and power each individual has in given circumstances. The examples of studies that would fit into cell 4 demonstrate the way in which power is systemic power dynamics are intrinsic to the construction process.

Also within cell 4 Foldy and Ospina (2022) point out that leadership attributions are an important part of the leadership construction process. For example, Rosette et al. (2008) demonstrated that white people are more likely to be seen as meeting the expected norms of a leader and therefore more likely to be granted leadership positions. Fletcher (2004, 2012) argued that relational leadership involves behaviours like developing others which tend to be associated with a lack of power and accordingly those who demonstrate this type of leadership risk losing their authority as a leader and that women are particularly susceptible to this due to the stereotype of women as caretakers. Whether this would be the case in an SME is not clear, the power dynamics shift when the CEO is ultimately the decision maker and is not susceptible to being voted out.

In considering the way in which marginalized people might challenge embedded power relations under cell 4 Foldy and Ospina (2022) cite some of the studies that demonstrate how people in marginalized positions have collectively drawn on systemic power to alter the dominant *Discourses*. Tourish (2019) notes that leaders' identities are in part affected by the degrees of resistance they receive from subordinates, thus the subordinates partially (even if subconsciously) contribute to the construction of leader identities. Other examples cited by Foldy and Ospina (2022) include Ospina et al.'s (2012) research into South American immigrants who altered the *Discourses* surrounding them to define themselves as 'makers of history' and 'co-authors of justice' (p. 273). Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) noted the shift from factory workers in Mexico, from identifying themselves as students to teachers. Lloyd and Carroll (2021) looked at the way in which identities were reframed to re-configure the leadership into a more collective entity.

Foldy and Ospina's (2022) research concludes that power affects collective leadership in six ways. First, power can be enacted by individuals to determine leadership configurations. Power can be transferred, or devolved, to subordinates. Third, power dynamics determine the context in which collective leadership may thrive or be constrained. Power can be collectively utilized by those in marginalized positions (through collective leadership) to challenge the embedded power dynamics.

The fifth way power may influence collective leadership is to construct a leadership hierarchy through shared meaning-making processes. Finally power shapes who can enact collective leadership and whether their leadership attributes strengthen or weaken this position.

Foucault (1994) has been hugely influential in developing our understanding of the systemic category. He argues that power runs so deeply throughout human nature that most of the time we are largely unaware of its impact. For Foucault the cyclical relationship between knowledge and power is fundamental to our understanding of our surroundings, it is at the heart of what we consider to be 'truth'. As Foucault explains, there are points in our history during which we can see changes in the way 'truth' is constructed through the use of power. For example in a series of lectures delivered in 1975 (and translated and published in 1994), Foucault (1994) considers the norms of the past whereby 'truth' (typically guilt or innocence) was established through an appeal to a deity (or deities), whether it be trial by combat, in which the God(s) grant a victory to the individual telling the truth, or some form of test the accused individual is required to perform in order for God(s) to pass judgement. This can be contrasted with the current norm of establishing 'truth' through evidence. For Foucault, truth is simply an effect of power. It is not as simple as saying that those with power dictate how the 'truth' becomes known, it is the construction of knowledge that leads to power and at the same time power that leads to the construction of knowledge. As Foucault put it, 'The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power' (Foucault, 1994, p. xvi). In this way power is irrevocably linked to knowledge and vice versa.

Influenced by Foucault's works, Flyvbjerg (2006) considered the relationship between rationality and power, concluding that rationality is essentially a *Discourse of power*. Power is exercised through rhetoric rather than rationality. What may appear to be rationality being employed to exercise power is more commonly rationalisation. Flyvbjerg cited many examples from his case study of planning, administration and politics in a Danish town to make this point but some of the examples centred on

the decisions on where to locate the bus station. The consultants employed had clearly been influenced by those with power to make the 'correct' recommendation, listing only advantages in the report made available to public of the preferred location and only disadvantages for alternative sites – a very unusual method of achieving an objective appraisal! Despite claims to the contrary, it was clear that the site had been chosen prior to the evaluation to rationalise the decision.

For Flyvbjerg the greater the degree of power the individual, or group hold the less the requirement for reason. Flyvbjerg cited Nietzsche's famous quote from *Twilight of the Idols*, 'Power makes stupid' (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 60) meaning with power a person can force their will, there is no need to use intelligence or persuasion. As Flyvbjerg (2006) put it, 'power defines reality' (p.227) it is not concerned with discovering what reality truly is. Machiavelli is also cited in this regard in *The Prince*, Machiavelli advises the distinction be made between those who can force their will and those who need to resort to persuasion. "In the second case they always come to grief" (Machiavelli, 1984, p. 51-52), of course *always* is an exaggeration, but the principle, according to Flyvbjerg (2006), is sound. Flyvbjerg's (2006) case study is a good example of a scholar considering both of Fleming and Spicer's (2014) categories of power (the 'systematic' and the 'episodic'), it is also an interesting illustration of competing *Discourses* and the influence of power on their success. In summing this up Flyvbjerg cites the old proverb 'truth is the first casualty of war' (p. 141), explaining that once the confrontation between two competing *Discourses* becomes overt, the exercise of power is far more effective than reason. That said it is more common for the competing *Discourses* to co-exist (for example the *Discourses* of environmental concern and economic interests, prevalent in Flyvbjerg's study as they are in most political arenas) and as changes occur over time the *Discourses* lose or gain support, power is gained or lost and corresponding changes occur.

For many scholars, particularly those approaching the study of leadership from a critical standpoint, leadership has been closely associated with domination (Collinson, 2011; Gemmil and Oakley, 1992; Tourish and Pinington, 2002). The focus of critical theorists on aspects of leadership such as



“ideological commitment, supporting domination, legitimating elites and boosting managerial identity” (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012, p. 369) means that many overlook the positive potential of leadership to promote emancipation and autonomy (ibid).

In terms of the power to construct leadership, many scholars focus on the downward flow within a hierarchical configuration. Dennis Tourish’s work which builds on Schein’s (1961) concept of coercive persuasion is a good example (Tourish, 2013; Tourish et al, 2009) of leadership being constructed within organisations from the top down, which has similarities with Kunda’s (1992) work on the construction of culture. Critical scholars tend to focus on this dynamic of power and the understanding of power in this context is perhaps best defined by Lukes in 1974 as “A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests” (quoted in Lukes, 2005, p. 12). This would fit squarely into Fleming and Spicer’s ‘episodic’ category of power and is an important consideration. As Bolden (2011) pointed out, collective (specifically in the case of Bolden’s article, distributed) configurations of leadership may mask the real power dynamics. Bolden argues ‘A focus on the *how* of leadership distribution... is only part of the story. Other important questions include “*why* leadership is distributed *who* controls this distribution and *what* (if anything) is being distributed?’” (p. 259-60, Italics from the original author) Currie et al. (2011) note that distributed leadership occurs “within the boundaries set by other parties” (p. 255) and Empson (2020), notes that those who held the power in a professional services firm changed the configuration from an ambiguous collective one to a hierarchical one when the context demanded it. Power, in Currie et al. (2011) and Empson’s (2020) studies was not truly distributed or shared since those in power tightly controlled the extent to which leadership was collective, and in the case of Empson’s study particularly, could simply withdraw the capacity to lead and make decisions when they saw fit. As Empson concluded, there is a certain irony to the fact ‘that a study of collective leadership has highlighted the extent to which collective leadership ultimately begins and ends with the individual’ (Empson, 2020, p. 83).

Lukes (2005) modified his original definition of power from 1974 conceding that power is not necessarily used to abuse the subservient party, power could equally be exercised to further the interests of a subservient party demonstrating a shift in thinking from power being used as a means of domination to having the potential to do good. Lukes (1974, 2005) identifies three dimensions of power. The first, 'decision-making power', is most easily identifiable in the *discourse* of actors. The power attributed to individuals by virtue of their position on a hierarchy, for example, might be most obvious in observing the orders or instructions they give their subordinates. The second, 'Non-decision making power', is the power to decide what can legitimately be decided upon and what is up for discussion. It is this second dimension that Foucault (1994) focusses on in his discussion (summarised above) of the relationship between truth and power. This may be less identifiable in the *discourse* of actors and require consideration of the relevant *Discourses* as well (this dimension spans the 'episodic' and 'systematic' categories of power identified by Fleming and Spicer (2014)). The third dimension is 'ideological power' which is the power to influence ideals and sits firmly within Fleming and Spicer's (2014) 'systemic' category of power. In Lukes' original consideration of the dimensions of power this was viewed as a process whereby the powerful influence subordinates to want things they otherwise would not (for example, influencing women to support a patriarchal system) but this third dimension is arguably the most complex and certainly need not be exercised from the top down, it could equally be exercised between peers or from the bottom up (see the example from Collinson (1992) below). This form of power resides primarily in the *Discourses* of an organisation (both internal and external).

Collinson (1992) provides an example in which ideological power was exercised from the bottom up (hierarchically speaking, also known as resistance leadership) in a UK truck manufacturer. Collinson found that when a US firm took the company over and tried to instil a sense of trust within the workforce by re-defining the company as a team, the resistance shown by the workers created the opposite effect – the workers' job insecurities created a culture of 'us' and 'them' and the workers focussed solely on treating work as a means of economic compensation. The senior management in

the US has no idea that their attempts to create a 'team culture' were empowering the workers to instil the opposite culture. Hardy and Phillips (2004) identify four available power sources in organisations: formal power, critical resources, networks and social relationships and discursive legitimacy. The focus in resistance leadership is typically on formal power and critical resources (Zoller and Fairhurst, 2007), for example the workers in studies such as Zoller and Fairhurst's (2007) study of resistance leadership used the power they held collectively - management couldn't fire all of them, but as Collinson (1992) showed in his study of a UK truck manufacturer this power may have its roots in discursive legitimacy. The sense of 'them' and 'us' created by the factory workers in Collinson's study, through the creation of an empowering *Discourse* enabled them to collectively resist management pressures. Of course, the ability to construct *Discourse* is not unrestricted. As Zald and Berger (1978) pointed out the *Discourses* are often in line with societal values and norms. Currie and Lockett (2011) noted that the likelihood of distributed leadership models being implemented in healthcare organisations was aligned with wider government policies. As Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) noted, whilst the collective power of the workforce in their research enabled the workers to refuse to do overtime when insufficient notice was given, this was ultimately founded upon a *Discourse* of 'fairness'. Fairhurst (2007) takes this idea further suggesting that not only are leaders influenced by the ideas around them, they are able to channel those emotions to their desired outcome. In citing this argument Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) suggest that Smircich and Morgan's (1982) concept of leadership as the management of meaning, might be extended to 'the management of feeling' (Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007, p. 1350).

Arendt (1970) was an early proponent of a collective lens being applied to power. Arendt argued that it is not the individual that possesses power, power is possessed by the group and whilst the individual may be empowered to exercise it, equally power may be taken away by the group. In Foldy and Ospina's (2022) review of the literature on collective leadership and power, the idea of power being 'episodic' and enabling people in marginalised positions to challenge embedded power dynamics are the defining features of one of the cells. In a practical sense, we might consider

organisations and movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Arab Spring, and Occupy as examples of power being collectively exercised by marginal groups (Ospina et al., 2012; Sutherland et al., 2014).

Fairhurst (2007), amongst others, has argued that in the same way, we can view leadership as a collective phenomenon, we can see power as relational, revealed through the application of specific practices, techniques and procedures. Bolden et al. (2015) noted that centralising power into the hands of a few may have been productive (in terms of economic performance) in the aftermath of the industrial revolution, but in “today’s highly networked, knowledge-intensive environments” (p.4) more collective distributions may be better suited.

Empson and Alvehus (2020) provide support for Bolden et al.’s argument. They argue that professional service firms tend to adopt collective leadership configurations (particularly at the top, what Denis et al (2012) called ‘pooled leadership’) for the very reasons Bolden et al. (2015) suggest. Despite the fact the traditional partnership configurations are declining in professional services as new entrants tend to opt for limited company status, the organisational characteristics of the partnership tend to be adopted (Empson, 2007; Pickering, 2015). Thomas and Hewitt (2011) found that experienced professionals expect (and in some cases require) extensive autonomy to do their jobs optimally, supporting the arguments of Freidson (2001) and whilst regulatory changes may inhibit the power exercised by those employed in professional services the organisations seek to empower their more senior employees (Empson, 2017; Empson, 2020; Empson and Alvehus, 2020; Empson & Langley, 2017). Where authoritative power is held in professional services firms it is ‘collegial and fragile’ (Hinnings et al., 1991 cited in Empson & Alvehus, 2020 p.1236).

Applying French and Raven’s (1959) classic bases of power to the way power is distributed amongst the top management teams in professional services firms Empson and Alvehus (2020) argue that ‘expert’ power carries little weight since all partners have expertise in their field (although it might be assumed from this that ‘expert’ power is a prerequisite to be part of the top management team in the first place), ‘formal’ power is minimal, as Hinnings et al. (1991) argued above. ‘Reward’ and

‘coercion’ are also of minimal influence since partners or senior professionals have little power to reward or discipline one another. ‘Referent’ power though is very much a significant factor (Empson & Langley, 2015). The political nature of large professional services firms means that those who demonstrate the desired standards gain the respect and admiration of their peers (Muhr, 2011).

Studies of leadership in the context of professional services firms have typically fallen well short of the domination decried by critical scholars (e.g. Collinson, 2011; Gemmil & Oakley, 1992; Tourish & Pinington, 2002). It is ‘typically a collective endeavour’ (Empson & Langley, 2015 p. 179) formed through “guiding, nudging and persuading” (Greenwood et al., 1990 p. 748). As Morris et al. (2010) point out, many professional services firms are largely “consensus-based democracies but... are subject to the lobbying scheming and bargaining which occur in any other political arena to achieve agreement” (p. 297). Rather than senior professionals wielding authority in dictatorial roles, they must combine social networking and astuteness with the ability to influence others (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006; Ferris et al., 2007). Empson and Alvehus (2020) found that power in this context is often gained through an ability to win business, similar to the way in which power is gained in some higher education facilities through gaining tenure (Denis et al., 2001).

The discussion above is primarily around the distribution of power amongst the senior leadership teams within professional services firms and it is important to give equal consideration to the critical scholars’ emphasis on the asymmetries of power in organisations. These asymmetries may not be as obvious within the upper ranks of professional services firms but for the majority of employees (who are not partners or senior professionals) they are very much present. However, there is a tendency amongst critical scholars to dichotomise leadership and followership (Collinson 2005, 2019; Empson, 2020) and in doing so neglect the prevalence of leadership and the exercise of power between peers, something which, rather obviously, needs to be avoided in a consideration of power within the context of collective leadership.

As the size of the groups in which power and leadership are distributed grows, so too do the complexities inherent within the relationships. Proponents of co-leadership argue that pooling the expertise of two people could result in better performance, but as Gibeau et al. (2016) and Gibeau et al. (2020) have shown even when power and leadership are distributed between just two people, the complexity can mitigate any potential gain. In one industry (healthcare) Gibeau et al. (2020) found six configurations of co-leadership. In brief, they were: *The dyad of one* - Where one party is dominant, and the other tries to get involved but meets resistance. In the example, the authors give the example of a medical professional asking the administrator for funds and being told to ‘mind her business’. *Professional consulting* – Similar to the first configuration but with the submissive partner having a greater role. In the example, the submissive respondent explains that they contribute when asked to. *Boundary Duo* – Both leaders occupy the shared leadership space more or less equally and collaborate with one another. Work was distributed according to expertise but some issues were jointly addressed in a collaborative manner. Respecting the other’s expertise was mentioned by the respondent. The ‘boundary’ part refers to the distinction between the two roles – one person is an expert on one side, the other on the other. *Management Duo* – The two leaders both emphasise the management side of the role, but the role is shared so as to be complementary to each other’s expertise. *Management Unit* – In this role the leaders view themselves as interchangeable. The managerial role predominant. *Mission Unit* – As above but the emphasis in the role is on the mission rather than the managerial.

Even a quick summation of these six configurations demonstrates the nuances and complexities inherent within CL, and the influence power may have, and this is where the leadership is shared by just two people. It is no wonder that Alexy’s (2020) review of the literature defining CL revealed more definitions than papers considered.

Equally, it is no wonder that a number of studies have revealed the “inherent fragility of collective leadership” (Empson, 2020 p. 66) as emotional labour arises (Denis et al., 2001; Reid & Karambayya,

2009) and confusion, conflict and ambiguity lead to failure (Gibbeau et al., 2015). Whether it is an 'inherent fragility' or the fact that the CL is a dynamic and fluid phenomenon, adapting to varying contexts is uncertain. Sanfuentess et al.'s (2020) study of the Chilean miners trapped underground (considered in more detail above) suggested that the 'confusion, conflict and ambiguity' Gibbeau et al. (2015) considered responsible for the failure of CL in their study, actually resulted in CL for the Chilean miners. It is also possible that in the instances in which CL is considered fragile, it is the fact that CL covers a hidden hierarchical structure (as Empson (2020) discovered in her study). The waters are further muddied, as Empson (2020) and Denis et al. (1996) have shown, ambiguity may intentionally be constructed as a way to avoid conflict within CL configurations and as Fleming and Spicer (2014) argued power may reside within this ambiguity.

Ospina and Foldy's (2022) review specifically comments on the differences between large organisations. Many of the generalisations presented in the paper do not intuitively fit with SMEs. For example, the cited findings from Fletcher (2004, 2012) which suggest that female leaders may lose authority when adopting relational styles of leadership, or from Rosette et al. (2008) which suggested that white people are more likely be appointed to positions of leadership due to perceived norms might be less relevant when the leader of the organisation is not appointed, voted in or otherwise recruited, but where the founder of a company establishes themselves as the leader. In this case we can make little in the way of assumptions based on the extant literature about how leadership styles or attributes might affect their position.

Whilst the role of power in collective leadership in SMEs is generally lacking in the extant literature, in recent years scholars applying conversation analysis to the study of leadership (e.g. Clifton, 2019; Van De Mieroop et al., 2020) have drawn upon the concepts of deontic and epistemic orders developed by conversation analysts in other fields (e.g. Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012, 2014). *Deontic* orders refer to the authority and obligation of the actors to determine the future actions of others

(and themselves). *Epistemic* orders refer to the authority of the actors to display knowledge about the how world is and the rights of others to be accurately informed (Watson, 2021).

Deontic authority can be considered in terms of its urgency, from proximal (most urgent) to distal (requests or demands to fulfil an obligation in the more distant future). It can also be compared in terms of their 'gradient' from steep (a command), to (shallow) a request (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2014). In practical terms, Van De Mieroop et al. (2020) note that Proximal deontic authority is associated with action such as opening, closing and maintaining a conversation. Distal deontic authority is associated with the power to control the orator's own and others' future actions.

Conversation analysis has also enabled researchers to differentiate between status and stance (Clifton, 2019). Whilst *status* refers to an individual's relatively fixed and stable position within an organisation's hierarchy, *stance* refers to the actors' positioning of themselves to one another concerning perceived authority and power. It is therefore quite possible for stance and status to be congruent or incongruent with one another (Heritage, 2012; Van De Mieroop et al., 2020). Richards (2006) has noted that incongruence may encourage resistance, and Van De Mieroop et al. (2020) have noted that a successful assertion of deontic authority can allow for informal leadership (see above), the incongruence here being rare (according to Van De Mieroop et al.'s findings) cases in which the orator's stance surpasses their status and allows them to assert deontic authority successfully.

### 3.7 Organisational culture and its relevance to collective leadership

If, as Smircich and Morgan (1982) argue, leadership is 'the management of meaning', organisational culture is an inseparable part of leadership. Smircich (1985) went on to argue that organisations are essentially systems of meanings that are shared to some extent (varying between organisations), if there is no shared meaning within an organisation there is no organisation. The importance of culture is difficult to understate. Pfeffer (1994) argued that organisational culture has become more relevant as knowledge has become more important. Knowledge is now, often, the competitive



advantage companies rely on (especially so in knowledge-intensive industries such as professional services). Alvesson (2013) also argues that knowledge issues are closely intertwined with organisational culture, or to put it another way knowledge management is closely interlinked with cultural management (Alvesson & Karreman, 2001). With leadership as with so many other aspects of organisational studies “the cultural dimension is central in all aspects of organisational life” (Alvesson, 2013, p. 1).

As with the term ‘leadership’ there is no agreed-upon definition of ‘organisational culture’ (Alvesson, 2013) but as Kunda (1992, p.8) put it “culture is generally viewed as the rules governing cognitive and affective aspects of membership in an organization and the means whereby they are shaped and expressed”. Organisational culture is not a static, constant entity. Like leadership, it is dynamic, emergent, context-dependent and co-created through dialogue (Heijes, 2011).

Culture as a social construction offers the prospect that culture could be constructed to improve performance. For those approaching the study of culture from what Alvesson (2013) terms a ‘technical’ approach, the identification and manipulation of variables could be utilised to improve efficiency and performance. As a case in point, Silicon Valley has demonstrated unparalleled levels of economic performance, despite being a small geographical area, if compared with other countries its economy would rank 19<sup>th</sup> in the world (Chai et al., 2018). The culture in Silicon Valley, at both regional and organisational levels has largely been accredited with the success rates (Mallaby, 2022) and unsurprisingly, the culture of and within Silicon Valley has been studied intensively (Delbecq and Weiss, 2000). Whilst many scholars have tried to unlock the secrets of Silicon Valley culture (e.g. Finkle, 2012; Lécuycer, 2001; Saxenian, 1996) and to replicate them (e.g. Leslie, 2001), attempts to do so appear to have underestimated the complexities in the construction of culture (Wonglimpiyarat, 2005, 2006). As Alvesson (2013) argues, it is important to balance the optimism of this approach with an understanding of the difficulties in managing culture.

Of course, as Alvesson (2013) points out, too much of a focus on culture as a tool to improve performance applies too narrow a focus, accordingly not all approaches to the study of culture adopt the 'technical' approach, Alvesson also identifies the 'practical-hermeneutic' approach in which culture is studied for the attainment of knowledge and understanding rather than for performance benefits and the 'emancipatory' approach favoured by critical scholars which aim to counteract the more oppressive aspects of organisational culture. Whilst the three approaches may at first seem antagonistic, especially the technical and emancipatory approaches, as Spicer et al (2009, 2016) argued they can be complimentary. In section 3.6, Collinson's (1992, 1994) study of a factory is discussed, where the senior managers tried to create a culture amongst the shop-floor workers through which the workers would identify with company values and goals. The result was to have the opposite effect – had the managers attempted to create a more emancipatory culture perhaps the end result would have been closer to their desired goal. As Ouchi and Wilkins (1985) argue, culture is not just “a rational instrument designed by top management to shape the behaviour of the employees in purposive ways” (p. 462)

Similarly, Tourish et al. (2009) looked at Schein's (1961) concept of coercive persuasion in relation to the construction of culture. Coercive persuasion describes the way in which leaders socially construct discursive systems of constraint that are difficult for the followers to resist or challenge. Since an individual's understanding of the world is held true to the extent they can be affirmed by some social group – known as 'reference group affiliation' (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2013, p.3) conformity is encouraged and embraced by employees who find a sense of belonging and reduced ambiguity. Tourish and Vatcha's (2005) study of leadership and corporate culture at Enron reveals a lot of the themes discussed in Tourish et al.'s (2009) article on coercive persuasion. As Spicer et al. (2009, 2016) argued (and indeed as Tourish (2019) concurred), often critical scholars critique areas of management for their oppressive nature and fail to explain that alternative approaches may be better not only for the exploited workers but for the managers and shareholders. The case of coercive persuasion at Enron is an example of this (Tourish & Vatcha, 2005).

It should be noted that it is not always the case that organisations with exploitative cultures are underperforming, many organisations thrive through the use of coercive persuasion and the exploitation of a workforce who are only too willing to conform to the corporate culture and identify with it. Sticking with the professional services theme, given the nature of this study, UK law firms forming what is known as the 'magic circle' (the top 5, London-based, international law firms in the UK) have a reputation for exploiting fee earners with some firms even providing 'sleeping pods' or tiny bedrooms, hidden out of sight in the office buildings to encourage and enable staff to sleep at the office to maximise the time spent at work (Aldridge, 2011).

Like leadership, culture is also a social construct (Alvesson & Empson, 2008; Kunda, 1992) it is also dependent on context (Alvesson, 2013), affected by power (Meindl, 1995; Pfeffer, 1978, 1981) and exists on multiple levels (Collinson, 1992, 1994). This construction of culture was demonstrated in Kunda's (1992) classic *Engineering Culture* in which the construction of culture in a technology firm was observed and documented over a longitudinal study for Kunda's PhD thesis. It was also demonstrated in Alvesson and Empson's (2008) study of 4 UK-based consultancy firms, which looked at the ways the actors constructed the organisation's identity. The two studies approached culture in different ways, for Kunda (1992) the focus was on the ways in which the culture is constructed through language, leadership, power relationships, the layout of the offices, and subtle yet ubiquitous stimuli – the "constant background noise" (p. 88) such as promotional videos being played throughout the offices, press releases and company materials depicting the CEO etc. Whilst Kunda noted that the various *Discourses* observed within the organisation were often competing and contradictory the general theme observed was that the culture was oppressive, he concluded that developing strong corporate cultures are a means to "bind employees' hearts and minds to the corporate interest'" (p.218) referencing Bourdieu's (1977) *symbolic violence* being used as a means to shut down dissent. Whilst Kunda noted that the employee's identity becomes linked to the organisation, the theme of identity was not the focus, whereas this was the case for Alvesson and Empson (2008).

The consultants in Alvesson and Empson's (2008) study were asked to consider the question 'who are we as an organisation?' Whilst there were common themes in how the participants answered the question, the identities of each organisation were quite distinct with consultants drawing on a range of internal and external influences on the organisation, suggesting, as Ford and Harding (2008) argued concerning leadership, that the phenomenon is perceived differently by different individuals.

The way in which leadership relates to culture depends largely on the perspective of the commentator. For Tourish et al. (2009) leaders have a disproportionate role in constructing culture, using techniques such as coercive persuasion to create the culture which best fits their own needs. Kunda's (1992) observations of leadership and culture were very similar. Alvesson (2013) proposes though that we could see the relationship vice versa. In asking what 'leadership' or 'management' means in an organisation we can get an idea of how the culture might be related to leadership. For example, if leadership within an organisation is generally a reference to a decision-maker at the top of the hierarchy, the relationship between leadership and culture may be more likely to be as Tourish et al. (2009) and Kunda (1992) describe it (of leaders constructing culture), on the other hand, if leadership refers to a more collective endeavour rather than a particular individual perhaps the culture is constructing the leadership (or the perception of what 'leadership' means within the organisation). Of course this is to oversimplify an incredibly complex dynamic simply to make the argument that the relationship between culture and leadership is unlikely to be the same in all settings.

Whilst there is a bias in the extant literature toward an assumption of leaders setting, or heavily influencing the culture (e.g. Schein, 2017) of an organisation, there is little empirical evidence to support the assumption (Alvesson, 2013), and as Bolden et al. (2011) pointed out if leaders were in a position to set the culture it could lead to tyrannies, in which the leader would essentially be a dictator imposing their will to ensure their own interests are met. Leaders/managers are often subservient to more senior leaders/managers in larger organisations and even those leaders who are

not directly reporting to a more senior leader (or group of leaders) usually have to take into account the interests of clients, stakeholders, voters, public perception, etc. Smircich (1983) carried out one of the very few in-depth studies into the effect the leader has on the organisation's culture and found the leader's influence to be minimal, similarly, Collinson's (1992, 1994) study of shop floor workers showed that the senior management's attempt to instil their desired culture amongst the workforce had the opposite effect to the one intended. This is not to say that leaders have no influence, Tourish and Pinnington (2002), Tourish and Vatcha (2005) and Kunda (1992) have all demonstrated the influence of leadership on culture (although none of these studies suggest that it is the only influence). The construction of culture is a heavily nuanced phenomenon, there are many factors that need to be considered, and whilst leadership may be one of the factors there appears to be an overestimation as to the extent this applies, perhaps in part due to the popularity of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) a theory of leadership which suggests that charismatic leadership creates a culture in which individuals set aside personal interests and work toward the shared goals of the organisation (Alvesson, 2013; Tourish, 2013). Hartnell and Walumbwa (2011) and Sashkin (2004) are amongst a number of the proponents of transformational leadership who have suggested that charismatic leaders influence their followers, providing direction, vision, inspiration, etc. Steve Jobs (the founder and former CEO of Apple) is a particularly common example of such a charismatic leader (Steinwart & Ziegler, 2014; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Jobs is famously quoted as follows, "it doesn't make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do, we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do" (Jobs, 2011). Of course, this is far from evidence of the degree of influence Jobs had on the culture at Apple, it is meant simply as an anecdotal example of the overemphasis that has been placed on an individual leader's ability to construct culture.

Schein (2017) suggested that it is the founder of an organisation which has the most influence, since in founding the organisation they are essentially founding the culture, even if the imposition of the founder's "beliefs, values, assumptions, and behavioural rules on their subordinates" (p. 146) is done subconsciously. Whilst there may be some merit to Schein's argument it appears to be based on a

few choice examples, rather than generalisable empirical evidence. The same argument cited above from Alvesson (2013) and Bolden (2011) to the influence of individual leaders applies here. In addition, whilst we can easily identify instances where a founder's values have become instilled in company culture it is not so easy to identify instances where a founder has attempted to instil values and failed.

Rather than assuming that culture is created by individuals and looking for evidence of this, if we consider the phenomena of leadership and culture more holistically it becomes clear that whilst leadership does indeed influence culture, culture also influences leadership (Alvesson, 2011). In addition to the influence of leaders, we also need to consider the macro influence (Alvesson, 2013), i.e. societal values, industry norms, etc. For example, the culture of casual dress in Silicon Valley tech firms was not created by Mark Zuckerberg (founder of Facebook) or Reed Hastings (founder of Netflix) even though such founders were famous for their relaxed attitudes toward dress codes. So whilst we might reasonably argue that Mark Zuckerberg's infamous visit to a large venture capital firm in his pyjamas, or that Netflix's famous dress code is cited in the employee handbook as "There is no clothing policy at Netflix, but no-one comes to work naked" (Hastings, 2020, p. xv) encourages a more relaxed dress code at tech companies we can't say that Zuckerberg and Hastings invented casual dress codes, they were simply aspects of macro cultural norms in which these organisations existed.

The trend for researchers to overlook the norms of their own wider culture makes it difficult to study a culture that exists within the researcher's own culture (Leach, 1982). Anthropologists have written more extensively on this than researchers in the field of organisational culture, As Gregory (1983) put it, research on organisational culture often says "more about the culture of the researchers than the researched" (P. 359).

So culture, as with leadership, may be thought of, not the result of a heroic individual, but as a collective endeavour with many contributors (in terms of actors and other influences, within and

external to the organisation) to its ever-changing development over time. It is also, as with leadership, a phenomenon that occurs on multiple levels within an organisation (Alvesson, 2013). Whilst it would be considerably easier to study if culture were a continuous set of beliefs and values running throughout an organisation, the reality is (as is so often the case) more complex. Collinson (1992, 1994) provided an example of this in the factory workers, discussed briefly above, who created a culture for themselves which was separate from that of the organisation more widely. Collinson's example might be considered an example of counter-culture, suggesting that there is still a prevailing cultural norm under which sub-cultures exist. Again this may be too simplistic a view, a post-structuralist argument might be that the organisation's culture is dependent on each individual's perception and this can change with time and context (Bolden et al, 2011). Alvesson (2013) considers the ways in which Hofstede et al.'s (1990) 'perceived practices' (Hofstede argued that an organisation's culture in most instances is dependent on what the organisation does), might apply in an organisation like a hospital in which people do an array of tasks (driving, cleaning, cooking, surgery, x-rays etc.). We might therefore adopt a view of culture as a non-ordered and contradictory phenomenon (Martin, 2002; Martin & Meyerson, 1988) even if this does make it considerably harder to study.

Whilst we must acknowledge that culture is not constructed through language alone (Alvesson, 2004) we know that language plays an important role in the construction of culture, this was perhaps most famously illustrated by Michel Foucault in seminal texts such as *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976). Foucault's work has been influential with reference to it in studies considering the construction of enterprise culture (Du Gay, 1996), cultures of racism (Potter and Whetherell, 1992), and cultures of patriarchy and class dominance (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). The use of language to construct culture has been termed by Alvesson and Karreman (2000) big 'D' discourse (*Discourse*) to distinguish it from small 'd' discourse (*discourse*) which refers to more everyday use of language.

Discourse is also a term used to reflect the use of language to create the identities of individuals within an organisational setting (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Alvesson, 2004, Fairhurst, 2007). Kitchell et al (2000) provide a good example in a study of a branch of the Alcoholics Anonymous organisation. The study revealed that older members (in terms of time spent in the organisation rather than chronological age) of the organisation would correct newer members when they strayed from the collective group identity of non-drinkers. Not only did this use of *Discourse* help to construct the identities of individual members, it contributed to the construction of a culture that values abstaining from drinking alcohol. Bennis and Thomas (2002) looked at the varying *Discourses* between *Geeks*, the under 35s (at the time of the study) who were leaders in the tech industry and *Geezers* “the grandparents of our geeks” (p. 7), 70 and over, who are active leaders in more traditional fields. In considering the cultural differences between the two groups Bennis and Thomas identified differences in the language they used to construct their culture and to define their shared values and identities.

The language used to construct culture is to be found at every level within an organisation and within what may appear to be the most mundane conversations. As Young (1989) argued, “What appears as prosaic detail is actually the development of norms and values whereby events and relationships in the organisation are given meaning. The mundanity of the everyday is an illusion, for it is within these details that the dynamics of organisational culture come into being and use” (p. 201).

In this study Alvesson and Karreman’s (2000) concept of *Discourse* will be used to explore the impact of culture of culture on the discursive construction of CL.

### 3.8 Chapter Summary

The review of the literature identifies a number of gaps relevant to this research. In the first instance, the research seeks to investigate *how* collective leadership comes about, something which several scholars have identified as being lacking in the extant literature (e.g. Fairhurst et al., 2020; Maupin et al., 2020; Van De Mierloop et al., 2020). The research has been designed to address the need for



research on collective leadership to take into account the multi-level, dynamic, and context-specific nature of the phenomenon (Maupin et al., 2020). The research will take place in the commercial sector, something lacking in the extant literature on collective leadership (Sweeney et al., 2019) and specifically in an SME, again an area that has received little attention to date (Cope et al., 2011). By using discursive construction analysis the research can consider both small 'd' and big 'D' discourse and in doing so take account of phenomena often neglected in the field of leadership, power (Bolden, 2011; Denis et al., 2012; Gronn, 2011, 2015) and culture. Furthermore, a longitudinal approach to the exploration of the discursive construction of CL allows for context to be considered (something scholars such as Sweeney et al. (2019) and Edwards and Bolden (2023) have noted is absent from much of the extant literature). The study will consciously address context through the use of reflexive diaries (as detailed in the Methods chapter), it will also address Denis et al's (2012) findings that the literature has given inadequate attention to power and the dynamic nature of collective leadership by specifically considering the concepts of epistemic/deontic orders, status and stance (as outlined in section 3.6).

Despite attempts to consider the ways in which CL and related phenomena are discursively constructed (e.g. Boden, 1994; Butler, 1997; Derrida, 1992; Fairhurst, 2007; Ford et al., 2008; wodak et al., 2011, Simpson et al., 2018) as several scholars have noted, we still have a limited understanding of *how* CL is constructed through language and communication (Fairhurst et al., 2020; Maupin et al., 2020; Simpson et al., 2018). Whilst Van De Mieroop et al. (2020) addressed the research question *How does shared leadership emerge within a hierarchical leadership configuration?* with a focus on how leadership identities are talked into being, there has been no study to date (to the best of my knowledge) addressing the discursive construction of CL which incorporates a longitudinal consideration of big 'D' and small 'd' discourse, taking into account power dynamics and cultural influences within the commercial sector.

In the following chapter the methodological challenges of studying CL as a context-specific, multi-level, and dynamic phenomenon, which should include considerations of power and culture will be addressed in the development of a method suited to this purpose.

## 4. Methods

As Maupin et al. (2020) argued, the traditional methods in the field of leadership studies are not well suited to the study of collective leadership (CL) as a dynamic, multi-level, and context-specific phenomenon. In this chapter, I will outline the development of discursive construction analysis (DCA) a research methodology that has been specifically designed to address the issues I have faced in answering the research question.

Beginning with a brief overview of the current dominant ontological and epistemological positions in the field, I will explain first the philosophy behind the methodology and move on to consider the research question and the requirements of a suitable methodology. I will then consider some of the methods that have been effective in the study of CL (when viewed as a discursive construction) and explain how these methods have underpinned DCA. I consider the research context and reflect on some of the ethical challenges which needed to be overcome before presenting a step-by-step guide to using DCA. In the last section of the chapter, I provide an evaluation of DCA.

### 4.1 Research Philosophy

The study of leadership has moved on from a time when the survey was the only credible method available to researchers to the present when a multitude of methodologies spanning a variety of paradigms has been employed (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012). There are broadly speaking three dominant paradigms in the study of leadership - the positivist, interpretivist, and critical (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). However, categorising the paradigmatic approaches to the study of leadership in this manner oversimplifies the diversity of approaches and leaves the critical paradigm as something of a catchall to include a heterogeneous collection of approaches. It also oversimplifies the enormous overlap, for example, distinct characteristics of epistemologies such as post-modernism and post-structuralism could be included in both interpretivist and critical paradigms depending on the research. A consideration of all the various research philosophies beyond the scope of this chapter

but some consideration behind the reasoning for the ontological and epistemological reasoning behind this research is useful to set the scene for the methodology.

#### 4.1.1 Positivism

A positivist approach to leadership begins with the ontological assumption that leadership is an objective phenomenon that should be studied using scientific enquiry (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Leadership, then, has an independent existence brought about through causal variables, and if we understood all the variables we could predict the outcomes of leadership. The epistemological stance of the positivist researcher is that leadership can be understood through the 'rigorous application of the scientific method' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012, p. 371).

The aim of a positivist approach to the study of leadership is to yield results that create "universalistic and generalisable" results (Sutherland, 2018, p. 265), from research that takes an objective and neutral stance (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Whilst there have been contributions from this paradigm, the positivist approach has done little to further our understanding of the complexities of leadership (Pfeffer, 2015; Grint & Jackson, 2010) and has yielded contradictory and inconclusive results (Yukl, 2011).

Positivist research in leadership generally tends to focus on the leader and pays little attention to the role of the followers in enacting leadership (Tourish 2014, 2013; Fairhurst 2007; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). This approach tends to provide a romanticised view of leadership in which the leader is attributed with having far more control and influence than they actually have (Meindl, 1995; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). The leader is often portrayed as a hero or scapegoat without consideration of the complexity of the environment in which they operate (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010).

The contribution of the positivist approach has been below the expectations of many (e.g. Pfeffer, 2015; Grint & Jackson, 2010) due in part to the contradictory and conflicting findings (Yukl, 2011) and failure to consider context (Ford, 2005). An additional critique of the positivist approach is the

difficulty in drawing conclusions from correlations. Even if researchers adopting the positivist approach are successful in identifying significant trends, it may not be obvious what has caused the effect. Seibert et al (2003) pointed out that in studies of group cohesion it was tempting for researchers to conclude that high levels of cohesion result in improved performance until it was shown that whilst there may be some truth in this, the far greater effect flows in the opposite direction - i.e., high team performance results in greater levels of cohesion (Evans & Dion, 1991).

It seems that attempting to provide a comprehensive explanation of a concept as complex and nuanced as leadership by breaking it down into simple, measurable components has not worked well. Kelly (2014) put it rather nicely in arguing that adopting a positivist approach to the study of leadership is akin to “using a ruler to measure the face of God” (P. 912).

#### 4.1.2 Post-positivism

Whilst one might assume that the shortcomings of the positivist approach to leadership would have caused a dramatic paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962) positivism (including post-positivism) is still the dominant paradigm in the field of leadership studies (Bryman, 2004; Fairhurst, 2007; Klenke, 2008; Stentz et al., 2012; Sutherland, 2018; Yukl, 2011). Whilst Fletcher and Kaufer (2003) argued that the idea of the organisation as a black box to be understood through simple inputs and outputs had pretty much disappeared by the mid-1980s replaced by the idea of the organisation as a “living dynamic system of interconnected relationships and networks of influence” (p. 21), the positivist influence remains in the form of post-positivism. Fletcher and Kaufer (2003) went on to argue that the paradigm shift in organisational studies has been accompanied by a corresponding shift in the way we see leadership. The paradigm shift Fletcher and Kaufer (2003) referred to though appears to be less dramatic than they might have hoped, and might better be described as a graduation to post-positivism (Crotty, 1989). Post-positivist researchers recognise the limitations of positivism including that researchers cannot truly be objective and that probability is a more realistic aim than

indisputable facts (Howell, 2013; Parry et al., 2014) but espouse the need for a scientific, evidence-based approach to the study of leadership.

Even in the field of CL, the increasing popularity of a constructivist ontology and the dominance of qualitative research which accounted for 85% of the research considered by Fairhurst et al (2020) in their review, they still concluded there is a positivist bias (previous chapter), albeit in the form of post-positivism which allows for the use of qualitative methodology.

Whilst positivism and post-positivism can be critiqued it would be unfair to suggest that there has been no contribution whatsoever from the paradigm to our understanding of CL. Indeed, some of the early work of Pearce and Simms (2002) and the theory developed by Pearce and Conger (2003) are largely (although not exclusively) based on post-positivist approaches and are frequently credited with popularising the concept of shared leadership.

Much of the research carried out under the positivist/post-positivist paradigm is not carried out in the commercial sector (Cope et al., 2011; Sweeney et al., 2019), with student samples being common-place (Sweeney et al., 2019; Ben-Hafaiedh & Cooney, 2017). Generalisations are often not appropriate when made from non-commercial settings to commercial (Locke, 2003) and in some cases generalisations are not appropriate from one situation or context to another (Clarke, 2018; Osborn et al, 2002). Very complex phenomena like collective leadership make generalisations from one context to another particularly difficult (Clarke et al, 2018; Maupin et al, 2020).

#### 4.1.3 Interpretivism

Some researchers, such as Alvesson and Svenningsson (2003a, 2003b), have argued that leadership is actually a bundle of unrelated activities and should be viewed as a 'perception' (Calder, 1977) rather than an objectifiable and measurable phenomenon. The positivist approach fails to consider the meaning attributed to leadership by the actors (Kelly, 2008), so the researcher will not consider the fact that the same act may be interpreted by some as leadership and not by others (Alvesson &

Spicer, 2012). This argument is perhaps even more pernicious in critiquing the positivist approach to CL, where leadership or influence can come from all angles, including from actors outside of the organisation (Maupin et al., 2020; Fairhurst et al., 2020). Interpretivist researchers typically reject the positivist approach, or at least consider it an oversimplification (Bell et al., 2019; Crotty, 1998; Fairhurst, 2007). The interpretivist researcher “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67).

For interpretivist researchers, the positivist approach to the study of CL is at best premature (Fairhurst, 2009). Collective leadership is a complex and dynamic process, to attempt to isolate variables and measure them as the process changes and adapts over time, dependent on context is too ambitious. There are simply too many variables to account for. Even in the most hierarchical organisations shared leadership can be found (Shamir & Lapidot, 2003), so to consider collective and vertical models of leadership as separate and distinct forms of leadership which can be compared and measured is problematic at best (Gronn, 2009, 2015; Bolden, 2011, 2015).

Interpretivism is a broad paradigm incorporating symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and more, we may also include post-structuralism and post-modernism depending on the specific research. The overlap between these categories is complex and cannot be explained in detail in this chapter, as such the paradigm will be considered as a whole with reference to specific areas where appropriate.

The ontological assumptions of the interpretivist approach to CL are (generally speaking, although not necessarily) that leadership is a social construct, brought about through the interactions and communications of the actors. The epistemological assumption is that leadership should be studied with a view to understanding the interpretations of leadership from the viewpoint of the actors (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). In this regard, the researcher should avoid any notion of objective truth and distinguish the study of phenomena constructed by humans as distinct from the natural world (Bell et al., 2019).

Of course, social constructionism as an ontological standpoint is neither unique to interpretivist scholars (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010), nor a pre-requisite for taking an interpretivist approach, but in the field of leadership studies it is certainly the dominant ontology amongst interpretivists allowing for the idea that organisations are dynamic, constantly evolving entities to which actors both within and outside may be active contributors (Hosking, 1998; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Tourish, 2013).

For the interpretivist scholar adopting a discursive approach to the study of leadership as a collective phenomenon, the search for generalisable knowledge and firm definitions of leadership are chimerical. The focus is on understanding how language and communication create leadership in a specific context (Fairhurst, 2011a; Kelly, 2008).

There are of course criticisms of the interpretivist approach. Power is often a neglected component of leadership (Bolden 2011; Denis et al., 2012; Empson, 2020; Gronn, 2011, 2015) and interpretivist scholars have not escaped this critique. The dynamics of leadership are usually unequal in some way (Harter et al., 2006) which has left some critical scholars (e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Gemmill and Oakley, 1992; Lipman-Blumen, 2006) to suggest that leadership is less of an agreement between actors and more of an imposition of power by one party onto another (or others). Alvesson and Spicer (2012) argue that Interpretivist scholars usually fail to consider factors such as what makes someone want to be a leader in the first place as opposed to critical theorists who will consider the “strong social and ideological forces” (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 372) influencing their decision. Whilst interpretivist scholars are less inclined to simply study things as they are than positivist scholars, critical theorists tend to go further in questioning how and why the situation has come to be and for whose benefit, and at whose cost.

#### 4.1.4 Critical Approaches

The critical approaches, also known as critical management studies (CMS), or in the field of leadership specifically critical leadership studies (CLS) is a field dedicated to addressing “what is neglected, absent or deficient in mainstream leadership research” (Collinson, 2011: 181). Rather



than accepting the traditional norms of organisational studies, looking for ways to improve company performance, increase profits, and discover models of leadership that will better achieve the company goals, the critical scholar questions why the organisation exists in the way it does, and questions whether the benefits from the increase in performance/profits may be at the expense of others, why is the appointed leader in the position they are and why certain sections of society underrepresented in senior leadership positions (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

Alvesson and Spicer (2012) critique the interpretivist approaches arguing that researchers do not typically consider the societal reasons that one individual is a leader and another a follower, this is typically just accepted. As critical theorists, it is perhaps unsurprising that Alvesson and Spicer (2012) draw their critiques of the interpretivist approach from the point at which critical theorists pick up, never the less, the critiques are no less valid and have been given particular consideration in this research. Whilst the positivist researcher can tell us that the FTSE 100 has just 6 female CEOs, (Hampton Alexander Review, 2019, correct as of November 2019) it has been the critical scholars such as Calas and Smircich (1991, 1999, 2006), Ford (2005), Sinclair (1998, 2013, 2014), Smirich (1983) and Smircich and Morgan (1982) to name just a few, that have revealed insights into *why* this may be the case. It is from this viewpoint that supporters of the critical approach such as Klenke (2008) assert that critical scholars “tell us more about our social worlds than decades of positivist research has ever done” p. 34).

In oversimplifying the different paradigms in the field it is necessary to note, as mentioned above, that critical approaches to leadership are diverse and a full review of the field is beyond the scope of this chapter. The term critical management studies can be subdivided in various ways. Fairhurst and Grant (2010) argue that critical management studies comprise post-modern, post-structuralist, and critical theory, Cunliffe (2009) divides the field in to post-structuralist; Marxist/neo-Marxist; and Post-colonialist. Calas and Smircich (1999) identify feminist poststructuralist theorizing, postcolonial analyses, actor-network theory, and narrative approaches to knowledge (or critical hermeneutics as

the authors later referred to it, Calas and Smircich (2006)) as distinct areas relating to Post-modernist research.

For the purposes of this chapter, the critical approaches will be summarised and evaluated as a single paradigm unless otherwise stated. In simplifying the field in this way it should be noted there is significant overlap not only within the sub-divisions of critical approaches but between the primary paradigms too (e.g. Ashcraft, 2004). Due to the diversity within the paradigm, inevitably not all of the discussion in this section will necessarily apply to all critical scholars.

In terms of methods, critical scholars typically adopt the same methods as interpretivist researchers (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012) but they go further than interpretivist researchers in questioning the element of power and domination in leadership and question how this relates to society more widely (Collinson, 2011). There is also typically an increased degree of reflexivity in the critical approach, particularly in the post-modern approach (Calas & Smircich, 1999; Collinson, 2011) for example, in Calas and Smircich's (1991) analysis of popular management texts adopting a critical hermeneutical approach, the authors overtly state their own biases in interpreting the texts. Similarly, in Liu and Baker's (2016) assessment of racism within leadership, the authors state their own ethnic backgrounds and give the reader some indication of their personal backgrounds in order to put their research in context. The idea of an objective researcher is rejected entirely under this paradigm, simply choosing what to study is an expression of the researcher's bias. The idea of any single truth is also typically rejected (particularly for post-modernist and post-structuralist researchers). As Smircich (1983) explained, we should see "culture as a metaphor" (p. 347), an organisation's culture is interpreted by those within the organisation and those without, each person's perspective being different from the next and changing all the time.

Unlike the critique of the interpretivist approach, for critical scholars power is a primary concern. Naidoo et al. (2014) have looked at the ways in which senior managers have forced employees to become representatives of the organisation's brand from a Bourdieusian perspective. Schien et al.

(1961) and more recently Tourish et al. (2009) have looked at how power may be manifested through coercive persuasion, and Flyvbjerg (1991) identified ten propositions that can be applied to the study of an organisation to better understand the influence of power on the construction of leadership. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) have highlighted the importance of power in the construction of Discourses, and this can be seen in a practical setting in Kunda's (2009) investigation into the creation of culture in a technology firm.

Critical theorists do not necessarily reject leadership entirely. Alvesson and Spicer (2012) distinguish between leadership – “influencing the thinking, values and emotions of followers’ and management ‘working directly with instructions, structures or results as means of influence” (p. 368) and acknowledge that both may be necessary for the function of organisations as some form of authority is generally required. Indeed, to promote values supported by many of the critical theorists such as autonomy and emancipation, appropriate leadership may be an important factor (Levay, 2010; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007).

The rejection of leadership with no suggestion of a better alternative is a particularly prevalent issue when critical scholars write with other critical scholars as their intended audience (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). To quote from an exchange of letters between Dennis Tourish and Kevin Barge: “I recall a colleague discussing a seminar presented by a leading CMS scholar. When asked ‘yes, but what is your alternative,’ the speaker paused for a moment and then replied, ‘Well, there is no alternative.’” (Tourish and Barge, 2010, p. 336). Whilst there is a valid argument that CMS seeks to deconstruct a socially constructed reality and in exposing the reality of the organisation scholars make a contribution to our understanding of leadership and organisational studies more generally (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Fournier & Grey, 2000), the critique that some critical scholars fail to make suggestions for improvement is pernicious, as Grint and Jackson (2010) put it “providing a critique without an alternative is not a position of moral supremacy but moral illiteracy.” (P. 349)

An additional criticism of the critical approach which applies equally to interpretivist scholars is the preponderance of scholars adopting a social constructionist ontology to use overly complex language to explain an already complex theory (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Grey & Sinclair, 2006; Tourish, 2019; Tourish & Barge, 2010). In an exchange of letters between Dennis Tourish and Kevin Barge the latter expresses his concern over one such article, in refreshingly simple terminology: “Do we have to write like this? Are we really trying to explain something? Or, like the Wizard of Oz, are we spinning our wheels to disguise the absence of genuinely purposeful activity?” (Tourish & Barge, 2010, p. 337). Grey and Sinclair (2006) similarly take exception to, “pompous, impenetrable writing; writing that seems driven by desires to demonstrate one’s cleverness, or to accrue publications as ends in themselves” (Grey & Sinclair, 2006, p. 443). Some critical scholars have proposed solutions to this critique, for example, Spicer et al. (2009, 2016) suggested ‘critical performativity’ as a method by which critical theorists can use their critique to formulate suggested improvements and Dennis Tourish has been quite vocal, particularly in later works on the importance of offering a better solution (e.g. Tourish, 2013, 2019).

#### 4.1.5 The epistemological and ontological positioning of this research

In considering the different paradigms operating in leadership studies it should be noted that no one paradigmatic framework is capable of allowing us to understand everything there is to know about leadership (Fairhurst, 2007; Deetz, 1996). Highlighting the weaknesses of a given paradigm is not an attempt to discredit it or to call for it to be discarded. As Braidotti (2013) writes ‘the 1990’s theory wars and the polemic fighting’ (p. 176) can hopefully be left in the past. Jeffrey Pfeffer’s (1993) call for a single, dominant paradigm to be accepted into organisational studies to reduce the barriers to the enhancement of knowledge has not been actioned which appears to be for the good of the field. Chrobot-Mason (2007) perhaps best sums up the current position on leadership research:

“leadership is a highly complex and dynamic phenomenon, involving many actors and variables. A variety of disciplines have taken an interest in studying leadership from multiple

perspectives and lenses which has certainly contributed greatly to our understanding of leadership... I predict that the study of leadership will grow and mature much faster and more completely if disciplines can begin to speak to and collaborate with one another". (p. 182).

A similar point was made by Ciulla in *The Quest for a General Theory of Leadership*:

"It takes more than one scholar, discipline, or theoretical approach to understand leadership. The study of leadership forces us to tackle the universal questions about human nature and destiny. For those questions, there will probably never be a general theory." (Ciulla, 2006, p. 233)

A number of authors have commented on the apparent paradox that despite leadership being one of the most researched phenomena we still know relatively little about it (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Barker, 1997; Clifton, 2012). Calls for researchers to adopt more qualitative methods gained popularity in the 1990's (e.g., Alvesson, 1996; Conger, 1998; Knights & Willmott, 1992). The idea of leadership being a discursive construction gained popularity with the publication of Gail Fairhurst's (2007) *Discursive Leadership*, and attracted the encouragement of scholars keen to see a greater focus on this approach (e.g. Tourish & Jackson, 2008), a trend that has continued in more recent publications (e.g. Maupin et al., 2020). Spicer et al.'s (2009, 2016) concept of 'critical performativity' and Tourish's (2019) book *Management Studies in Crisis* both emphasize the importance of scholars adopting new ways to conduct research with a focus on having practical applicability.

The reluctance of many leadership scholars to adopt alternative ontological and epistemological positions seems to be largely due to the culture within the fields of management and organisational studies more generally. Many scholars seem more interested in the "fashioning of academic careers and institutional prestige" (Alvesson et al., 2017, p.5) than producing meaningful research. As Dennis Tourish (2019) points out the idea of measuring and ranking academics, heavily influenced by Kaplan and Norton's (1992) balanced scorecard, and other similar initiatives, has led to scholars producing

research based on what will get published in the 'right' journals, leading to a 'triumph of nonsense' (Tourish, 2019, p. 133). Instead of academics being driven to further knowledge and provide practical solutions to the field in which they operate, they are, from the moment they commence their Ph.D. motivated to aim for the same types of research as each other (Tourish, 2019), creating what Walker et al (2019) termed a 'research monoculture'.

With positivism/post-positivism holding its standing as the dominant paradigm, much of the research in leadership adopts this ontological and epistemological approach. However, the irony of a paradigm that seeks to minimize or even eliminate bias yet tends to use what Henrich et al. (2010a, 2010b) termed WEIRD (western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic) participants, frequently students (Sweeney et al, 2019; Ben-Hafaiedh and Cooney, 2017) to investigate phenomena in which the participants have little to no experience and then to make generalisations to wider populations, seems to be set aside by those scholars adopting this approach. It is clear from the extant literature that context plays a significant part in phenomena such as leadership (see literature review), as Osborn et al. (2002) put it, "leadership and its effectiveness, in a large part, are dependent upon the context. Change the context and leadership changes" (p. 797). Generalisations should not as a matter of course, therefore, be made from one context to another. The transferability of findings from, for example, non-commercial to commercial settings is limited (Lock, 2003; Sweeney et al, 2019) and should only be made when the researcher has reasonable reason to believe such a generalisation is valid.

In conducting this research I aim to explore the discursive construction of CL in a specific setting, not to make generalisations, nor to establish an overarching theory, but far more modestly to develop our understanding of CL as it occurs in a specific, naturally occurring context. A commercial SME has been chosen for a number of reasons and is explained further in the section 4.3 of this chapter. Primarily an SME was chosen because my background is entrepreneurial, as such SMEs are an environment in which I have some familiarity and understanding. Partially because there is a dearth

of research in this sector (Sweeney et al, 2019) and yet they account for 99.9% of businesses in the UK (Federation of Small Businesses, 2023) and partially because, through my wife, the CEO of an SME, I have access to recordings of instances of leadership rarely afforded to researchers (Carroll et al., 2017; Samra-Fredericks, 2003).

The fact that this research is carried out in an organisation owned and run by my spouse creates a number of ethical quandaries which are discussed section 4.3.2. of this chapter, but also elicits concerns of bias. For some the term 'bias' in the field of organisation studies is often a term used to describe a perspective that does not align with that of the writer. Those approaching the study of leadership from a positivist/post-positivist standpoint frequently reject interpretivist and critical methodologies on the basis that they are subjective and prone to bias. One could surely argue that this is in itself an expression of bias, a bias toward an objective ontology. Anthropologists such as Gillian Tett (2021) and Philip Bourgois (2003) have commented on the fallacy that approaching research with objectivist ontology yields more accurate data. As Bourgois put it, "in order to collect 'accurate data', ethnographers violate the canons of positivist research; we become intimately involved with the people we study". (Bourgois, 2003, p. 13). This is not to discount bias as a relevant factor, in this research, at least as much as any other, the perspective of the researcher must be considered and this forms an important part of the methodology discussed below.

For the purpose of this research, a conscious decision has been taken not to specifically align with a given paradigm but to focus on answering the research question as well as possible (an approach advocated by Fairhurst and Putnam, 2019). The research sits somewhere between the interpretivist and critical paradigms. My aim in analysing the naturally occurring instances of leadership is to interpret the perspectives of participants, whilst taking into account the influence of power and culture (deficient in the study of leadership generally). I adopt a subjective, constructivist ontology, specifically discursive constructionism (Clifton, 2012) which is described by Mumby and Clair (1997) as follows:

“Organizations exist only in so far as their members create them through discourse. This is not to claim that organisations are ‘nothing but’ discourse, but rather that discourse is the principle means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are.” (p. 181).

Gergen et al. (2004) add that “Organizational worlds are created and sustained through discourse... it is through relational process that discourse acquires its significance.” (p. 39).

As both of the above quotes make clear, the construction of the organisation is not the work of a lone individual but a collective endeavour, achieved through relational processes. Leadership may also be viewed in this way, as a process (Crevani et al., 2010) or a practice (Raelin 2016). In this sense leadership is viewed as a collective process, rather than CL being viewed as a specific type of leadership (Ospina et al., 2020).

My ontological argument is based on the premise that leadership is a social construction (Crevani et al., 2010; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Grint, 2005; Kelly, 2014) created primarily through discourse (Fairhurst, 2007, 2011; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Leadership is a complex phenomenon that involves multiple actors (Bolden, 2011; Chrobot-Mason, 2007; Gronn, 2002), operating across multiple levels within an organisation (Sweeney et al., 2019; Yammarino & Danserau, 2008) and is context-specific (Chreim, 2015, Empson, 2020; Sanfuentess et al., 2020). In considering the construction of collective leadership it is important to take all of these factors into consideration (Maupin et al., 2020) and to design a research method capable of doing so.

Viewing leadership, as a *‘moment by moment construction of direction’* (Crevani et al., 2010, P. 81), through a “never ending cycle” (Kelly, 2014, p. 909) makes it difficult to study. Researchers tend to seek out an empirical object (be it the leader, follower, organisation, or something else) to study (Chia, 1995), a fallacy Kelly (2014) terms “misplaced concreteness” (P. 909). Wood and Ladkin (2007) have argued that rather than trying to reduce leadership to its component parts we should study the



practice of leadership in situ and include an awareness of the significance of the place (or environment), historical antecedents, political, emotional, aesthetic factors, and even inanimate objects. In taking this into account this research seeks to embrace the complexity of leadership and to study the phenomenon of leadership as it is practiced and as it is interrelated to factors such as culture and power. Leadership is considered a collective phenomenon as opposed CL being a reference to a specific type or model of leadership (Ospina et al., 2020)

#### 4.2 The Research Question, aims, and the requirements of a suitable methodology

The following section explains the aims of the research and explains the significant challenges I faced in achieving these aims. I discuss some of the data collection methods and analysis techniques that have been used in similar research and explain how the limitations of each led me to develop a methodology specifically for this research project. The specific details of how the research was carried out are covered in the methodology section below.

The research has been designed, primarily, to address the gap in the extant literature, that there is a dearth of research on *how* leadership is collectively and linguistically constructed (Fairhurst et al., 2020; Maupin et al., 2020; Simpson et al., 2018), especially as a collective phenomenon. The aim is, therefore, to explore the interplay of naturally occurring language in an organisation with a view to contributing to our understanding of how language is used to construct leadership in a collective setting. This led to the following research question.

**‘How is organisational leadership collectively and discursively constructed in a small law firm?’**

The aim of this research is not simply to add to the extant research on theoretical debate, nor to simply critique the extant theory (although these points do form part of the contribution). Having experienced life in organisations at junior, mid, and top levels I have empathy for those operating at all levels within organisations and the challenges they face. I hope that in addition to the theoretical

contributions made, the research will be of practical benefit to all members of the organisation being studied.

The research is a single, embedded, idiographic, and longitudinal case study, with no aim or intention to make generalisations. It is primarily an exploratory study, although aspects of the descriptive and explanatory are included. It is primarily inductive, although due to the extensive consideration of the extant literature prior to commencing the research, there are elements that might be considered deductive. So up to this point, it is well aligned with the interpretivist paradigm. That said power, culture, identity constructions, and the contested nature of hierarchical relationships are primary considerations of this research, as they would be for critical leadership scholars (Collinson, 2018). The consideration of small 'd' discourse as a technique for constructing leadership would be associated with post-positivism, whereas the consideration of big 'D' discourse would be more commonly associated with the critical scholars (Fairhurst, 2007), particularly post-structuralists. The emphasis on reflexivity is typically associated with post-modernism (Crotty, 1989). As such it can fairly be stated, as was concluded in the previous section, that the research does not neatly fit into any specific paradigm.

#### 4.2.1 The approaches that underpin the analysis

To conduct research on leadership as a collective phenomenon presents a number of challenges. CL is a complex phenomenon involving multiple actors (Bolden, 2011; Chrobot-Mason, 2007; Gronn, 2002), operating across multiple levels within an organisation (Sweeney et al., 2019; Yammarino & Danserau, 2008) and changing with context (Chreim, 2015, Empson, 2020; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Sanfuentess et al., 2020). An appropriate method must take into account all of these factors (Maupin et al., 2020) and arguably more. Clarke et al. (2018) argue that to consider context is insufficient. Context, by definition, Clarke et al. (2018) argue, is the consideration of factors around but excluding the phenomenon being investigated, they advocate consideration of the *situation* which includes a consideration of the effect the phenomenon has on itself. Clarke et al. (2018) apply the term 'co-

constitutiveness' and define it as a term to explain that "entities in relation to one another are constitutive of each other" (p. 17). Consider the aforementioned studies of Empson (2020) and Sanfuentess et al. (2020). The former considered the context of the development of the financial crisis of 2008 on the leadership configuration of a professional services firm. In this study, the configuration changed from a collective leadership structure to a hierarchical one, with an elite group emerging from within the collective. Sanfuentess et al. (2020) investigated the change in the leadership configuration of a group of Chilen miners trapped underground in 2010. In this case, the configuration changed from hierarchical to collective. Importantly though, the latter study considered the leadership itself, noting that the hierarchical leader of the group of miners was unable to deal with the psychological impact of being trapped, differentiating it Sanfuentess et al.'s study from Empson's on the consideration of context versus situation respectively.

#### 4.2.2 Organisational Discourse Analysis

Organisational discourse analysis (ODA) has been advocated as a method well suited to the study of CL, particularly by scholars viewing leadership as a discursive construction (e.g. Clifton, 2012, 2019; Fairhurst, 2007). ODA is a collection of methods covering sociolinguistics; conversation analysis; cognitive linguistics; pragmatics; semiotics; rhetorical and literary studies; critical discourse analysis, and post-modern studies (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001) and as Potter and Whetherell (1987) quipped, "it is perfectly possible to have two books on discourse analysis with no overlap in content at all" (p. 6) such is the variation between specific techniques. Whilst organisational discourse analysis has been applied by researchers from a range of ontological and epistemological backgrounds (Grant et al., 2004) it is particularly popular and well-suited to those adopting social constructionist ontologies (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004).

Maupin et al (2020) have advocated ODA as a method capable of taking into account the context-specific, multiple-level, and dynamic (assuming the researcher adopts a longitudinal approach) challenges of studying CL, Fairhurst and Putnam (2019) point out that ODA has its limitations

concerning the study of big 'D' Discourse. Researchers who adopt the perspective of the organisation as an 'already formed object' (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2015) and focus on the discourse occurring within the 'object' which is common amongst those adopting a positivist approach (Grant et al., 2004) tend to miss the importance of big 'D' Discourses which may be furthering a group or individual's interests (Mumby & Clair, 1997; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001).

As Fairhurst et al. (2020) has pointed out in the relationship between *discourse* and *Discourse* in CL is a particularly important. As mentioned briefly in the literature review Alvesson and Karreman (2000) distinguished between the everyday use of language, *discourse*, and the cultural, historically constructed expressions of norms, values and power they termed as big 'D' Discourse. Whilst the study of *discourse* has been the primary focus of positivist scholars who have considered discourse in the context of leadership (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Grant et al., 2004) and the consideration of *Discourse* more associated with interpretivist, post-structuralist, post-modernist, and critical scholars (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004) there has been little consideration of how the two relate to one another in the construction of leadership as a collective phenomenon (Fairhurst et al., 2020).

*Discourses*, created through "constellations of talk, ideas, logics and assumptions" (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p.8) give order to our environment and standardise power relationships (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Foucault, 1976, 1980). It is the language used to construct culture, identity and leadership (Alvesson, 2004) and to regulate what can be said and who can say what (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004). It is an important consideration in exploring the construction of leadership as a collective phenomenon. Whilst the concept of *Discourse* is relatively new to the field of organisation studies, we can see consideration of the concept (albeit under different names) much further back. The term *Discourse* is largely based on the concept of Foucauldian discourse. Foucault described the term as sets of text which "systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972, p. 149). Foucault, however did not invent the concept, as he said in an interview in 1978 that he had developed the idea from his readings of Nietzsche (Foucault, 2002). We can see a similar concept in

Gramsci's concept of Hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) a term based on the Greek word *hēgemonia* (derived from the Greek 'to lead').

Discourse has not received the attention it merits in the study of CL (Maupin et al., 2020). Neil Sutherland et al.'s (2014) ethnographic study of an anarchist organisation is a notable exception and as the author reflected in a later paper, it is through the underlying *Discourses* that meaning is often managed (Sutherland, 2018). For Sutherland et al. (2014) the *Discourse* of anti-authoritarianism was of paramount importance in the management of meaning for the participants. For Fairhurst and Coreen (2004) the *Discourse* apparent in terminology used by a police officer in distress was of particular importance and for Wodak et al. (2011) the *Discourse* of 'bonding' was an important part of remote working, with the authors highlighting the importance of the use of the terms 'I' and 'we'. Kitchell et al. (2000) also picked up on the importance of these terms in noting that older members of an Alcoholics Anonymous group used the *Discourse* of 'non-drinkers' to form the group identity and were quick to correct younger members if they deviated from it. The use of *Discourse* to create identities within the organisation is of particular importance in the study of the construction of collective leadership as Empson et al. (2023) demonstrated.

Clifton (2014) explains the importance of *Discourse* with reference to Gramsci (1971) who revived (and in part redefined, when compared to the way in which Marxists such as Lenin had used the term) the notion of hegemony (derived from the Greek term *hegemonia* which means 'dominance over') to describe the way in which the dominant group projects their own perspectives onto the dominated and the dominated group come to accept this perspective as reality. Of course, Gramsci's use of the term 'hegemony' is itself an example of big 'D' *Discourse* being employed, in this case to construct a neo-Marxist cultural reality. The frequency with which examples of *Discourse* are given as an exploitative tool perhaps reflects the fact that the study of *Discourse* is particularly prevalent amongst post-modernists and critical scholars (Fairhurst, 2007), whilst it is certainly possible for

Discourses to be used in this way it is important to note that the *Discourses* cover a far wider range of expressed values and norms.

Examples of *Discourse* are all around us whether we are aware of them or not. They are ubiquitous and yet at the same time often elusive, paradoxical, and contradictory (Laine & Vaara, 2007; Maupin et al., 2020). Fairhurst and Coreen (2004) use the example of the *Discourse* apparent in a distress call placed when a police officer was shot by an assailant. In reviewing the transcript the researchers were able to identify the technical language used by the officers and support staff involved to ensure a level of professionalism and avoid panic. More contemporary, and high-profile examples of *Discourse* being used could be seen during the build-up to and aftermath of the Brexit referendum, for example, the term 're-moaners' was used as a derogatory term for those who had wanted the UK to remain in the EU with obvious implications. More recently still, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the former president of the United States (along with many of his supporting staff) referred to the virus as 'the Chinese virus'. Perhaps the most relevant example though is the term 'leadership' itself.

Ford and Harding (2003, 2004) looked at the ways in which the NHS had evolved over a relatively short period of time from referring to senior managers as 'administrators', then 'managers' then 'leaders' with the terms being more than just labels for jobs, but as Grey (1999) observed the change from 'managers' to 'leaders' was not simply an innocent use of a synonym, it was used to create an effect. The conservative government of the 1980's brought in 'managers' to replace senior administrators who were running the NHS as a measure to reduce costs. The labour government at the turn of the millennium had what Newman (2000) termed a *Discourse* of 'modernisation' (p. 45), using the term 'leadership' repeatedly in an effort to solve the issue of costs in NHS. The term 'leadership' has been presented as the solution to all manner of problems (Ford et al., 2008).

The term *Discourse*, is however slightly ambiguous (Mumby, 2011), being used by different scholars to mean different things. In an effort to reduce ambiguity in this regard I use the term *Discourse* as an umbrella term to describe language which constructs culture, norms, and values. Under the

umbrella of ‘Discourse’ the term ‘organisation-specific discourse’ will refer to terms or phrases used by members of the organisation to construct the culture, norms, and values of the organisation but which would not have the same meaning (or be used at all) outside of the organisation. Similarly, I use the term ‘industry-specific discourse’ to refer to the language commonly used within the legal profession generally which is specific (or has specific meaning within) the industry. More generally I use the term ‘cultural discourse<sup>2</sup>’ to instances of language use which fall under the category of Discourse, but are not specific to a particular group. By way of further explanation consider the following use of language by former president Donald Trump;

“China’s pattern of misconduct is well known. For decades, they have ripped off the United States like no one has ever done before.”<sup>3</sup> (Trump, 2020)

This would be an example of cultural discourse. The terminology is not specific to the Trump administration, it is everyday language used to create the culture desired by the orator. This can be contrasted with the name Trump gave to the Coronavirus, ‘the Chinese virus’. This term is an organisation-specific discourse, the typically used term to describe the virus was (and is) COVID-19 or the coronavirus. The term ‘the Chinese virus’ was specific to the Trump administration (and obviously spread from there). Similarly, the aforementioned study by Fairhurst and Coreen (2004) refers to the organisation-specific elements of Discourse in reviewing a transcript from a police distress call, terms such as “Copy 1627 Central” and “Car 15 responding” are further examples of organisation-specific discourse. Within the legal profession, some words and phrases are used which either would not be used in the same way or which might mean different things outside of the industry. A ‘trainee’ for example, refers to someone who has completed the academic requirements to be a solicitor and is now in their first two years on the job, after which they will become an ‘NQ’ (newly qualified

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘*cultural Discourse*’ (italics original) was used by Gail Fairhurst (2011, p. 33) in her book *The Power of Framing* as an umbrella term to cover what is more commonly referred to as big ‘D’ Discourse. The term ‘cultural discourse’ in this paper has a more specific meaning.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from a speech delivered by Donald Trump in the Rose Garden on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

solicitor), from there each year of experience will be termed 'PQE' (post qualification experience). So a job advert for a "Solicitor with 5 years PQE" would be aimed at Solicitors who qualified at least five years ago. These terms are examples of Industry-specific discourse.

#### 4.2.3 Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis was developed by researchers such as Harvey Sacks, Gail Jefferson and Emmanuel Schegloff in California in the 1960s (Clifton, 2019). These researchers, influenced by the ethnomethodological approach of Harold Garfinkel, were concerned with observing the phenomena they studied as it emerged but differed from the ethnomethodologist in the focus on the use of verbal and non-verbal communication to construct social realities. As Clifton (2012) put it, "meaning is not 'out there' in some pre-discursive fashion but has to be managed as people talk it." (p. 151).

Conversation analysis, therefore, is not simply a study of the language being used but looks for the meaning behind the language (and non-verbal communications). Clifton (2019) gives the example of a participant saying, 'I don't know' to make this point. A researcher using conversation analysis will not simply record that the participant doesn't know, but would record that the person denies having the relevant knowledge. Researchers tend to use a simplified version of the Jeffersonian transcription system (Jefferson, 2004) which allows for pauses, interruptions, specific types of inhalation and exhalations and more to be recorded (see Appendix B for a guide to the symbols used).

There is no presumption in conversation analysis that one individual possesses greater or lesser power or has greater relational control than another (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2004), the researcher aims to identify the power imbalances through an analysis of discourse as it happens in its natural environment. Similarly, conversation analysis is not concerned with the frequency of occurrences, this has the potential to obscure the researcher's understanding of the context of each occurrence (Peräkylä, 2011). As with thematic analysis, it is the relevance of the themes, not their frequency which matters (Braun & Clarke, 2006).



In order to better understand the method of conversation analysis Fairhurst and Cooren (2004) explain the process as a cluster of five distinct areas. *Conversational openings and closings* – the openings and closings of specific interaction, in this research the specific interactions were primarily the openings and closings of instances of leadership. *Turn-taking* which can be a manifestation of power expressed through interruptions, and length of time talking which may also be used to influence through a number of tactics, specifically Neu (1988) identified speech rate, hesitations, volume and interruptions as examples of this. *Adjacency Pairs* refer to the predictable patterns of speech such as a question being followed by an answer, or a request being followed by an acceptance. *Topic Shifts* are used by actors for a number of reasons, they may be an exertion of control particularly when used in decision-making (Ainsworth-Vaughn, 1992) or as a tool for mediating tense situations (Frances, 1986). The fifth area conversation analysts tend to focus on is *disclaimers and alignments* which are used for a range of purposes, to avoid conversational breakdown, reduce another's credibility, soften criticism in the case of disclaimers and to clarify misunderstandings, deal with interruptions, convey intentions and repair conversations in the case of alignments (Fairhurst & Cooren, 2004). It is the focus on the relational use of language that makes conversation analysis particularly well suited to studying leadership as a collective phenomenon (Clifton, 2019).

As discussed in the literature review, conversation analysis has identified deontic and epistemic orders as key concepts in the field of power (e.g. Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012, 2014). In considering a discursive construction of leadership and the effects of power dynamics in this context an analysis of the epistemic and deontic authority of the actors offers a unique perspective and has the potential to shed light on some of the ways in which language may be used to construct power dynamics. Specifically considering how this authority is effectively (and ineffectively) asserted. Whilst there is a dearth of research on this concept in the field of leadership, Clifton and colleagues have demonstrated its relevance concerning informal leadership (Van De Mierop et al., 2020) and stance (Clifton, 2019).

Stance refers to the actors' positioning of themselves to one another, the title they refer to themselves by, or other public way in which authority and power may be conveyed. A humorous example of an actor attempting to improve their stance can be seen in the character Gareth, in Ricky Gervais's 2001 sitcom *The Office*, who refers to himself as the "assistant general manager" only to have his boss, David Brent (played by Gervais) correct him, "assistant to the general manager". Stance should be differentiated from 'Status' which refers to the individual's official position on the organisation's hierarchy (Clifton, 2019). In essence, stance is the measure of an individual's power and whilst it may be commensurate with their position on the organisation's hierarchy, this is not always the case (Van De Mierop, et al. 2020). Stance is also a dynamic phenomenon that, unlike status (the individual's position on a hierarchy) can change with the context, be talked up, or down and, be affected by others.

The complex and subjective nature of discourse analysis and specifically the emphasis on the importance of interpretation in conversation analysis (Clifton, 2012, 2019) means that the researcher will interpret the data according to their own biases and values (Grant et al., 2004) and it is important the researcher remains aware of this. For example, postmodernist researchers Calas and Smircich (1991) deconstructed texts with a distinctly feminist bias, openly noting their bias was simply one way of interpreting the text. The inclusion of a reflexive element in the methodology was therefore essential and is detailed below, and in further detail in consideration of the implementation of the methodology.

#### 4.2.4 Grounded Theory

Fairhurst and Putnam (2019) suggested that a solution to the limitations of ODA in considering *Discourse* was to pair ODA with grounded theory (GT). Whilst this methodology has demonstrably added to our understanding of the importance of *Discourse* and its role in the construction of leadership (e.g. Fairhurst & Coreen, 2004), GT is concerned with the establishment of an overarching theory. Whilst GT covers a range of data analysis techniques, this is a defining characteristic of all of

them. When Glaser and Strauss (1967), having established the original variant of GT, started to depart from one another on their views of how best to develop the technique, they remained true to the core value that GT is a data analysis technique aimed at uncovering a theory grounded in the data (Glaser, 2006; Strauss, 1995). The most flexible variant, constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and the most rigorous (and arguably the most inflexible), the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013) are very different in their ontological assumptions yet both have at their core the aim of developing a theory grounded in the data. GT therefore lacks the flexibility required by a researcher who wishes to explore and contribute to our understanding of a phenomenon without necessarily building a theory. This is the case in this study, and many of those mentioned in the paragraphs above explaining the importance of GT (e.g. Kitchell et al., 2000; Newman, 2000; Wodak et al., 2011).

A further issue with GT is that it was established by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to be a credible data analysis technique to deal with qualitative data in the eyes of their positivist peers. GT is therefore, very much a post-positivist technique (Charmaz, 2014; Clarke et al., 2018; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2019), and whilst I fully accept and support Fairhurst and Putnam's (2019) argument that researchers should worry less about identifying with a paradigm, and more about answering the research question to the best of their ability, following the prescribed steps of a data analysis technique which asserts that there is an objective truth hidden in the data that the researcher should uncover and that researchers should attempt to eliminate bias (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is contradictory to my ontological position. It is worth noting that Kathy Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory does align with my ontological position. As Charmaz says,

“[Researchers] are not passive receptacles into which data are poured. We are not scientific observers who can dismiss scrutiny of our values by claiming scientific neutrality and authority... Nevertheless researchers... are obligated to be reflexive about what we bring to the scene, what we see and how we see it.” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 27).

Charmaz even goes on to argue that constructivist grounded theory is a particularly well-suited technique for the analysis of language and how language is used to “enact meanings” (Charmaz, 2014, p.95), the search for an overarching theory proved to be incompatible with the aims of this research.

#### 4.2.5 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis shares many of the features of constructivist grounded theory. Advocates of thematic analysis have emphasised the importance (as Charmaz (2014) did) of recognising the role the researcher plays in actively seeking themes and of taking a reflexive approach (Braun & Clarke; 2006; Ely et al., 1997; Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Thematic analysis is also a very flexible approach, in fact Braun and Clarke (2006) list flexibility as the primary strength of thematic analysis, making it suitable for the study of a dynamic and multi-level phenomenon such as CL. The key difference though is, as Braun and Clarke (2006) explain,

“We argue, therefore, that a ‘named and claimed’ *thematic* analysis means researchers need not subscribe to the implicit theoretical commitments of grounded theory if they do not wish to produce a fully worked-up grounded-theory analysis.” (p.81. italics from original).

Thematic analysis has been around in varying forms for some time. Clarke and Braun (2014) cite Gerald Holton (a historian of science and physicist) as being the first to use the technique in the 1970s but in terms of its use as a qualitative data analysis technique, it didn’t really gain popularity until the 1990s. In 2006 Braun and Clarke produced the seminal article, *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was a ‘systematic’ and ‘sophisticated’ (Howitt & Cramer, 2008) account of the technique which included specific guidelines on how to conduct thematic analysis as well as a detailed consideration of its strengths and weaknesses. Braun and Clarke (2006) differentiated thematic analysis from what Ryan and Bernard (2000) referred to as ‘thematic coding’, a process that takes place within other analysis techniques (including grounded theory but in others such as discourse analysis as well).

As is the case with grounded theory, there are a multitude of variants within the umbrella term ‘thematic analysis’ (Fugard & Potts, 2020). In addition to simple distinctions such as inductive and deductive thematic analysis which are relatively self-explanatory terms, Braun and Clarke (2021) distinguish between four distinct categories of thematic analysis. *Coding reliability approaches* (such as the approaches favoured by Boyatzis, 1998; Guest et al., 2012) are perhaps most similar to grounded theory, they involve a more rigid approach to analysis typically relying on the frequency of themes to determine their relevance with the assumption that the themes are a truth hidden in the data. These approaches often advocate using multiple coders to minimise bias and increase reliability (a characteristic of Gioia et al.’s (2013) variant of grounded theory). The second category is the one Braun and Clarke favour (Braun & Clarke, 2021), reflexive approaches take the view that the researcher is generating the codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014) rather than uncovering an objective truth. Accordingly, the researcher must reflect on their own assumptions and biases. The third category is something of a mixture of the preceding two (Braun & Clarke, 2021), *Codebook approaches* are typically used in applied research and the codebook is produced less as a means to improve reliability and accuracy but as a record of the development of the themes. The fourth category is the least well established, known as the *critical tradition* it is typically associated with poststructuralist and constructionist approaches. This is by no means an exhaustive consideration of all forms of thematic analysis – to do so would be well beyond the scope of this thesis.

The reflexive approach to thematic analysis was selected for this research for the following reasons. The importance of reflexivity in this research specifically has been made clear above. The ontological position adopted by reflexive thematic analysis is in line with the researcher’s position that the researcher is an active agent in identifying themes (as opposed to believing they exist objectively in the data). The flexibility of reflexive thematic analysis “makes it ideally suited to... a pluralistic analytic approach” (Terry, 2016, p. 104). Terry (2016) specifically argued that reflexive thematic analysis is well suited to be combined with discursive approaches.

For the purpose of this research, therefore, thematic analysis will from here on refer to the reflexive approach (unless otherwise stated).

The pairing of thematic analysis with conversation analysis offers the advantages detailed by Fairhurst and Putnam (2019) in regards to combining discourse analysis and grounded theory or more specifically the advantages demonstrated by Fairhurst and Coreen (2004) of pairing conversation analysis with grounded theory, but with the addition of greater flexibility. This combination however turned out to be insufficient to explore the discursive construction of CL in the detail required. Specifically, the exploration of the *Discourses* was more complex and nuanced than had been anticipated. Identifying the relevant *Discourses* with thematic analysis might be likened to the reader of a novel identifying a genre – easy enough to do, but if we asked the reader *how* the genre was constructed they might struggle to explain each instance in which the words the author of the novel used contribute to the construction of the genre.

#### 4.2.6 Thematic Decomposition

Through a process of trying to develop a suitable methodology and searching the literature for anything appropriate, I came across an analysis technique I hadn't read about in the extant organisational studies literature. Even in the field of psychology and specifically linguistics, thematic decomposition is not a term one comes across frequently. Originally developed to allow linguists to break sentences into thematic components, scholars such as Chomsky (2002/1957) were among the early proponents of the technique.

Thematic decomposition has since been developed by post-structuralists and constructionists (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to consider the meaning behind the words used. Thematic deconstruction, is in this sense, a variant of thematic analysis and would fall into the fourth category Braun and Clarke (2021) identified (the critical tradition). Thematic decomposition shares a lot of similarities with thematic deconstruction (e.g. Dirsmith et al., 2005), and deconstruction itself (Derrida, 1976, 1982) and the differences between the two techniques should be made clear. Deconstruction involves breaking

down themes in order to identify contradictions, ambiguities, and complexities within those themes. In deconstruction, there is no clear relationship between the language an individual uses and that which they are signifying (Howell, 2013), the researcher assumes the language used covers hidden themes (which the researcher seeks to uncover). For this reason, deconstruction was not considered an appropriate method. I wanted to understand how the actors were constructing the *Discourses* they used, rather than interpreting their use of language per se as this would likely result in my placing too much emphasis on my interpretation of what was said rather than the effects of the language being used. In thematic decomposition, there is no such interpretation. As Stenner (1993) explains, it is important to consider what the participants say as opposed to trying to interpret what they intended to say. Stenner also argues that a thematic decomposition should not focus on whether what has been said is true, but on what is being achieved by the language used.

Combining aspects of conversation analysis, thematic analysis, and thematic decomposition provided the basis for what became DCA but an important step in the process was still lacking. In order to give sufficient consideration to the researcher's perspective, the research context, and to adequately consider ambiguities arising in the findings an additional but important stage of the methodology was added.

#### 4.2.7 Reflexive Journals

Whilst there is minimal interpretation involved in thematic decomposition, it is a major component of conversation analysis, and a factor in thematic analysis. As has been stated above, the perspective taken in this research is rather unusual, given the relationship I have with the owner and CEO of the organisation being studied. This highlighted the importance of being aware of the perspective one adopts as a researcher. It is not just an important aspect of research when conducting research in a setting in which the researcher has a relationship with a participant(s), but for all researchers to be aware of the perspective they adopt and the extent to which this may affect the findings (e.g. Ybema et al., 2019). Kempster and Stewart (2010) had a similar issue to mine in their autoethnographic

study of the latter author's promotion to COO, they described their approach as "hyper reflexive" (p.2).

Keeping a journal as a means of ensuring the researcher is reflecting throughout the process is advocated by many (e.g. Archer, 2003; Charmaz, 2014; Coghlan, 2019; Williams, 2018). "Journal keeping is a significant mechanism for developing first-person skills" (Coghlan, 2019, p. 43). The advantages however proved to go further than solely being encouraged to reflect on the perspective being taken. As could probably be assumed at this point, from the description of the underpinnings of the multi-analysis approach, the chosen methodology can get complicated. The themes from the thematic analysis and decomposition needed to be applied to the instances of the leadership identified in the conversation analysis. The reflexive process enabled me to separate interpretation from observation and allowed me to consider the relationships between the themes, techniques, and phenomena identified in the various stages of the analysis. It also allowed for a consideration of ambiguities as they arose (for example where multiple possible interpretations of a participant's language were possible I could use the reflexive diary to note the ambiguity and return to it in the event the same participant was involved in a similar situation elsewhere in the data. Furthermore, the reflexive diary allows for a consideration of context. I was able to note how relevant changes in the context affected the participant's language at an organisation wide level, for example when the organisation faced financial pressures, or for individuals which might be the presence (or absence) of certain people from meetings for example.

In viewing an organisation as a discursive construction Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) and Putnam and Fairhurst (2015) emphasise the importance of adopting a perspective that allows for three distinct potential interpretations to be considered. The first, is that the organisation is viewed as an 'already formed object', the authors liken this to perceiving the organisation as a container in which discourse may occur within or outside. The second perspective views the organisation in a constant 'state of becoming'. Under this interpretation the construction of the organisation is never finished, it is in a



constant state of change as the discourse of its members (which brings it into being) changes over time, so does the organisation itself. The third perspective views the existence of the organisation as being 'grounded in action'. In this interpretation the organisation exists not as an empirical object but as a series of actions, it is the result of social practices. Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) advocate researchers take into account all three perspectives as each will offer new insights into the unit of analysis. The need to reflect on one's perspective is clear, and keeping a journal or diary encourages the researcher to remain consistent in doing so.

The methodology developed is capable of taking into account the core characteristics of CL namely that it is context/situation-specific, dynamic, multi-level (Maupin et al, 2020) as well as being capable of addressing the interplay between big 'D' and small 'd' discourses (Clifton, 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2020). In addition, the methodology is suited to the interpretivist ontological perspective that the researcher does not uncover an objective truth but interprets data, by including a reflexive element to make both the researcher and reader aware of the perspective being taken. In the Methodology section below the specific details of how the data was collected and analysed are considered along with some worked examples. Before discussing this, the research context is considered in more detail including an explanation of the choice of the type of organisation (an SME), the organisation itself and the resulting ethical considerations.

### 4.3 Research Context

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) account for 99.9% of businesses in the UK, they employ 16.7 million people (61% of the total) and account for more than half of the turnover of UK businesses (£2.5 trillion, or 53%) according to UK Small Business Statistics (Federation of Small Businesses, 2023). Despite the significance of SMEs in the UK economy they have been notably under-researched in the field of leadership (Cope et al., 2012; Franco & Matos, 2015). In order for the leadership research conducted in the commercial sector to have practical relevance more research needs to focus on SMEs, the overwhelming majority of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and managing directors

are running SMEs and whilst the research conducted in large companies may have some practical benefit it is not substitute for research conducted in the context in which most businesses operate (Boeske & Murray, 2022).

In order to address the aims of this research, and to provide an answer to the research question the organisation to be studied needed to be of a size that enabled the researcher to gain a holistic understanding of the firm's leadership. To analyse the discourse of a large firm would inevitably mean considering a small subsection of the organisation – a single team or department, and whilst this would be possible, the aim of this research is to explore how the leadership is collectively constructed – if a single team or department is considered in isolation it is likely that significant influences will be lost (the effect of the wider company culture or the prevailing *Discourses* which may be prevalent in other departments and their effects).

Start-ups and SMEs have attracted the interest of scholars interested in collective leadership as they provide a setting in which leadership must increasingly be shared, or distributed, as the organisation grows beyond that which can be managed by an individual (Ensley et al., 2003; Cope et al., 2011).

The requirement to share leadership responsibilities creates a challenge for the founder, as Phelps et al. (2007) and Perren and Grout (2001) note, the entrepreneur needs to defend their business from failure. How then, should the founder balance the need to relinquish control with the need to protect their business in an environment where failure is an ever-present and all too common occurrence? This research aims to contribute to the practical issues facing entrepreneurs in addition to the academic theory on the construction of leadership.

#### 4.3.1 The Organisation

The organisation was founded by the researcher's wife and current CEO in 2017, in part, through frustration with the conventional law firms she'd worked for (and consulted for) in the 5 years since qualifying as a solicitor. The CEO was convinced that the traditional law firms were outdated, that

much of the legal jargon was unnecessary, and that many clients would much prefer to partner with a law firm that represented what she termed “human lawyers” (The organisation website, 2022).

“We've traded the heels, shelved the suits, and prioritised innovative legal support that puts the human back in law. That's why we're a multi-award winning firm.” (The organisation website, 2022).

The CEO stands out on social media platforms, legal conferences, and industry award ceremonies as being anything other than a traditional lawyer. She wears trainers rather than heels, has pink hair (at the time of writing), and many visible tattoos. With over 75,000 followers on Linked In and another 30,000 on Instagram she attracts many like-minded legal professionals, as well as her share of critics, and is considered a somewhat controversial lawyer in the UK legal industry.

The organisation has grown since it was founded to a team of 35 people comprising solicitors and support staff, it deals with clients ranging from start-ups to multi-billion pound corporations operating internationally and specialises in 8 different fields including one of the few firms in the UK offering specialist blockchain legal advice.

Whilst the organisation comprised 35 employees at the start of the research period, the focus of the data collection and analysis was on the board and senior leadership team (the heads of the various departments). That said, there were instances in which more junior members of staff contributed to meetings, and with this possibility in mind, all members of the organisation were given the opportunity to consent or withdraw from participation. The board consisted of 4-5 members (Director N left the organisation in July 2022, and the Head of Marketing was promoted to the board around the same time (thereafter referred to as Director S)).

An organisational chart can be found in Appendix D with a brief summary of key participants in Table 4.1 below. The information is non-specific to improve the anonymity of the participants.

<b>Board</b>	<b>Senior Leadership team/Heads of department</b>
<p><b>CEO</b> A female in her early 40s, a qualified solicitor but not a practicing solicitor in this role</p>	<p><b>Head of Department B</b> A male in his mid-30s, the legal profession was a second career for Head of Department B and he had progressed into a senior role very quickly, joining the organisation from a large London-based law firm to head up one of the larger departments within the organisation</p>
<p><b>Director D</b> A male in his late 30s, a qualified solicitor who had worked for a competitor of the organisation for most of his career as a solicitor before joining the board at the organisation. Director D was the head of a department as well as a member of the board.</p>	<p><b>Head of Department L</b> A male in his mid-30s, a technology lawyer sharing the Head of Department role with Head of Department H, also a male in his mid-30s, specialising in finance and technology (fin-tech) law.</p>
<p><b>Director N</b> A female in her mid-40s, a qualified solicitor and the head of a department in addition to her role on the board.</p>	<p><b>Head of Department A</b> A female in her mid-30s specialising in financial law (left the organisation in May 2022).</p>
<p><b>Director Y</b> A male in his late 30s. A non-executive director with an entrepreneurial technology background (not a solicitor and with no legal experience). Worked for the organisation for the duration of the research period on a part-time basis</p>	<p><b>Head of Department W</b> A female in her early 30s specialising in intellectual property law, with a background as a freelance solicitor, she left the organisation (by mutual consent) in July 2022 to set up a separate company which the organisation partially funded.</p>
<p><b>Director S</b> A female in her early 30s, who started with the organisation as the Head of Marketing and was promoted to the board in July 2022. Director S was a marketing executive, with no legal background.</p>	<p><b>Head of Department J</b> A male in his mid-30s and head of the Information Technology (IT) department, a former lawyer turned specialist legal IT services provider, the department which not only maintained the IT equipment for the organisation but also custom-built legal software.</p>
	<p><b>Head of Operations</b> A female in her late 20s with a non-legal background and one of the organisation's longest-serving employees.</p>

Table 4.1 – Brief details on the main participants.

Rather than the traditional approach adopted by most law firms operating in the UK of estimating a fee for the work to be undertaken, completing the work, and submitting invoices (often for far more than the initial estimate) the organisation encourages clients to take a subscription to their legal services. This can be from 3 months to 12 months and covers all specialisms, they then work in partnership with the client to meet their legal requirements for a given number of hours (decided by the client) each month, with a discounted rate for any additional hours which may need to be purchased during busier times. The result has been that clients feel supported at all times by their legal services provider and have provided an array of positive testimonials.

The organisation moved from having a conventional office in 2020 to the norm being for employees to work from home. Meetings are therefore typically carried out online via Microsoft Teams. Employees are dispersed throughout the UK and even further afield with the CEO being based in Amsterdam for the period of the research.

#### 4.3.2 Ethical Considerations

The fact that the CEO of the organisation is the researcher's wife creates several advantages and disadvantages to the research. Conducting research in one's own organisation obviously brings up ethical issues (Coghlan, 2019), and these are quite similar for the researcher conducting research on an organisation in which their spouse is the CEO. The methodology has been selected with great thought and care to minimise the potential and detriment to the participants. Furthermore, it was decided that methods that could have been used to supplement the data collected (such as interviews or focus groups, particularly with more junior members of staff) were not appropriate as they risked the possibility of pressurising participants to consent to participate. These supplementary methods would also detrimentally affect findings if participants viewed the researcher not as a researcher but as 'the husband of the CEO' and therefore as someone from whom information should be withheld or tailored to meet expectations.

The data then consists only of transcripts of meetings which the directors have access to anyway, this should eliminate any potential perceived risk from participants that the researcher will be relaying information to the board which could have a detrimental effect on them.

Participant information sheets and consent forms (see Appendix E and F) were distributed by the operations department of SL (rather than the researcher) with managers being told explicitly by the board that everyone is entitled to withdraw any or all of their data without any detrimental effect and that there would be neither advantage nor detriment to taking part or abstaining. Furthermore, the contact names of the researcher's supervisors were provided to all participants providing them with contact points outside of the organisation to whom concerns could be addressed.

Generally speaking, qualitative research has inherent ethical complexities (Clark and Sharaf, 2007). As Ellis (2007) argues, approval from an ethics committee is not sufficient to conduct ethical research, relationships with participants can change throughout the research and situations may arise that require ethical decisions to be made by the researcher without the assistance of an ethics committee. A particular concern that preceded the data collection stage, which was impossible to avoid and not unique to this research, was the potential for what Evetts (2003) calls 'guilty knowledge'. Guilt knowledge is the attainment of knowledge that would be detrimental to the participant(s). The researcher can in this instance be left with a dilemma as to whether to disclose the information (compromising the researcher's obligation to keep participants from harm) or to withhold the information (compromising the researcher's obligation to be honest and transparent). Of course, ultimately it would be down to the researcher to make their ethical choices (Clark and Sharf, 2007; Costley and Gibbs, 2006; Pring, 2001; Small, 2001) and each instance would need to be considered on its merits but awareness of the ongoing potential for ethical challenges to arise throughout the study was an important aspect of the method. As a general rule, this research adopted the ethical standards advocated by Gellerman et al (1990), specifically in this instance in ensuring that the research serves the good of the whole. It was decided and agreed with the Board,

prior to the commencement of the research, that nothing would be done to adversely affect any member of the organisation. To achieve this it was decided should a situation arise in which a participant(s) would unavoidably be adversely affected were the research to continue, the research would be abandoned. A key concern of the ethics committee was that the CEO may feel obligated to allow the research to continue whilst being adversely affected by it. In the event of the CEO experiencing any adverse effects of the research process, it was decided that the research would be abandoned.

An additional concern raised during the application for ethics approval for this research was whether the researcher was capable of providing an unbiased account of the phenomenon under investigation. In the sense that any perspective, any approach to research (especially qualitative research), and any individual's account of a phenomenon is prone to their own interpretation and therefore bias, then of course, the answer would be 'no', the same for, arguably, any piece of research. However, if the question is whether the researcher is capable of considering the 'warts and bruises as well as the accolades' (Ellis, 2007, p. 17) as Ellis put it in regards to what constitutes good autoethnographic research, the answer is resounding, 'yes'. The purpose of the research and request of the organisation is to provide practical feedback to improve the leadership, not to provide flattery, this would be of no benefit to the organisation, nor to the researcher. The concern raised by the ethics committee highlights the importance of including a reflexive approach within the methodology. Whilst adding an additional, and unusual perspective to the research on CL can be viewed as a significant strength of the research, the importance of understanding the impact such a perspective has on the interpretative aspects of the methodology is difficult to overstate. As Kempster and Stewart (2010) advocate, when the perspective of the researcher is particularly unusual a 'hyper reflexive' approach is called for.

## 4.4 Methodology

As Knights and McCabe (1997) argued, a single case study is an ideal setting in which the researcher can combine multiple qualitative methods or analysis techniques. The single, idiographic, and embedded case study carried out was an ideal setting in which to develop a methodology appropriate for a discursive exploration of CL. In this section, I consider the specifics of the methodology employed (the underpinnings having been detailed in section 4.2). The research might best be described as a mono-method, pluralistic analysis approach which I have termed discursive construction analysis (DCA).

Whilst DCA has been designed specifically to address the challenges associated with the study of CL (the context-specific, multi-level, and dynamic nature of the phenomenon identified by Maupin et al. (2020) and the need to consider power dynamics (e.g. Empson, 2020; Fairhurst et al., 2020) and culture (e.g. Clifton, 2014; Fairhurst and Coreen, 2004)) it is applicable more generally to the study of any discursively constructed phenomenon and especially well-suited to those of a collective nature.

The data in this research was collected through the recording of various meetings at a small UK-based law firm, employing (at the commencement of the study) 35 employees, most of whom worked for the organisation full-time. Between April 2022 and March 2023 (inclusive), the Head of Operations in the organisation oversaw the recording of a total of 30 meetings, amounting to approximately 25 hours and 30 minutes. Three types of meetings were recorded. Board Meetings, which comprised directors and the Head of Operations (5-6 attendees). Senior Leadership Team (SLT) Meetings which comprised at least two directors, and the Heads of Departments of the organisation (8 - 14 attendees). The third meeting type was termed by the organisation 'Town Hall meetings', all members of the organisation were invited to these short meetings, typically around 20 minutes long (25 - 31 attendees).

The board meetings were supposed to take place monthly but between missed recordings, resignations, and other pressures on those due to attend many were missed. In total, only 5 of these



meetings were recorded over the year totalling approximately 7 hours, and 45 minutes. The ‘Town Hall’ meetings (TH) were short meetings of around 20 minutes each, these were held quarterly, and over the research period four were recorded, totalling 80 minutes. The remainder of the meetings recorded were senior leadership team meetings (SLT) which were typically held bi-monthly with a couple of additional meetings for training and discussion about the supervision of trainee solicitors. On occasion, the recordings were neglected by the organisation, in total 21 of these meetings were recorded amounting to approximately 16 hours and 25 minutes. The meetings were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. The researcher then viewed the videos of the meetings and edited the transcripts to ensure accuracy.

	Apr 2022	May 2022	Jun 2022	Jul 2022	Aug 2022	Sept 2022	Oct 2022	Nov 2022	Dec 2022	Jan 2022	Feb 2023	Mar 2023
Board	1		1			1	1	1				
SLT	1	3	1	3		1	2	3	2	2	3	1
TH	1	1	1		1							

*Table 4.2 The occurrences of board meetings, senior leadership meetings (SLT) and Town Hall meetings (TH) over the research period.*

#### 4.4.1 Analysing the small ‘d’ discourse

Exploring the construction of leadership with the ontological position outlined above presents an inherent issue as discussed above in section 4.1. As Sutherland (2014) has argued in order to study leadership in practice we need to define the term in order to identify instances of leadership. Whilst the disadvantages to doing so have been discussed above, leadership in this research was pre-defined. In doing so the researcher asserts their own bias and in part constructs the very term being researched and this is an acknowledged weakness of the study. However, an alternative approach, of asking the participants to tell the researcher what they think leadership is would likely mean as many different definitions of leadership emerge as participants asked. This would make the process of

identifying instances of leadership difficult, not to mention the potential for participant bias in interviewing employees of an organisation in which the researcher's spouse is the CEO (discussed in the 'ethical considerations' section above).

Leadership in the context of this research refers specifically to organisational leadership. Rather than trying to define the concept of leadership per se, the researcher considered a popular definition of leadership which, it was hoped, would be loosely accepted by most scholars (something Haslam et al. (2024) confirmed recently, in citing a general consensus around a very similarly worded definition of leadership). Yukl's (1989) definition of leadership: a phenomenon which *'include(s) influencing task objectives and strategies, influencing commitment and compliance in task behavior to achieve these objectives, influencing group maintenance and identification, and influencing the culture of an organization'* (p. 253) is an oft-cited, widely accepted definition.

Yukl's (1989) definition suggests that leadership is a collective endeavour, confirmed by Yukl (2006) "the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (p. 8).

Similarly, Pearce and Conger's (2003) definition of shared leadership is another commonly cited definition; "a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organisational goals or both. This influence process often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence." (p.1).

For the purpose of this research, instances of leadership were identified on the basis that they meet the requirement of Yukl's (1989) definition in terms of having an influence (whether the desired one or not). The distinction is important, as it is not always clear to the researcher whether the proposed action was implemented or not. A second reason is that often orators participating in an instance of leadership have differing objectives, they may influence one another to come up with a solution

neither one was particularly advocating. Such instances are key in understanding how leadership is constructed but would be lost if a more stringent definition was adopted. A third reason was that it is as much the instances in which orators influence others in one way, but fail in their objective, as those in which they succeed which contribute to our understanding. Consistency in the identification of instances of leadership was improved by referring to ambiguities in the reflexive diary in order that similar ambiguities could be addressed in the same manner should they recur.

The successes and failures of instances of leadership were noted and are discussed in the findings and beyond.

The transcripts were read and re-read several times, along with the accompanying videos. Once the researcher felt sufficiently familiar with the transcript, instances of leadership were identified. The instances of leadership then underwent additional, more detailed transcription using a simplified version of the Jeffersonian Transcription System (JTS) (Jefferson, 2004) a list of the symbols used can be found in Appendix B.

Once the JTS had been applied to the transcripts the instances of leadership were coded in an effort to identify patterns in the language used to construct leadership. This took the analysis a step further than conversation analysis typically would, making it similar to a thematic discourse analysis (Braun & Clarke 2021). The additional step was important as it enabled the researcher to identify techniques that actors used to contribute to instances of leadership and to consider their effectiveness. This, in addition to the more typical considerations of a conversation analysis such as assertions of epistemic/deontic authority, techniques to raise and soften stance, pauses and broken sentences, changes in volume/pitch, significant inhalations/exhalations, interruptions, and emphasis of words or phrases. All of which proved to be significant.

An array of coding approaches were considered for the initial coding stage. Verbal exchange coding was considered due to its suitability for discourse analysis (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016; Gee, 2011; Rapley, 2018; Willig, 2015), In Vivo coding, was considered to avoid (or minimise) the potential pitfall

of misinterpreting the data and applying bias, and descriptive coding due to its particular suitability to coding naturally occurring data or ‘non-interview data’ (Saldana, 2021). Descriptive coding was chosen as the primary technique. The inherent flexibility of descriptive coding allows the researcher to amend the coding process as they become more familiar with the data (Saldana, 1997).

Furthermore, this flexibility is particularly well suited to longitudinal studies as allowance can be made for changes in context (Saldana 2021). Lastly, the use of descriptive coding does not prohibit the use of In-Vivo coding, so instances of In-Vivo coding were included.

To minimise bias a line-by-line approach to descriptive coding was adopted as advocated by Charmaz (2014). A codebook was assembled during the analysis which ensured consistency among codes (see Appendix 1, Codebook 1). Examples of codes frequently identified in instances of leadership are shown in Table 4.3.

Name of code	Description	Example
Setting the scene	When the speaker introduces their argument	Director D: I’ve always I’ve always viewed him as being (1.0) legal ops, project management, business analysis and er ( ) but he does, he does get involved and actually if he didn’t get involved with erm stuff, then we wouldn’t have a reskinned OBP <sup>4</sup> , er ( ) we wouldn’t have the tool kits, imperfect as they are (smiles), even though it doesn’t quite meet, erm ( ) [Head of Marketing’s] vision for what they should look like. (April Board Meeting, 2022)
Explain	When the actor provides an explanation to support their argument, detail their concern, etc.	CEO: It's got nothing to do with trust. We're just trying to understand what's happening within the business. (0.2) That's all it is. (November Board Meeting, 2022).
Seeking understanding	When the actor asks a question to better their understanding of another’s argument.	OM: Is that something that happened in inductions ↑, or you're reminded at appraisals ↑? Or was it just something that happened from the outset? (Supervision Round Table November)

Table 4.3 A selection of some of the codes identified in the analysis. A comprehensive codebook is included in Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> Onboarding platform – software used by the organisation to add clients which includes features such as anti-money laundering checks to ensure compliance with the Solicitor’s Regulation Authority.

Whilst saturation was not an aim of this research, as the data was context-specific, the identification of new codes decreased as the analysis progressed and suggests that data saturation was achieved despite the varying contexts across a turbulent year for the organisation.

As depicted in Figure 4.1 the *discourse analysis* stage of DCA can be broken down into a 3 stage process with multiple levels within the stage. The first stage, termed *familiarise*, was about familiarising myself with the data. I watched the video recordings until I felt familiar with the data and then watched the recording whilst checking through the automated transcription to correct mistakes and ensure the transcript represented the recording accurately.

The second and third stages require some oscillation between them. In the *Identify* stage, the first step is to identify the start and end points of the instances of leadership throughout the transcript. Where there is ambiguity I recorded the nature of the ambiguity in the reflexive diary, which was the *reflect* stage. Ambiguities were commonplace with starting and ending points being subjective, and in some cases, decisions had to be made as to whether to break down a potential instance of CL into two or three instances, or to consider it as a single instance. Recording the thought process I used to make such decisions enabled me to maintain a greater degree of consistency in the process.

The *identify* stage also involved assigning first-stage codes to the data relating to characteristics of the language used in the construction of CL. Table 4.3 (above) provides some examples and a full codebook is available in Appendix A. As with the identification of instances of leadership the reflexive diary was used to record instances of ambiguity in regard to coding, or when applicable, in regard to my interpretation of a participant's meaning. A third step in the *identify* stage was to note instances of participants asserting epistemic and deontic authority, and recording ambiguities in the reflexive diary. As The Findings chapter will demonstrate it wasn't always clear whether a participant was asserting deontic/epistemic authority, sometimes for example assertions were so soft it was questionable whether they should constitute such an assertion at all. Instances in which the stance

of the participants appeared to be affected were identified in the second stage and reflected upon in the third.

As Figure 4.1 depicts, DCA need not be completed in a straight-line process. The methodology is designed to provide the researcher with a degree of flexibility. In this study, I found that in some instances after considering the assertions of epistemic and deontic authority and changes in status the interpretation of participants' language may be affected, or alternatively, that by coding the language subtle changes in stance became evident. DCA gives the researcher the flexibility to move between the stages when necessary. I deemed the *discourse analysis* stage to be complete once I had been back and forth between the *identify* and *reflect* stages to the point that no additional themes were being identified.

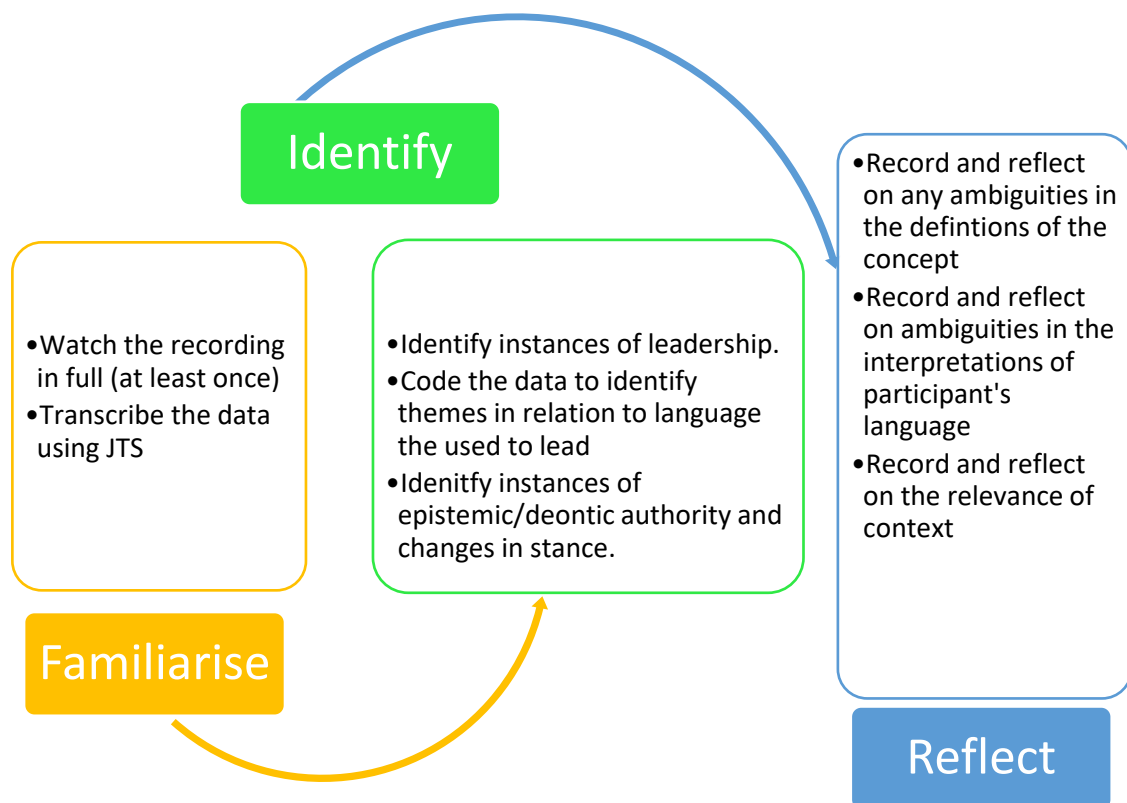


Figure 4.1 – The discourse analysis stage of DCA presented as a three-stage process.

#### 4.4.2 Analysing the big 'D' Discourse

The next stage of the analysis was to take the transcript afresh (without the coding from the first stage but with the corrections (see step 2 of the conversation analysis)) and to identify the Discourses used throughout (not just in the instances of leadership). Discourses are the themes identified in the discursive construction of cultural norms, values, and expectations. This stage of the analysis was based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process to analyse the data using reflexive thematic analysis, however, whilst the six stages were always completed in each instance, they were not always followed in the prescribed order. Braun and Clarke (2006) advocate researchers take the following steps:

- (1) Familiarise yourself with the data
- (2) Generate initial codes
- (3) Search for themes
- (4) Review the themes
- (5) Define and name the themes
- (6) Produce the report.

Due to the nature of *Discourse*, it is sometimes easier to identify the themes than it is to identify the initial codes that comprise them. In this regard, early attempts to follow the six stages of thematic analysis proved insufficient to capture all of the nuances and complexities within the data. In the case of most of the themes identified the themes were identified prior to all the 'initial' or 'first stage' codes. This is where the thematic decomposition acts as a safety net, to ensure the researcher is coding all of the relevant data which construct the themes (discussed further later in this section). The same principle applies to stages four and five. In some instances, key phrases and language use made clear that a certain *Discourse* was being constructed, supported, or challenged but what was

unclear was whether every instance had been recorded. Some instances were more subtle (even silent) and did not become apparent until after the *Discourse* had been identified and understood (again, this became apparent in the thematic decomposition), including instances where the effect was apparent despite there being no explicit reference to the *Discourse* (see Findings chapter section 5.3.9). This resulted in stages 4 and 5 of Braun and Clarke's steps being revisited on multiple occasions throughout the process and more of an oscillation between the underpinning techniques, than a step-by-step process.

As with the *discourse* analysis stage of DCA, the *Discourse* analysis is not a step-by-step process. DCA has been designed to allow the researcher the flexibility to deal with the unique data they are presented with. Even in this study, whilst the data was all of the same type the content could be quite different. In some transcripts, the *Discourses* appear immediately apparent and warrant more of a focus on the decomposition of the theme. In others, *Discourses* were less evident, and more of a 'bottom-up' process of analysis was called for. Figure 4.2 below depicts the process in such a way that I hope the reader can appreciate the oscillatory nature of the method. With that caveat, I present the detail of each of the stages of the *Discourse* analysis element of DCA

1. The first step involved familiarising myself with the data. Whilst I was already familiar with the data having conducted the analysis of *discourse*, this stage might be likened to a palate cleanser. The analysis of the *Discourse* is very different from the conversation analysis conducted in consideration of the *discourse*. I needed to refamiliarize myself with the data in order to think about the data in a different way. This was achieved by watching the video recording again, on numerous occasions (usually three, occasionally four, although in two of the short recordings, only two viewings were necessary). By the time I had run through the video a few times, I could read the transcripts and almost hear the actors speaking, picking up on their tones, body language, and other idiosyncrasies.



2. I reviewed the transcript and noted instances of *Discourses* (themes) and any initial codes that arose. This stage was repeated with and without the assistance of the recording, making notes on the transcript of the codes and themes. The themes were then recorded separately along with the first stage codes, grouping similar codes together either with an identified theme or in categories awaiting the identification of a theme.
3. Where themes had been identified through previous readings (in the first and other early transcripts) or identified in the analysis of previous transcripts, their occurrence was decomposed<sup>5</sup> which involved breaking down the language used to construct them into the first stage codes.
4. Instances of *Discourse* were also analysed in terms of the effect they had. In some cases, an argument based on a given *Discourse(s)*, might be challenged by another actor basing their argument on an alternative *Discourse*. In this regard, consideration was given to the strengths of the *Discourses*, and the effect they had (whether they strengthened (or otherwise) the actor's contribution to acts of leadership, whether they affected the actor's stance, and whether they received support or challenges from the other actors. In the last example, the support and challenges to *Discourses* were particularly important, as they were a key component of the overall construction of the *Discourses*. This stage involved a consideration of the relevant sections of the conversation analysis which enables the researcher to better interpret the actor's intentions, emotional factors (for example nervousness might be identified through unusual pauses in the actor's speech, anger or frustration may be noted in the types of interruptions observed) and any other insights the analysis of *discourse* had to offer.

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<sup>5</sup> I use the word 'decomposed' here in the sense of breaking down the composition. Whilst the word 'deconstructed' might be more appropriate and less likely to bring to mind the association with decaying or rotting, the word 'deconstruct' is associated with Derrida's (1976) deconstruction technique, and as such was avoided.

5. All of the effects of the *Discourses* were fed back into a review of the *Discourses*, or a review of the themes as Braun and Clarke (2006) categorised the stage. This was a cyclical process that continued throughout the analysis.

The following excerpt allows for an abbreviated worked example of the process:

Director N: (interrupting) I have to say, I push back quite strongly on that and say a lot of that is on them to ask for that information, cos I think the reality is that supervisors can't always hand everything to them on a plate, we're not going to fill in a long form of instructions for trainees, it just won't happen. So I think, I think it was [name of a trainee] who asked for that but you know I think I was quite firm with her in that, you know if there's something you need to know and if you've got lots of deadlines and that you're really busy, then it's really important that they ask for further information about when it needs to be done and that they, you know, they have a conversation with their supervisor about how to fit it in.

Director D: I agree, they need to use their own initiative as well.

Director N: It's also a really important skill, I mean we have to do that with clients, so it's just something you need to learn how to do, so it's not that I don't think we should give them that information, if we have it available. I did say to them, I think they need to be responsible for gathering (-)

Head of Department B: (interrupting) they're not at uni anymore they've just got to man up and get stuff done, you know we're busy, I can't babysit them and talk them through every clause and every piece of information.

(SLT Supervision Meeting May 2022).

To give some context to the above excerpt, the meeting began with the Operations Manager running through the feedback she had received from trainees in a previous meeting. In feeding this back to the supervisors (of the trainees) the opening to the meeting was essentially a list of criticisms that some of the supervisors objected to. As the Operations Manager is running through the criticisms,

Director N attempts to interject to ask if anyone has questions. The Operations Manager and Director N speak at the same time, as the Operations Manager relays her next criticism, relating to clarity over deadlines. Director N's body language (recorded in the *discourse analysis*) suggests she is not pleased that the operations manager didn't stop speaking for her (she raises her eyebrows and very slightly purses her lips), then as the Operations Manager makes her point, she lets out a derisive laugh and interrupts in an assertive manner (which is where the excerpt above picks up).

The Findings chapter covers this in more detail but for the purpose of demonstrating the process, the analysis began with multiple read-throughs, along with watching the video recording. Straight away I identified a theme of superiority around the way the supervisors viewed themselves in relation to the trainees. This was recorded as a theme, named 'Superiority'<sup>6</sup>.

Throughout the process I was asking questions such as, 'why did X respond this way?', 'what is it that appears to have upset X?', 'why are certain participants appearing to welcome an argument whilst others do not?' and many, many more similar questions, which consulting the analysis of the *discourse* helped me to address. In this example, I was particularly concerned with why this particular *Discourse* had arisen, although this meeting was analysed early in the process the superiority *Discourse* already seemed at odds with the cultural 'feel' I had picked up on (more of the caring and professional *Discourses* were apparent in the first meetings analysed). The opening to the meeting has a disproportionately high frequency of pauses and broken sentences (when compared with other recorded speech from the same actor) suggesting nervousness from the Head of Operations). Director N's reaction to the Head of Operations continuing to speak rather than conceding to her and her subsequent derisive laugh and assertive interruption suggest frustration or anger, perhaps at the criticisms she has faced as one of the supervisors.

So, with an idea of the *Discourse* that appeared to have been borne out of frustration, and a reaction to a string of criticisms, I deconstructed (or decomposed) the text to identify the specific instances of

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<sup>6</sup> There is at least one other *Discourse* at play in this excerpt, this is not an exhaustive analysis.

the theme being constructed. So, an example would be, “Supervisors can’t always hand everything to them on a plate, we’re not going to fill in a long form of instructions for trainees, it just won’t happen”. This implies that supervisors could provide instructions as they have more knowledge, and experience and are better able to do the job – which is confirmed at various points in this transcript but we can see an example in the excerpt where Director N says “It’s also a really important skill, we [supervisors] have to do that with clients, it’s just something you [trainees] just have to learn how to do” (as supervisors have already). There is also an implication that supervisors are too busy, or too important to provide trainees with additional instructions (the former is confirmed by Head of Department B later in the excerpt) and the latter is confirmed in other parts of this transcript.

Once the theme has been analysed sufficiently, the effects are considered. The effect of Director N’s interruption was that her stance is raised (she is clearly asserting herself as the more senior participant in the meeting), she is also supported by Director D and Head of Department B (so these two actors raise the stance of Director N, and add momentum to the superiority *Discourse*). We might also note the excited/supportive interruption from Head of Department B (again identified in the *discourse analysis*), which suggests he may be sharing the sentiments Director N seemed to portray. The effects of this instance of leadership are discussed in more detail in the Findings chapter, but this demonstrates the *Discourse analysis* stage of the process.

Recording the analysis of the *Discourse* as a five-step process is, as I hope is clear, something of a simplification as the steps do not flow chronologically but are cyclical and repeat throughout each transcript analysis with varying emphasis being placed on different steps depending on the context of the data. For every transcript, during the analysis process entries were recorded in reflexive journals, with one journal being associated with each meeting. Whilst this stage of the process is detailed separately it is important to note that the method did not involve waiting until the analysis was completed before adding entries to the diary, this was done throughout the process.

As with the *discourse* analysis stage of DCA, I have depicted the process. Figure 4.2 shows the process outlined above in an alternative format in order to convey the cyclical, and oscillating process the researcher will embark upon.

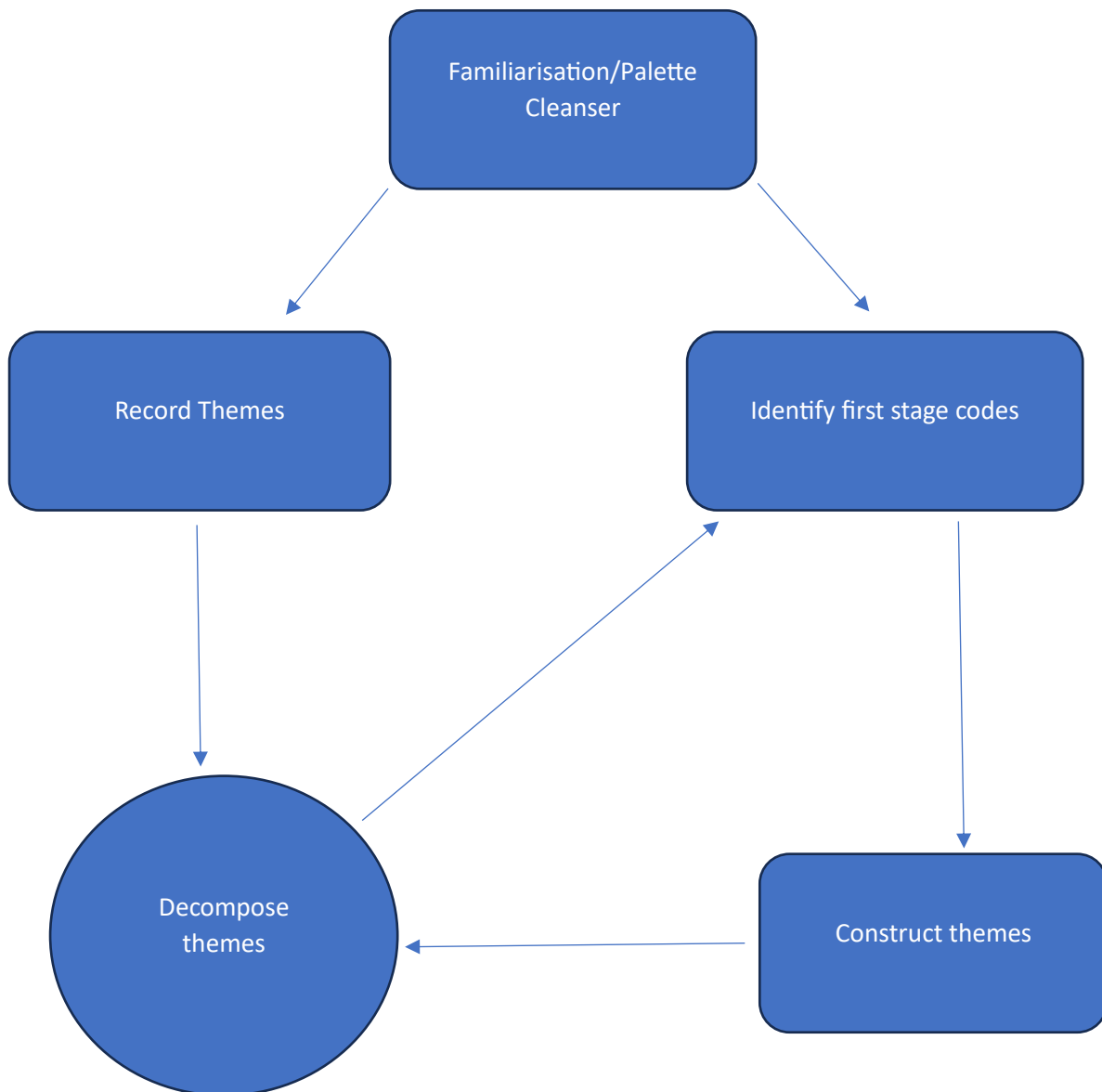


Figure 4.2 – The analysis of the Discourse as a cyclical and oscillating process.

For the sake of simplicity, Figure 4.2 does not depict the consideration given to how the participants influence the *Discourses*. As will be made clear in sections 5.3.2, 5.3.3, and 5.3.4 of the Findings

chapter the participants used identifiable strategies to influence the effect of the discourses. This is stage requires the researcher to have identified the *Discourses* (or themes) but is not necessarily a final, or separate stage in the analysis, it can be carried out whilst other themes are being analysed.

#### 4.4.3 Reflexive journals

To address concerns regarding the ethical challenges around conducting research at an organisation owned and run by my spouse there were two reflexive journals kept during the research period. I will consider the reflexive journal that I kept in detail as it forms part of the analysis process, but in regard to the reflexive journal kept by the CEO of the organisation it is important to note that it was decided prior to commencing the research that should the CEO experience feelings of discomfort about the research then the research should be stopped. This was an easier decision to make than it may appear, suffice to say I would put my marriage above any research project.

Accordingly, I encouraged my wife (the CEO) to keep a reflexive journal in which she could and should record her feelings about the research being conducted, having her (and her colleagues') language analysed. This gave me an appointed opportunity to reflect on the ethical concerns arising from my relationship with the CEO of the organisation. As it turned out there were no concerns expressed by the CEO or any other participants in the study. On occasion, when I was watching a recording of a meeting without headphones on and my wife walked into my study we would discuss it being weird for her to see me going over the conversations she had had in such detail, but she assured me that there were no feelings of discomfort.

The reflexive journals kept by me, as the researcher, require more detailed consideration and form an integral component of DCA as a methodology as has been demonstrated in outlining the stages above. I kept the diary open (in Microsoft Word) on my computer whilst I analysed the data and made notes as and when I felt it prudent to do so, and on an array of topics. The journal entries were

labelled according to the corresponding transcript to give order to the process and each transcript had a journal entry (even though on the odd occasion it was just a note to say that nothing particularly noteworthy had been observed). The reflexive journal gave me the opportunity to note phenomena that didn't quite fit with the analysis process. For example, referring back to the excerpt used in the worked example of the analysis of the *Discourse*, I mentioned above, in establishing some context to the meeting, the Operations Manager had begun the meeting with a series of criticisms of the supervisory team. I noted in the corresponding journal entry;

“Notably [the Operations Manager] isn't really drawing on any of the prevalent *Discourses* - this may be contributing to the unsuccessful result of her efforts.”

Such a note may seem insignificant, as many of the entries in the journal were, but as it turned out a lack of *Discourses* proved to be a significant factor in assessing the likelihood of participant's contributions to the CL. The reflexive journals then provided a space in which such observations could be made, when they didn't really fit with the analysis process – the thematic analysis and decomposition, set out to identify themes (*Discourses*) the relevance of their absence wasn't considered as part of this process.

Other instances of significant reflexive diary entries included comments on the ambiguities arising from the working definition of leadership selected. There were several comments on instances of leadership that could have been defined in different ways, which led to a consideration that some of the findings in the extant literature may differ from the findings in this study on the basis of differing definitions of what leadership is (see the Discussion chapter for more on this). There were similar ambiguities in what constituted an assertion of epistemic or deontic authority, for example, how softly could these be asserted before they ceased to be an assertion. There were also comments on the patterns of codes identified in the conversation analysis stage which assisted me in concluding (contrary to my expectation from the extant literature) that there were no set patterns due to the complexity of language (see Findings and Discussion chapters).

More generally the reflexive diaries enabled me to keep a note of context and remain aware of the perspective I adopted and encouraged me to look for alternative perspectives. Overall, the reflexive diaries proved to be an essential component of the methodology, allowing a greater degree of flexibility to record that which might otherwise have been neglected.

#### 4.5 Evaluating the methodology

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria for qualitative research, even today nearly 40 years after it was published is still a benchmark against which much qualitative research is assessed, some have even gone so far as to call it the "gold standard" (Smith et al, 2014, p. 192)) of criteria for assessing qualitative research. As discussed in the Introduction, I would argue that the criteria are ill-suited to the assessment of qualitative research within paradigms such as the interpretive, post-structuralist, post-modernist, and many others, and are only suited to post-positivism. Instead then of assessing the DCA methodology on the basis Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria, I will draw on the considerations of a range of scholars to consider both the strengths and limitations of the methodology.

Sociologists, Small and Calarco (2022) in their book, *Qualitative Literacy* suggest the following criteria for qualitative research; cognitive empathy; heterogeneity; Palpability; follow-up; and self-awareness. Sociology is a field in which the influence of positivist assumptions is less pronounced (Steinmetz, 2005) and the criteria proposed by Small and Calarco (2022) are far more appropriate to assessing this methodology than that of Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Small and Calarco's (2022) first criterion, *cognitive empathy*, is an assessment of how well the researcher is able to understand the perspectives of the participants. This is clearly a subjective measure which, even with a rounded consideration, is difficult to give a definitive answer to. In regards to this research specifically, the strengths of the methodology employed are the fact that the researcher is familiar with the organisation and the challenges it faces, and that the longitudinal nature of the research allows the researcher to consider a range of the participant's dialogues in



varying contexts in order to help to clear up ambiguities. The methodology is limited in that the researcher cannot ask the participants for clarification, although this may not always be an advantage as participants may choose to clear up ambiguities in a way which presents them in a favourable way, this has the potential to mislead the researcher as much as the potential to clear up misunderstandings.

The second criterion is *heterogeneity*. Small and Calarco (2022) argue that the researcher should expose themselves to the subject of their enquiry as much as possible. The heterogeneity element is an aspect of this, assessing the degree to which the researcher has considered the subject of their enquiry in as many different possible context as possible. The strength of the methodology in this respect lies again in the longitudinal nature of the enquiry which exposes the researcher to a range of contexts. The limitation in this research specifically, is that the range of contexts is limited primarily to board meetings, senior leadership meetings, and the occasional organisation-wide meetings. There was no consideration (for ethical reasons) of department meetings, and no consideration of the day-to-day communications of actors outside of formal meetings.

The third criterion is *palpability* which can be contrasted to abstraction. The evaluator might question the extent to which the concepts and ideas presented in this research are concrete (palpable) versus abstract ideas. The phenomena forming the focus of this research (leadership, culture, and power) are certainly more abstract concepts. Palpability is improved by defining the concept of leadership and addressing specific aspects of power and culture (which are again pre-defined), and whilst this is certainly a limitation of this research specifically, the DCA methodology, more widely speaking, is able to address both palpable and abstract concepts.

The fourth criterion is *follow-up*, which whilst tailored toward qualitative interviews is relevant to this methodology too. Follow-up is the extent to which the researcher asks questions as the data is collected to expand their understanding. In an interview these would be literal follow-up questions. In DCA the researcher is still required to follow-up. The interpretations of the actor's intent and

meaning can be far more confidently stated with follow-up. In the context of this research specifically, when ambiguities arose over a participant's intent or meaning I would make a note and revisit the excerpt once more data had been analysed. For example, if I was unsure in an analysis of an early meeting in the research, if the participants frequent pauses and broken sentences were an expression of nervousness, another emotion, or perhaps just the way they spoke generally, I could come back to the instance once I had observed the same participant in other meetings and make a better assessment.

The fifth criterion is *self-awareness* and as the description of the methodology above makes clear, this is an essential component of the process. As Ybema et al. (2019) have argued, the researcher actively constructs the findings and their part in the process deserves careful consideration. Rather than adopting the requirement for an objective approach to research founded in positivism, DCA is designed to allow the researcher to acknowledge their part in the construction of the findings and to reflect and discuss them in the process.

DCA is unavoidably prone to researcher bias and given my proximity to the organisation this is an area that requires some discussion. The research is designed to offer a perspective rarely considered in organisational studies. As Tillmann-Healy (2003) describes it, it is a move from "studying them, to studying us" (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 735). Whilst this raises questions of bias, if we adopt the poststructuralist/post-modernist view that the researcher's perspective should be reflected on (Crotty, 1989) rather than discounted as biased (Haraway, 1991), we can consider valuable perspective with insights that would be unavailable to third-party researchers (Ellis, 2007; Kempster & Stewart, 2010). This approach is not an easy one to take, as Ellis (2007) points out, the researcher must apply the same degree of scrutiny to themselves as to the participant(s), and it is perhaps more difficult still to make a self-assessment of how well this has been done. Coghlan (2019) argues that the important criteria for valid, reliable, and credible research are that the researcher pays attention to the data, is intelligent in their inquiry, reasonable in their judgments, and responsible in their

decision-making. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue that reliability is a reflection of honesty and truthfulness. I have endeavoured to meet these criteria to the best of my abilities.

In taking the unusual decision to research an organisation to which I have such a close connection I knowingly and acceptingly anticipate critics suggesting that the researcher has interpreted the data with a bias toward the board of directors. However, as Ellis (2007) points out, in co-constructed autoethnographic research all parties stand to gain from the research. There would be nothing to be gained were I to approach the analysis with rose-tinted spectacles. The organisation welcomed the research as an opportunity to learn how to improve its approach to leadership. Portraying the findings in a favourable light would be counter-productive (as well as unethical). Whilst I accept that some scholars (particularly those of a positivist persuasion) would reject the research out of hand, I hope that those who give adequate consideration to the aims, and the reflexive nature of the research will view it as a step toward encouraging the consideration of multiple perspectives, from whichever angles researchers can find to explore the phenomena we strive to understand. I can only see limiting the perspectives considered as equating to limiting our understanding.

In taking such stringent steps to address the ethical concerns arising from the nature of the enquiry the design of the research could be argued to be less prone to a number of biases common in qualitative research. The meetings analysed would have taken place whether they were analysed or not, so the participants are less likely to have been affected by researcher. Furthermore, the participants are unlikely to have been concerned that what they said would be fed back to the board since the contents of the meetings were available to the board and always had at least one board member present, in this sense participant bias was significantly reduced in comparison to other data collection methods. The credibility of the findings is likely, therefore, to have been minimally affected by the data collection.

## 4.6 Chapter Summary

It became apparent that a significant contributing factor to the gaps identified in the literature review was the lack of a methodology suitable for addressing the research question. As mentioned in the introduction the influence of positivism on the study of leadership appears to have limited the potential for researchers to address the more abstract, complex and nuanced topics to the overall detriment of the field.

In this chapter I have outlined the ontological and epistemological positioning of this research, explained the aims of the research and in doing so presented the requirements for a suitable methodology. DCA is the result of trial and error, or perhaps more specifically, trial and frustration. The initial attempts to analyse the data using a combination of traditional methods were aborted, the methodology revised and the process repeated until DCA came into being.

The complexity of the process involved in DCA reflects the nature of discursively constructed phenomena. It is a methodology suited to researchers willing to embrace complexity and nuance and therefore would be ill-suited to a researcher looking to follow a set of simple instructions in order to conduct their research. The attempts to depict the process and to offer a step-by-step guide were challenging and ultimately needed to be broken up into sections.

The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the methodology which I hope will be adopted by future researchers. The following chapter details the findings of the research.

## 5. Findings

The findings have been grouped into three main categories, those relating to the analysis of the *Discourse* have been detailed in relation to the construction of culture. The findings in relation to power relationships follow, and the third section details specific instances of leadership and considers the findings identified in the consideration of power and culture in relation to the instances of leadership.

The analysis of the *Discourse* uncovered seven primary themes which are discussed below, along with thirty-nine sub-themes. The sub-themes are recorded with explanations and examples in Appendix C. The ways in which the *Discourses* are influenced by the participants and the way in which they influence the participants is then considered in relation to the collective construction of leadership.

The effects of the concepts of stance and status and epistemic and deontic orders, detailed in the Methodology chapter are explored through the *discourse* analysis of the power dynamics at play. The ways in which actors vie for power, successfully and unsuccessfully affecting their own and others' stances are considered in detail as is a consideration of the ways in which the *Discourses* identified affect this process.

The third stage of the Findings chapter concerns the analysis of the ways in which language is used to discursively construct leadership, and to bring the findings from the previous two sections together to present a more holistic explanation of the process.

The findings include excerpts from transcripts both from the *discourse* analysis, and from the analysis of the *Discourse* included within DCA. There are therefore some excerpts that contain the Jeffersonian Transcription System (JTS) (see Appendix B) annotations (those from the *discourse* analysis) and some which do not (those from the *Discourse* analysis). All excerpts from transcripts are in blue. There are also excerpts from my reflexive journal to explain aspects of the interpretive

stages of the analysis, these are recorded in purple to differentiate them from the main text and other excerpts.

### 5.1 The significance of the definition of collective leadership

Prior to detailing the main findings it is important to note the impact the definition of leadership adopted for this research has on the findings. As Ybema et al. (2019) noted, the researcher is an active participant in the construction of the findings, and as Edwards and Bolden (2023) argued the term collective leadership (CL) is given its meaning by the author writing about it. Having constructed the concept of CL for the purposes of this research, as detailed in the Methodology chapter, it quickly became clear that adopting a wide definition of the term and viewing the phenomenon not as individual acts of leadership, but as a group construct would lead to an increase in the instances of informal leadership.

Consider the excerpt below as a typical example;

Director D: Our pension (0.2)<sup>7</sup> our pension provision is pretty poor. Erm ( ) and I think that's something we're definitely going to have to look at improving within the next 12 months so I don't know (0.6) I don't know if ( ) how long the 1.2 factor is going to remain (0.2) you know, valid.

Director N: For the pension, even if we increased the pension, what is it now, is it 3 now, 3.5 something ( ) like ( ) that...

Operations Manager: It's 3 from the employer...

Director N: Yeah, and even if we put it up to ( ) 5 or 6 that's still (0.5) it's not a huge increase in our (-)

Director D: (supportive interruption) No.

Director N: costs, put it that way...

Director Y: Is that, is that a genuine retention factor at the moment? Are there other things(-)

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<sup>7</sup> Some of the excerpts are from transcripts which underwent a conversation analysis and therefore have notes from the Jeffersonian Transcription system (see appendix).

Director D: (excited interruption) No it's not. Nobody has raised the issue of pensions as an issue but I think that it is generally accepted that (-)

Director N: (corrective interruption) One person did in the feedback form

Operations Manager: Yeah people have raised it. We've said it would be reviewed in the employee benefits in the autumn.

Director D: Yeah

Director N: yeah

Director Y: Well if it's enacted in the autumn, let's say from October, even a one-point pension change isn't really going to have any significant impact on GP<sup>8</sup>, it'll have a (0.2) half, half a percent or something, third of a percent impact, so erm

D: Yeah.

Director Y: I would suggest keeping 1.2, because it is a crude measure anyway, but we're coming back to that later. Whereas 1.203 or 04 (laughs) I mean (-)

CEO: Ultimately we can't increase our pension contributions until we are profitable so (0.2), so you know at the moment it's not something we can do.

(Board Meeting April 2022)

To identify a leader in this instance would over-simplify the exchange. We could argue that the CEO is the leader since she shuts down the initial suggestion, but if we look more closely, the opening suggestion from Director D is that the pension contribution be reviewed within 12 months. So if the pension contribution was reviewed within 12 months from the time Director D made it we could argue this is an instance of D leading effectively. Or perhaps, if the review was done in the Autumn we could argue that Operations Manager is the leader since she proposed this. We might also note that the CEO is simply following the argument made by Director Y which immediately precedes her closing argument, if so perhaps Director Y is the leader. The reality is that this is an instance in which five participants contribute to an instance of collective leadership which has a number of effects. It raises awareness of the importance of pension contributions to some members of staff, assesses the

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<sup>8</sup> Gross Profit

costs, and highlights the need for the organisation to perform better to achieve the desired increase in contribution. Rather than referring to leaders as individuals, reference is made to individuals' contributions to leadership.

The same can be said for instances of informal leadership. The above example has five contributors, four directors, and the Operations Manager. The Operations Manager is of lower status than the others and therefore it could be said that she has made an informal contribution to leadership. If we imagine the ratios in reverse and consider the same example but with four Heads of Department and one Director (a more typical ratio) each contribution from a Head of Department could be considered an instance of informal leadership. This would create something of an issue in considering the findings in relation to the extant literature as instances of informal leadership are typically uncommon (e.g. Van De Mierop et al., 2020). The findings therefore refer to informal contributions only if the contributor is of lower status than the majority of the other parties to the instance of leadership since this is most in line with the definitions used in the extant literature. This makes instances of informal leadership appear less common than they might otherwise be since the opportunity for such instances to arise is relatively low by comparison.

A total of 137 instances of CL were recorded across the 30 meetings analysed.

In the following subsection of this chapter, I consider the discursive construction analysis (DCA) of the organisation's *Discourse*, identifying and describing the main themes, and considering the ways in which these *Discourses* contribute to the construction of collective leadership.

## 5.2 The use of Discourse to construct Culture, and the effect of Discourse on the construction of leadership.

The consideration of the cultural element focused on the slightly ambiguous (Mumby, 2011) term 'Discourse' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). To avoid ambiguity in this thesis, I use the term *Discourse* as an umbrella term to cover the themes identified as being instances of language being used to construct culture. I use 'cultural discourse' to refer to instances of the use of everyday language



being used to construct the organisation's culture and differentiate 'organisation-specific discourse' and 'industry-specific discourse' which refer to the language used that is specific to this organisation or the legal industry respectively (as mentioned in the Methodology chapter).

It is important to note that even an intense analysis of 25+ hours of meetings conducted over 12 months cannot provide an exhaustive list of all the language which affects the construction of culture. The reported findings represent the themes the researcher identified from an analysis of predominantly leadership-focused meetings. Other perspectives may well shed light on a multitude of alternative aspects of the culture and the interpretations of other researchers may differ from my own. The reflections made during the analysis are reported in some instances to explicitly address this.

### 5.2.1 The Themes

The discursive construction analysis (DCA) revealed 7 distinct themes or *Discourses*, although often with related features and in most cases numerous sub-themes (see Appendix C for a complete list of the themes and sub-themes with examples and Figure 5.1 for a brief overview). Throughout the analysis, the terminology used to describe the *Discourse* was typically a two-stage approach. For example 'Professional: Client-centric' would refer to the 'Professional' theme (a focus on the success of the business) but specifically relating to a 'client-centric' (a focus on the importance of the client) sub-theme. Sometimes more than one sub-theme from the same *Discourse* was identified. In that case, the reference might be 'Caring: Support, Reassurance', as was noted in an SLT meeting in April 2022 when the Head of Department A responded to the Operations Manager's concern about their workload;

Head of Department A: Well if there are fairly basic data protection enquiries I can still do that under the subscription. (SLT Meeting April, 2022).

The response simultaneously offered support and reassurance and was part of a longer dialogue in which these caring discourses were built up (see section 5.3.2 below) collectively by numerous participants keen to acknowledge and help a colleague.

Below each of the seven themes is considered in turn with some discussion over the complexities and nuances of the construction (and the identification of) *Discourse*.



Figure 5.1 The main Discourse and their sub-themes

### *(i) Caring*

The first theme was immediately apparent, a 'caring' *Discourse* was noted very early on in the analysis. This could be defined in line with West's (2022) concept of 'compassionate leadership', an approach to leadership which demonstrates a caring, or compassionate approach. Specifically in this analysis, the caring *Discourse* was comprised of seven sub-themes. Each of the sub-themes is detailed with examples in Appendix C but one example is the sub-theme of support. In the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) Meeting in October 2022, one of the employees from the IT department talked about the organisation paying for them to have some counselling to help them deal with stress. The same sub-theme was applied to an instance where the CEO specifically directed the participants in the meeting to support one another:

CEO: support and be kind to each other. I know it doesn't need to be said because I know that you're already doing this. But it is really, really important to make us all you know, feel like we want to be here. (SLHQ Meeting 29 November 2022)

The importance of the *Discourse* to the individual actor can be considered throughout the analysis process. In the excerpt above I noted in my reflexive diary that the CEO is also clarifying that this is an expectation, and as such a key part of the culture of the organisation. It was also not the first time the CEO had alluded to the importance of (what has been labelled in this research as) the caring *Discourse*, analysing such details of the 12-month research period enabled me to conclude with some confidence, the level of importance the individual actors attributed to the various *Discourses* (at least for the members of Board members and Heads of Department).

### *(ii) Survival*

Perhaps the most powerful and potentially detrimental of the themes 'Survival' is the only one of the seven themes identified without sub-themes. It refers to instances where the actor is creating an urgency that the action suggested is required for the firm to survive. The survival theme was not noted until the organisation began to experience financial difficulties (September 2022) at which

point it was used sparingly (at least in explicit terms), and often caveated to avoid panic, with a 'Professional: Positivity' Discourse (see the 'Professional' Discourse below, or appendix C for a specific example of this sub-theme).

The following account from Director D demonstrates the strength and potential detriment of the survival Discourse:

Director D: We're in we're in survival mode at the moment. We're not really exhibiting the characteristics of an ambitious and growing organisation at the moment because we're in safe mode. Yeah, I think that people feel that, and when everything that you're looking at, the news is about inflation and economic instability and recession, and massive tech companies making thousands of people redundant on mass at a moment's notice. People are just like 'shit, is that going to be me?' (Board Meeting, 28 November, 2022).

Director D makes clear the sentiment that has arisen in the organisation as a result of the problems being faced. He goes on to explain the effect this has on some of the other cultural themes identified by the research:

Director D: A lot of people join [the organisation] because of an, er, an ethos, and a culture and an idea and they're just seeing that perhaps take a bit of a backseat while we tried to steady the ship. (Board Meeting, 28 November 2022)

Director D then goes on to speak about balancing the volume of work people are doing and aiming to:

Director D: Maintain that sense that we are a good place to be, you know, a place that cares about its people, a place that cares about their learning and development and growth. (Board Meeting, 28 November 2022)

This is an example of the Survival Discourse 'outshining' the caring Discourse as the business focusses on what is necessary in order to survive. Director D also ends his discussion based on the survival discourse (as is typical for actors dealing with this cultural discourse) with a more positive one, speaking of a return to the 'Caring' and 'Community' cultural themes.

### *(iii) Superiority*

The third theme, 'superiority' refers to instances where one group (or in one of the ten sub-themes an individual) is held to be superior to another in some way. In some of the sub-themes the superiority *Discourse* refers to industry-specific terminology and appears to represent an industry-wide *Discourse* (and cultural norm). Sub-themes such as 'fee-earner vs non-fee earners'<sup>9</sup> and 'supervisor vs trainee' are examples industry-specific discourse which appear to have created a cultural norm within the legal industry. Whilst it is not the intention of this research to make generalisations, and there is insufficient data in this study to make a firm claim about the legal industry, it is important to consider the potential differences between organisation-specific *Discourse* and industry-specific *Discourse*. As noted in my reflexive diary, in relation to 'supervisors v trainees' as a sub-theme of the superiority *Discourse*:

The actors drew on their experience from other firms. [Head of Department W] speaks of 'part of the problem with [the organisation]...' in regard to the focus on managing trainees, suggesting other firms place less emphasis on the task. [Head of Department B] makes an observation that as a smaller firm, the organisation is disadvantaged in comparison to larger firms as the larger firms have "that trainee train running through", referring to staff appointed to developing trainees. [Director N] speaks of the methods she has developed for managing trainees throughout her time as a qualified solicitor (which goes back well before she joined [the organisation]). (Reflexive diary entry made during the analysis of the Supervision Feedback Meeting, May 2022).

Not only were the references made to the terms in relation to the actors' experience at other firms, but the superiority *Discourse* was expressed in these instances too. For example, in the last example cited in the reflexive diary Director, in explaining the strategy she has developed in her career to date toward managing trainees:

Director N: I will always say to my trainees it really irritates me if you just come and ask me lots of questions. (Supervision Feedback Meeting, May 2022).

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<sup>9</sup> Sometimes the term 'support staff' was used a less demeaning alternative, although this was less common.

The industry-specific sub-themes can be contrasted with organisation-specific sub-themes such as ‘whatever it takes vs nine-to-fivers’ and ‘business winners vs workhorses’, referring to people willing to put in whatever hours are necessary to finish a task versus those who only work their contracted hours, and those capable of winning new business versus those who just do the work they are given, respectively. In both examples, the former is viewed as the superior group. Whilst it is not the suggestion of this research that these themes only occur within this organisation, they form part of the culture of this organisation which does not necessarily apply to the legal industry more widely.

These sub-themes were constructed by either praising individuals who made additional effort or won new business, or writing off (or even denouncing) those who didn’t. In the following excerpt, Director D exalts a member of his team for not only working on a day she had taken as holiday but incurring the costs of a childminder so that she could do so:

Director D: She did have to give up a non-working day and pay a childminder to take her kids off her hands so she could complete the work for this client, which I think is a really good thing. So when the chips are down she will do what she needs to do to make things work. (Board Meeting, June 2022).

This can be contrasted with an instance in the same Board meeting in which Director N and the CEO are discussing an employee who has not been successful in winning new business:

Director N: I’ll see if we can get her to do a bit more. I don’t know that it’s a lost cause, growth mindset [CEO] (laughs) there's no such thing as a (-)

CEO: (excited interruption) Yeah but we all have strengths and weaknesses.

Director N: Of course.

CEO: Anyone can learn to sell, I completely agree with that but I think you know I think if she hasn’t mastered it by this stage of her career it's very unlikely that she will.

(Board Meeting, June 2022).

The superiority *Discourse* at times seems rather unpleasant. Suggesting that one group is better than another in some way may go against the principles of some people, and it was an area that I chose to

reflect on at length, largely due to my discomfort with it, having felt similar discomfort in my previous commercial/entrepreneurial roles. These reflections led to the following observation:

The nature of superiority Discourses appears to be well aligned with the survival Discourse. The organisation needs its staff to meet client demands, which may mean working longer hours and giving up holidays, as client demands dictate. [The organisation] needs to bring on new business and therefore values those who do. It needs people who are competent solicitors and therefore values the supervisor over the trainee, not just in terms of remuneration but culturally – this works not only as a reward for the supervisor (beyond remuneration) but an incentive for the trainees. It appears that to a large degree, the construction of culture is down to the survival of the organisation. Support for this can be found in the fact that some of the superiority Discourses are industry-wide cultural norms, and those that are organisation-specific appear to be those that meet the needs of [this organisation] specifically. (Reflexive diary entry, Supervision Feedback Meeting, May 2022)

It appears then that the construction of culture may have less to do with the conscious choices made by leaders than scholars such as Schein (2017) have suggested, and is more heavily influenced by the simple need to survive. This was supported in the transcript from a later board meeting:

CEO: So they're supposed to record seven and a half hours a day that they're working, so that we can see what they're doing. And not many people actually do that. And it doesn't seem to matter how many times I bang my head against a brick wall, it doesn't seem to change.

Director D: The flip side of this is that we're talking to everybody about dropping time recording and dropping hourly billing. So when we do that, how do we measure productivity? Surely the only way to do that is by revenue.

CEO: But that's a whole separate conversation [Director D]. And, and I don't think we should get sidetracked because we can't have that conversation about dropping time recording until we are in a much better place than we are now. Because at the moment we've, we have got the data available, and we have to use it. (Board Meeting, September 2022).

Typically solicitors in the UK record their time in 6-minute intervals so that the amount they bill their clients is transparent and clear<sup>10</sup>, this is known as time recording. As Director D mentions in the excerpt, the organisation has been trying to move away from time recording (which is unpopular with employees) and billing clients by the number of hours worked, toward billing a fixed fee for a set amount of work (whereby the organisation and the client know from the start how much the job will cost and what can be expected for that sum). The proposed move away from hourly billing (and with it time recording) spans a number of *Discourses*, one of which is the *Caring Discourse*. The organisation, through concern for their employees' wellbeing, had tried to move away from time recording, but as the CEO makes clear, in order to survive they need to know who is billing what so that they can ensure the minimum revenues are met. The effect then, of the survival *Discourse* overpowering the caring *Discourse*, is that a culture is created based on surviving, rather than (as the Board would have preferred) based on employee wellbeing.

*(iv) Home life*

The general acceptance, even encouragement of interruptions to meetings caused by children, pets, deliveries, and other aspects was termed 'Home Life'. This theme may have been particularly prevalent in this organisation due to the fact that employees generally worked from home and that meetings were held online. The language used around these subjects was almost always accepting and even encouraging. On multiple occasions, a young child would appear on a participant's lap or at their side and be encouraged to say 'hello' to the other participants. The participants would typically respond and converse with the child almost as though it was a welcome break from the discussions of work, as was the case in the following example when the CEO's son put in an appearance:

CEO: Do you want to say hello?

CEO's son: Hi everyone!

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<sup>10</sup> There are other ways in which clients are billed, such as offering a fixed fee for a set task, but hourly billing is common place throughout the industry.



[smiles and laughter, followed by lots 'Hi's and 'Hello's]

Hello. [holds up a spinning top] I'm just gonna make it spin, do you wanna see?

Participants generally: Yes...

CEO's son: I will do it right here... Just wait

CEO: OK they're ready

Head of Department L: [CEO] stand back

Head of Department B: Every time you talk (Head of Department L) it goes off the screen and I can't see it! [laughs]

Head of Department L: Now you're doing it [Head of Department B]. [laughs]

CEO: OK one more time quickly because people have to get on.

CEO's son: OK. Everyone ready?

[The spinning top spins and some shout 'Woo-hoo' others applaud]

CEO: OK [CEO's son] we're going to go now, say goodbye to everyone.

CEO's son: Goodbye everyone!

All: Bye [CEO's son]!

[waving from CEO's son and participants]

(SLT Team Call April 2022)

There seemed to be no shame or avoidance of people leaving meetings to answer the door when a delivery arrived or other similar interruptions occurred. In one instance Director D excused himself momentarily from a Board Meeting when he received a call from his mother.

The responses to interruptions fell into one of two categories, 'Accepting' when an issue from an individual's private life which interrupts or detracts from the meeting is accepted (without comment or any non-verbal communication to suggest disapproval), or 'Welcoming' when the meetings are interrupted by children or pets (there were no other examples in the data) and the other participants welcome the interruption by engaging with the subject of the interruption (as in the excerpt above).

It is worth noting that the *Discourse* termed 'Home Life: Accepting' is an example of a lack of language, or silence, creating the cultural discourse. The concept of silence and its effects on leadership are discussed further in the third part of this chapter but in terms of *Discourse* specifically, there are two significant observations to note.

The first is that it can be very difficult for a researcher to identify instances of *Discourses* when their very existence is constructed from what is not said. As a researcher with a commercial background, I have experience in meetings such as those being observed in companies I have worked for, and companies I have owned and run, and it is therefore, some of the more unusual aspects of this organisation that stand out for me. Not having worked from home (as is the norm at this organisation) I am not used to interruptions family members and pets in business meetings. I have, therefore, picked up on instances such as this one. This serves though as a reminder, that there seems to be a strong likelihood that I have missed instances of *Discourses*, which are constructed through the absence of language, simply because I am too familiar with the culture of the organisation I am observing.

The second observation concerning silence is that certain *Discourses* were apparent without any identifiable language bringing them into being. It is perhaps redundant to point out that the culture in an organisation is not constructed afresh at the commencement of each meeting. Certain understandings, cultural norms, values, etc. will have been established long before my research began. *Discourses* will therefore exist prior to them being identified by the researcher (if indeed they are identified at all). This challenge is mitigated to some extent through the decomposition stage of DCA which allows the researcher to revisit the transcripts once *Discourses* have been identified, and to deconstruct text in other contexts to see if the influence of a given *Discourse* may have applied in a setting where the language does not make it explicit. For example, the opening to the Supervision Feedback Meeting in May 2022, a meeting in which superiority *Discourse* has been discussed above, starts with an opening from the Operations Manager which is atypical in its pauses and broken

sentences. It is presented below as an excerpt from the analysis of the *discourse* to allow the JTS annotations to demonstrate the apparent nervousness of the participant.

Operations Manager: Okey dokes. (0.2) Cool. (0.2) Well thanks for joining. Me and [Director N] had a chat with our (0.3) trainees, paralegals, more ( ) sort of junior solicitors, probably a couple of months ago now. Admittedly I did actually forget to arrange the follow-up session, so sorry that it's so (0.2) so late. Erm (1.3) but still, I think it's important that we go through the feedback with you that they (0.2) that they gave. Erm (0.1) So I'll go through the (0.2) the notes that I made and then if [Director N] wants to ( ) to add anything on to that then she can erm (1.5), I think, [Director N] do you want to run through the sort of trainee uhm (0.1) appraisal system separately after we've had the session on the 14<sup>th</sup> June ↑? (Supervision Feedback Meeting, May 2022)

Whilst any comparison with other more typical excerpts from this participant would show that the frequency of pauses and broken sentences were not the usual style of speech for this individual, it is difficult for the researcher to understand why that is the case. However, once the 'Superiority: Supervisors vs Trainees' *Discourse* had been identified in this meeting a deconstruction of the text suggests that this provides a likely explanation as to why the Operations Manager seemed to be nervous about introducing a meeting in which her role is to pass on the criticisms from trainees to their supervisors.

#### *(v) Professional*

One of the most common *Discourses* (along with the caring *Discourse*) the 'professional' theme was present throughout the research and not absent from a single meeting. This theme is defined as a direct focus on ensuring the business is successful. The professional theme comprised nine sub-themes which are detailed in full in Appendix C. The most common sub-themes were 'Professional: Financial' and 'Professional: Reality' The financial sub-theme refers to arguments that are justified based on their financial impact or that emphasise the importance of it. The 'reality' sub-theme comprises instances in which the actor bases their argument on industry norms, expectations, or

requirements. For example, in discussing the organisation's shift from a regulated law firm to an unregulated one, one of the directors made the following remark:

Director D: I mean, the fact is if any of our clients want to... they can do so because under our terms they can. That's because, that's because, as an SRA-regulated entity, we can't stop clients from terminating their relationship with us if they want to. (Board Meeting, 7 September 2022).

Director D makes clear that any client can terminate their contract with the organisation if they choose to do so as the contracts are regulated by the Solicitors Regulatory Authority (SRA). Hence the applied theme 'Professional: Reality'. This is a powerful cultural discourse as it leaves little room for dissent, although when applied inaccurately or inappropriately its effectiveness is diminished (as discussed below).

The professional *Discourse* should be differentiated from the 'survival' theme. Rather than being two distinct *Discourses* the survival *Discourse* picks replaces the professional *Discourse* when that which is desired or important (Professional) becomes that which is essential for the firm's survival. For example, the discussion solicitor's targets might be 'Professional: Financial' in the following situation:

CEO: So our revenue of April was only 257,000. So obviously quite a lot below our target. But May was really, really good May was 335,000. So that was an you know, 30% higher than April's revenue and our gross profit for May was 188,000 and that's a gross profit margin of 55%. (Town Hall Meeting, July 2022)

The *Discourse* moves into the survival category, however, in the following excerpt which also centres on the employees' targets:

Director D: We have very achievable chart targets across the business that simply aren't being met. Our productivity levels at the moment are pretty poor. We had a fairly terrible August, which was to be expected. But based on the data, which (CEO) is going to look at shortly, there's some warning signs that we're not going to have a tremendous rebound in September. There will come a point, as there comes a point for any other business, whether it's in the professional services industry or not, where simply the costs of doing business are going to be greater than our revenues. (SLT Mandatory Meeting, September 2022).

The strength of the survival *Discourse* is again evident in relation to the professional *Discourse* and as such its influence on the construction of the culture, as postulated in the second excerpt from the reflexive diary in consideration of the superiority *Discourse*, is further supported.

*(vi) Ethical*

The 'ethical' theme refers to instances when actors express their support or dissent for an argument based on a moral code. Five sub-themes were identified and are listed with examples in Appendix C. One of the sub-themes, the 'professional code of conduct' has a formal set of rules, laid out by the SRA to regulate the conduct of solicitors, the other themes are down to the individual or group to determine through their interactions.

The 'personal moral standard' sub-theme references instances in which the actor's argument is guided by a personal moral standard. For example, the CEO when considering a redundancy which was to be implemented responded to the argument that it should be done as quickly as possible by saying:

CEO: But I just don't know if I can make her redundant three weeks before Christmas. It just feels like a really shitty thing to do. (Board Meeting 28 November 2022).

In this example, as is frequently the case in the data, we can see that more than one of the *Discourses* identified is present. In the example above the 'Caring: Concern' *Discourse* is present alongside the 'Ethical: Personal Moral Standard'.

*(vii) Community*

The seventh and last of the *Discourses* identified in this research concerns actors using language such as 'we' or 'us' to explicitly define the culture of the organisation. All of the identified themes contribute toward the culture of the organisation, this theme concerns those instances when the actor makes specific and overt claims about what the organisation's culture is. Frequently the sub-themes relate to another theme that has been identified above. To be included in this theme it is not

sufficient that the actor is expressing (for example) a caring sentiment, they must be describing the organisation as being caring. An instance such as this would be termed 'Community: Caring' and would almost certainly have an additional label relating to the specific type of 'caring' from the caring *Discourse* sub-themes. There is, as a result, a significant overlap with the *Discourses* mentioned above, and the nuances and complexities of a consideration of the prevalent *Discourses* perhaps become most apparent in considering this section, as was noted in my reflexive diary midway through the analysis:

The community *Discourse* category needs to be considered further. At this stage, I'm not sure whether to record this as a separate theme from the others or maybe each of the relevant *Discourses* should have an additional sub-theme in which I note instances in which the participant uses terms such as 'we' to explicitly define the culture of a specified group<sup>11</sup>. (Reflexive Diary entry from the analysis of Senior Leadership Team Meeting, August 2022).

As is now apparent, I stuck with the coding system in which the community *Discourse* warranted a theme, although I acknowledge there is an argument that it could be considered a collection of sub-themes better classified within the other *Discourses*. The community *Discourse* is considered to be a theme because, unlike the other sub-themes, there is a distinct theme connecting the instances of its occurrences. Whilst sub-themes all relate to the theme to which they are attributed, they do not relate to one another across themes in a consistent way. The instances of community *Discourse*, however, do. They are all instances in which the participant actively and explicitly defines the organisation's culture. For example, in the following excerpt, Director S addresses the company as a whole:

Director S: So it's really important for us as a company to, to speak the language of who we want to target. (Town Hall Meeting, March 2023)

This excerpt was labelled 'Professional: Client-centric' to reflect the fact that Director S is highlighting the need for the organisation to understand its prospective clients in order to improve its business

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<sup>11</sup> This would include the organisation as a whole

development strategy. It was also labelled as 'Community: Professional' because Director S is not making her comment about strategy exclusively, she is making her argument a part of the organisational culture, which is an important distinction from the following example:

CEO: So there's going to be two options, a subscription or a fixed fee. And what we would ideally like to be able to do is to give clients a choice. (Town Hall Meeting, October 2022).

In the second example, the CEO explains that clients will be given a choice in how they would like to instruct the organisation, either to commit to a set number of hours each month for a recurring payment (subscription) or to pay for a set amount of work for a set price (fixed fee). This was also coded as 'Professional: Client-centric', but it was not included in the instances being coded under the community theme. The CEO was simply stating a company policy, she was not attempting to make this a part of the company culture. Had the CEO said, "As a client-friendly organisation we should offer two options..." or, "Since client choice is at the forefront of our mission statement we will offer two options..." then the instance would be included as an instance of community Discourse.

Now that the main themes have been identified and discussed, consideration will be given to the ways in which the participants influenced the effectiveness of the Discourses (and the ways in which the Discourses influenced the participants).

### 5.3 The role of Discourses in the construction of CL

In this section of the chapter I consider the way in which the Discourses identified affected the construction of CL and the influence the participants had on its effect. I also consider some of the ways participants strategically used Discourses to strengthen their contributions to CL, as well as some of the ways in which they were neglected or inappropriately used.

### 5.3.1 Constructing Discourses – the coloured lights analogy

As mentioned above the seven themes identified could and often did overlap, meaning multiple themes could be observed in one instance. The coloured lights analogy, helps to explain this<sup>12</sup>. If we assigned a red light to the ‘Caring’ theme and a yellow light to the ‘Ethical’ theme, the result of both themes being employed at the same time would result in an orange light. An example of this would be the CEO saying;

CEO: But I just don't know if I can make her redundant three weeks before Christmas. It just feels like a really shitty thing to do. (Board Meeting, 28 November 2022).

As noted above the CEO draws on both the ‘ethical’ and ‘caring’ Discourses. The analogy can also be used to explain the extent to which the Discourses are relevant. This can vary and an assessment of this would be subjective, but for the sake of argument, we might say that in the example given there was an equal influence of the Caring and Ethical Discourses. In the following example, whilst there are multiple Discourses they are not used with equal emphasis:

CEO: You know, we're stepping away from the regulated environment, because it's really restricting our ability to innovate. Erm, and moving away from them gives us more flexibility, more freedom to be more creative with the services that we're offering. (Board Meeting, September 2022).

This excerpt follows a conversation in which the board had been discussing the financial advantages associated with being a non-regulated law firm when compared to being a regulated firm, including a significant saving in the insurance premium. The main theme running through this conversation was therefore ‘Professional: Financial’. The CEO then pointed out (in the excerpt quoted) that an additional advantage is that non-regulated law firms can offer a more flexible service to clients. The ‘Professional: Client-centric’ theme is then added, but it was my interpretation that the main reason for considering changing to a non-regulated status was financial. Assigning coloured lights analogy

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<sup>12</sup> This should not be confused with Pendleton and Furnham’s (2012) colours of leadership, which is an entirely different concept.



then, we might assign a blue light to the financial element, and a green to the client-centric but note that more of the blue light is coming through, giving us a peacock blue rather than a teal colour.

Hence there are an infinite number of potential *Discourses*, in the same way there are infinite shades of colours.

Furthermore, on numerous occasions during the analysis the effect of a *Discourse* was present in a meeting, the recording of which covered the start to the finish, but there was no identifiable use of language that created it in that instance. It seems some of the *Discourses* were present without the need to be verbally expressed. Similarly, some *Discourses* that were present seemed to disappear (or be turned off to use the analogy) again without any specific challenge or dissent toward them being expressed. Of course, the culture in an organisation is not re-created in every meeting, some aspects of the culture exist without the need to refer to them and this muddies the waters for the researcher trying to understand such a complex phenomenon. With these caveats declared, there were identifiable strategies used by participants to shape the *Discourses* at play in the organisation.

### 5.3.2 Supporting a Discourse and building momentum for a Discourse

Once a *Discourse* has been introduced it might be supported by other participants through their expression of agreement for an argument that is grounded within that theme. A step further is when the participants build momentum for the *Discourse*, this is when the participants base further arguments on the prevailing *Discourse*. The *Discourse*, in this manner, gathers strength (or using the analogy above is made brighter). To clarify the difference between *supporting* and *building momentum* for a *Discourse* consider the following example which encapsulates both. The following excerpt is from the Board Meeting held in September 2022. The CEO argues that the solution to the problem being faced is to generate more revenue, grounding her argument in the 'Professional: Financial' *Discourse*, which overlaps with the 'Professional: Reality' *Discourse*. Director Y follows this:

Director Y: Yeah, the summary was pretty much that. So, I think, well, there are two problems... The second problem, like [CEO] is saying is that basically we aren't doing enough

billable hours. To summarise, we, last month I think, [CEO] correct me if I'm wrong, if we were optimistic, if we're optimistic, then with 250 grand of recognised revenue, which is obviously nowhere near our capacity, which is, which is much, much higher". (Board Meeting, October 2022).

Whilst the dialogue doesn't flow particularly well (Director Y was clearly thinking things through as he spoke) we can see a distinct support for the *Discourse* followed by the building of momentum for it. In the first sentence, the simple agreement with the CEO's argument provides support for the cultural discourse on which the argument is based – if the argument is sound then we can assume the cultural discourse on which it is based is also sound, unless otherwise indicated. As the Director goes on he builds the momentum of the *Discourse* (a blend of Professional: Financial and Professional: Reality) by providing examples. Indeed, he goes beyond the quoted dialogue to present a table showing the revenue contrasting the actual revenue with the potential based on the number of fee-earners.

In this way, the participants have some control over the effect of the *Discourses*. As demonstrated above, it would be a mistake to place too much emphasis on the extent to which the participants control the construction of the organisational culture, but equally, it should be noted that the actors demonstrated a degree of control over the effects of the prevalent *Discourses*.

### 5.3.3 Challenging a Discourse

The importance of *Discourses* could be directly challenged by contradicting an argument that had been underpinned by a specific *Discourse*. For example, in the Supervision feedback meeting of May 2022, the supervisors are discussing the time available to them to provide supervision. Head of Department B uses a combination of the 'Superiority: Bigger law firms', and the 'Professional: Reality' *Discourses* to base his argument that he doesn't have the time to supervise trainees that he would have if he were in a big firm. Director D then argues that the problem of insufficient time arises because they work remotely. This argument is also grounded in the 'Professional: Reality' *Discourse*, but in a different aspect of it to the first. The two arguments, although seeking the same

justification undermine one another to some extent since the reason for the lack of time is unclear. This provides an opportune moment for a challenge to the importance of the 'Professional: Reality' theme in this context and is astutely picked up on by Head of Department A who challenged Head of Department B's premise:

Head of Department A: The fact that we are not a big law firm requires us all to put more effort into training our trainees because we can't afford to hire them and then lose them because they're not good enough. So the effort we put into training pays off because they're capable of doing the job. So it's not, yeah it's true that we do not have a machine that trains trainees. That's on us, every single fee-earner, to train them. Otherwise, we're not going to have capable lawyers at the end of the process". (Supervision Feedback Meeting, May 2022).

Grounded in the 'Caring: Supportive' *Discourse*, with elements from 'Community: Employee-centric' and 'Professional: Progress' *Discourses*, the counter-argument raises the importance of the Caring *Discourse* in this meeting and challenges the importance of the Professional *Discourse* as asserted.

Direct challenges, such as this one were less common than the strategy of limiting the cultural discourse, which is discussed below, partly because the ability to challenge a *Discourse* is limited to those with sufficient stance and epistemic authority to exercise such a challenge, and partly due to the confrontational nature of such a challenge. The fact that Head of Department A used a caring *Discourse* to challenge her colleagues softens the confrontational aspect. The caring *Discourse* is inherent in the organisation's culture, if participants accept the premise, 'this is a caring organisation' then an argument based on the importance of caring is less likely to be contested (this is discussed in more detail below).

#### 5.3.4 Limiting a *Discourse*

As *Discourses* are introduced and build in momentum on occasion actors express the sentiment that the prevailing *Discourse* has become too strong (or too bright using the analogy) and they use a strategy termed here as 'limiting' the *Discourse*. In the Supervision Feedback meeting of May 2022 (in which the operations manager presented feedback from the trainees to supervisors), we can see

a particularly clear example of limiting the *Discourse*. During the opening dialogue of the meeting in which the Operations Manager listed a number of concerns and criticisms of the supervisors, Director N interrupted, in her words, to ‘push back’. This ‘push back’ explicitly<sup>13</sup> introduced the ‘Superiority: Supervisors vs Trainees *Discourse*’. The Superiority *Discourse* gathered momentum quickly as Director D supported, and Head of Department B built momentum for the *Discourse* as if they had been waiting for an opportunity to do so. The *Discourse* was then limited by Head of Department A who suggested that calls for more initiative from trainees should only apply to trainees in their second (and final) year of training but that first-year trainees be given more support. So rather than challenging the *Discourse* as she had done in the example above, Head of Department A limited its use to a smaller, more specific category.

An additional example that differentiates challenging and limiting *Discourses*, appears later in the same meeting when Director N re-introduces Superiority *Discourse* in a challenge to the prevailing (at that time) caring *Discourse*. The Operations Manager was again interrupted by the Director who contradicted her arguing that as long as supervisors made their expectations clear from the start there was no need for a consideration of the arguments grounded in the Caring *Discourse* the operations manager had proposed. Director D took a middle position, he did not disagree with the argument made by Director N but pointed out that there is always room for improvement and that they were there to learn from the feedback, limiting the strength of the Superiority *Discourse*.

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<sup>13</sup> The term ‘explicitly’ is used here as I believe the cultural effect was present before it was brought in through language and that evidence of this could be seen in the unusual degree of nervousness in the Operations Manager’s opening language (which is discussed separately in the ‘leadership’ section of the findings) as she fed back to the participants.

### 5.3.5 Organisation-specific and industry-specific discourse.

Part of the ambiguity surrounding the term big 'D' Discourse, is the distinction between the everyday language used to construct culture and the organisation-specific discourse. In some research, the term 'Discourse' refers specifically to organisation-specific discourse and the way it contributes to the construction of culture (covered in more depth in the Methods and Discussion chapters), in other research the term *Discourse* is used more widely. In this research I have tried to differentiate between the organisation-specific, industry-specific, and cultural discourse, as discussed in the Methodology chapter.

It is worth noting a couple of examples of organisation-specific *Discourse* used in this organisation in order to contribute to an explanation of the construction of the culture. The organisation derives some of its organisation-specific language from the Flamingo, used as the organisation's logo. The bird theme was used in the naming of subsidiary companies owned by the organisation and in keeping with this theme the term 'flockers' is used to refer to the organisation's members. Derived from this, the Operations Manager was termed 'mother flocker', a term of endearment to express her caring sentiment (contributing to the 'Caring: Cultural' *Discourse*) and with obvious undertones meant to be humorous ('Community: Fun' *Discourse*).

Perhaps the most significant organisation-specific term though was "#HumanLawyers". The hashtag, being used as a social media reference but often included when participants used the term orally. This is a term grounded in the 'Community: Caring' *Discourse* to define the organisation. It has wide implications and was intentionally used to mean different things to clients and employees. For clients, the term meant that the people working for the organisation cared about them, cared about their business, and wanted to help them. For the employees (and prospective employees) it meant the organisation cared about them, their goals, their lives outside the organisation, and about supporting them. As Director D explained, the term had mixed effects:

Director D: Sometimes the human lawyers aspect to our culture means that people feel uncomfortable giving the sort of feedback they may have received at other firms which were not Hashtag Human Lawyers. What I mean by that is that I think [the organisation] fosters a culture of being very, very nice and very polite all the time” (Supervision Feedback Meeting, May 2022).

Lots of the language used was industry-specific, meaning that its use in the legal industry may differ from its use in other contexts. There are too many examples to list, some have been mentioned above, as they relate specifically to the themes identified. Others had a less obvious effect, terms such as ‘billable hours’, ‘WIP’ (work in progress), ‘time recording’ contribute to the culture of the organisation not least in identifying it, culturally, as a law firm.

#### 5.3.6 Layering Discourses

Layering *Discourses* refers to the employment of multiple themes at the same time as can be seen in the following statement from Director D:

Director D: I think we just need to have that stern conversation with the SLT next week where we just lay it out and just say, you know, we really need everybody to, to kind of buck-up, find our hustle, dig deep, whatever word, whatever expression you want to choose because it just feels at the moment that everybody's resting on their laurels, and we just simply can't. We don't have, we don't have a cash position that allows us to do that. We have to really graft over the next three months. We need everybody to graft hard. You know, we're not, we're not in the business of, we're not in the business of failing to recognise when people do graft hard. We're, you know, we're very supportive and very rewarding of people that do well. But we just need to see that we need to see the hustle”.(Board Meeting, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2022).

Director D starts by grounding his argument in ‘Professional: Reality’ (the organisation is in a position where it needs its members to work hard and bring in new business), he adds a touch of the ‘Survival’ *Discourse* to the ‘Professional: Reality’ (people can’t rest on their laurels because the organisation doesn’t have enough cash for that), and the fact that he uses language which defines the organisation means the ‘Community: Professional’ *Discourse* applies here too. Then Director D

adds the 'Caring: Recognition' Discourse (the organisation doesn't fail to recognize the contributions of its members), the 'Caring: Support' ('we're very supportive'), and the 'Caring: Incentivising' (the organisation rewards people who do well). Again, the caring Discourses are used not just to express a caring sentiment but to define the culture of the organisation, and as such the 'Community: Caring' Discourse applies. More subtly Director D shifts the problem for the poor performance away from the directors he is addressing, and places it firmly with the Heads of Department (the SLT) which is classified as 'Professional: Shifting/assigning the problem'. The layering of the Discourses in this manner has some significant effects.

The argument Director D presents is strengthened by the fact that he is drawing on themes that have been used throughout the transcripts analysed, and therefore presumably were used more generally, to define the culture of the organisation in a way that is generally accepted (at least in the meetings analysed in this research) by the other participants. His premise therefore appears solid and on that basis, the conclusion seems justified. Indeed, later in this meeting Director D is called upon by Director Y to deliver exactly this message to the SLT in a meeting which takes place shortly after the board meeting this is taken from.

The layering also has the effect that it can appeal to individuals who concern themselves predominantly with the financial success of the business, but also with those whose primary concern is the welfare of the employees. There are in effect multiple arguments being presented to support the conclusion that the SLT needs to perform better which might be summarised as the business needs it, and the business deserves it.

Assigning the problem being faced to a group who are not present may endear the speaker to those present and they may feel a greater inclination to support the argument than they would have done if he had made an equally plausible argument that the members of the board should have done more to generate new business themselves. It seems, with the benefit of being able to see the consequences of the blame being shifted from the Board to the SLT over the months that followed,

that whilst this instance of leadership may have been popular in the boardroom, it was not so well received in the organisation more widely. It is worth noting that instances of effective contributions to the leadership (it should be emphasised that this excerpt was a contribution to an instance of leadership which led to the assignment of blame to the SLT, rather than the instance itself) do not necessarily mean that the consequences are as desired.

### 5.3.7 When Discourses Become Detrimental

There were several instances throughout the research period in which the strength of a certain *Discourse* had a detrimental effect on the individual's or the organisation's goals. This is alluded to in the discussion above on 'limiting' and 'challenging' *Discourses*. The most obvious example comes from the strongest *Discourse*, 'Survival'.

When this *Discourse* was employed it was typically softened by the 'Professional: Positivity' *Discourse* to avoid panic as Director Y and the CEO demonstrated in the Board Meeting held in September 2022:

Director Y: What I'm really saying is, by my calculation anyway, back of a fag packet but nevertheless, we absolutely have to be hitting these targets going forward. Because even if we do hit them, you can see the cash is quite prickly as it is. And I don't think there's any time to do sort of business viability analysis. But if we do not deliver on these, and we are not doing 70, 80 grand a week, then you can see how this minus 22 grand [referring to a slide he is sharing] starts becoming significant enough, such as we can't manage the intraday cash to be able to meet what we owe essentially... But I think last week, for example, the available search, billable time to total hours worked was about half. So you know, there is clearly more to squeeze from the resources that we have.

CEO: Yeah, so it is concerning. I am worried about it... So I don't know how we fix this. I mean, we know, we know that the revenue targets are achievable, without expecting lawyers to work ridiculously long hours. We know that our cost base is not out of line with our revenue, if we can hit our revenue targets, like there is enough of a profit margin there to support the cost base that we have. (Board Meeting, September, 2022)



In both cases, Director Y and then the CEO, start with a cultural discourse relating to the Survival Discourse and in both cases, they conclude with a 'Professional: Positivity' Discourse. The only instances in which the survival Discourse was not immediately paired with the 'Professional: Positivity' were instances in which the Survival Discourse was merely hinted at whilst the actor employed a more dominant alternative Discourse.

The reason the Survival Discourse was always followed by the 'Professional: Positivity' Discourse was made clear by the CEO:

CEO: I think the long and short of it is, is we're still about twenty percent below where we need to be. Which I think is a pretty accurate reflection of where we are actually too. So the question is if by sending [the numbers] out today to everybody, I can't just send out and say everything's fine. But equally, I don't want to alarm everybody. So, what message do we want to send to everybody about the situation, what the situation is at the moment? (Board Meeting, October 2022).

The potency (or 'brightness') of the Survival discourse means too much of it will lead to "alarm" or panic, which could lead to despair. It also addresses an issue that applies to all the Discourses; overuse could become detrimental.

Whilst the overuse of the Survival Discourse was identified relatively quickly in the analysis, it was less apparent that other Discourses could also be overused. Director D explains this in regards to the 'Professional: Positivity' Discourse';

Director D: I think that what they're, what they're seeing, though, is a lot of positive messaging around how we're growing and all the exciting things that are happening and all the new people that are joining the business. So the assumption is that if we can afford to recruit all these new people, we must be doing all right. (Board Meeting, September, 2022).

It is clear from Director D's explanation that the overuse of the 'Professional: Positivity' Discourse has been detrimental. A similar effect was noted in regard to the use of the caring Discourse. Whilst typically spoken about as having a positive effect on the organisation, attracting lawyers and non-lawyers looking to join the "#HumanLawyers", and differentiating the organisation from competitors

when overused the caring *Discourse* could be detrimental as Director D made clear in the Supervision Feedback Meeting in May 2022.

Director D: I do also feel, although I do really value it, I think it's a real draw to everybody who works here, sometimes the human lawyers aspect to our culture means that people feel uncomfortable giving the sort of feedback they may have received at other firms which were not Hashtag Human Lawyers. What I mean by that is that I think [the organisation] fosters a culture of being very, very nice and very polite all the time, which is not to say that we should be nasty bastards but I think that sometimes you need to tell it straight to people... And I don't like to be that person, who erm, who's having to say those things but at the same time if they're not said you can't expect people to improve. (Supervision Feedback Meeting, May 2022).

Director D's prescience on this subject was notable when, a few months later in the Board Meeting in September 2022, the CEO admitted that her tendency to place too much emphasis on creating a caring culture had led to complacency amongst the SLT;

CEO: I've never wanted to be the type of firm that is beating people over the head because they're not meeting targets but I just don't know what else to do

Director S: ... Is this a problem with the heads of department?

CEO: I think it's a problem across the board.

Director Y: I was just going to say it's a DNA issue we never tested. So yeah [trails off]

CEO: People are too relaxed about it. And we have to take responsibility for that, I have to take responsibility for that.

(Directors S and D nod).

(Board Meeting September 2022)

### 5.3.8 Failing to Draw on Appropriate Discourses

The importance of *Discourses* could be observed as much in their absence as in their use. In the Supervision Feedback Meeting, May 2022, the Operations Manager opens the meeting by essentially listing the feedback points made by the trainees. No discernible cultural discourses are underlining

her opening and she is interrupted within the first few minutes by an assertive contradiction from Director N. Of the 30 meetings analysed, this is the only instance in which an assertive contradiction comes only minutes into the meeting, they are rarely used over the 25+ hours analysed and are usually only used after more diplomatic attempts have been attempted. It is almost certainly the case that the strength of the Operation Manager's arguments would have been increased if she had grounded them in an appropriate *Discourse*. Of course, they may still have been contradicted but the absence of *Discourse* made the contradiction easier and stronger as it was based on the 'Superiority: Supervisors vs Trainees' *Discourse* – a cultural norm that exists in this organisation and seemingly in most other UK law firms<sup>14</sup>.

It is not just the absence of *Discourse* that can weaken an argument, in some instances the participant chose to ground their arguments in inappropriate *Discourses*. In the SLT Mandatory Meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2022, Head of Department H argued that whilst his team was not meeting their targets, they had a lot of quotes out with clients, so were in a stronger position than they appeared to be. Head of Department H grounds his argument in the 'Professional: Financial' *Discourse*, but as Director D points out in his response, it is not an appropriate grounding. Quotes are not revenue and the targets are for revenue, so by correctly applying a 'Professional: Reality' *Discourse* to his argument, Director D contradicts the argument of Head of Department H. Rather than this being an instance of the 'Professional: Reality' *Discourse* trumping 'Professional: Financial', it is an example of the 'Professional: Financial' being used inappropriately.

Perhaps the most extreme example of an inappropriate employment of a *Discourse* occurred during the Board Meeting in April 2022. The CEO expressed concern over the costs of the annual company get-together and Director N responded with an proposal to hire a 'massive house', grounded in the 'Community: Fun' *Discourse* much to the amusement of Directors Y and D:

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<sup>14</sup> Based on comments made by the participants in this study about experience with previous employers.

CEO: I think we need to be really clear on what (0.1) the social committee can spend and what their remit is. (1.1) And it's a bit scary really when you think about it because actually like, if we were to get everybody in the business together face to face once a year, I mean that's really expensive.

Director Y: Oh yes!

Director N: [Director Y] and I had quite a long conversation about this on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March when we all met up, and (0.2) you know different options, and we thought (0.8) and everyone sitting around the table who was listening or, or half listening at the time agreed, we thought maybe renting somewhere, like renting a massive house ( ) somewhere ( ) would be awesome

Director Y: (smiling) (.hhh) it's quite difficult (-)

Director N: There are really big places in the centre of the UK, there are massive places that you can just rent, like old hotels and stuff (-)

Director D: (Excited interruption) What about Blenheim Palace?

(Board Meeting, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2022)

The transcript from the *discourse* analysis was referred to in analysing this excerpt as there are hints, identified by the JTS annotations, that Director N may have realised her mistake as she spoke but felt unable to backtrack. There is a long pause (0.8 seconds) before she claims to have the support of many other people, and then there are multiple pauses between the closing words of her suggestion.

### 5.3.9 The Degree to Which Cultural Discourse Affects the Construction of Leadership

As has been argued, it would be nigh-on impossible for any researcher, through any means, to make the claim that they are aware of all the *Discourses* affecting an organisation. The effects of some *Discourses* exist without being spoken, the effects of some may be taken for granted by a researcher from the same culture, or so obscure to one from another culture that they may be missed. The effect on each individual participant will be different, their perception of which discourses are at play will be different, and the context will of course change their effects too. All this combined with the infinite potential combinations of *Discourses* and their ever-changing state means that we are a long

way from being able to understand the influence of *Discourse* on leadership in any generic or holistic sense.

That caveated, we can observe the effects of the *Discourses* at play and this analysis suggests that they may be more powerful than they have been given credit for. Scholars have to date, to the best of my knowledge, concluded that *Discourse*, is the foundation on which leadership is built (Fairhurst & Coreen, 2004; Sutherland, 2018), or the language that constructs the culture (Alvesson, 2004) but not the acts of leadership per se. In this research on at least one occasion, the *Discourse* at play seemed to overrule the language being used to lead. Toward the end of the Supervision Roundtable in November 2022 (a meeting in which trainees get an opportunity to give feedback to the Operations Manager and one of the Heads of Department assigned to take charge of the trainees) the trainees had given several critiques of their supervisors and as the meeting drew to a close the following exchange took place.

Operations Manager: What I will say is, I understand how difficult it is to go to somebody whether their name's on the door or whether you see them working till 2am and you feel you've got constructive feedback to offer... Although you might not have a sort of a personal connection or relationship with [CEO] or other members of the board. To them this, this business is everything. And you know, you might not be having one-on-ones with them every week, but they do genuinely care about this business. They have to make really hard decisions and you try for it to not be personal. It can be personal, especially when it comes to things like redundancies, but you're being asked for that to give your feedback, right? And I know it can feel challenging but if you aren't happy and for those reasons, you're thinking of leaving or you know you're deciding you might want to do something else with your career. Please say something rather than nothing... And you know, if you want to come to me... or if you want to put something on the anonymous box on engagement multiplier, because you feel unhappy, then then please do that I really would rather you say something, if it's really affecting you, then just say nothing. And then there ultimately not being a change.

Trainee: Oh, and obviously, we appreciate you setting this up and doing this, [Operations Manager]. Thank you.

Operations manager: Alright, so I won't get back on the things I mentioned earlier. But since then, we spoke about [summarises the points made already] Have I missed anything? Is there anything else that anybody wants to add?

[silence]

No?

(Supervision Roundtable November 2022)

The most apparent *Discourse* in this excerpt is 'Caring: Concern', it seems that the Operations Manager's language is actively encouraging the participants to voice their concerns but note the reference to 'redundancies' and the statement that the board 'have to make really hard decisions'. These bring in just a hint of the *Survival Discourse*. The response from the trainees (who had been so vocal up to this point) is telling. Not only do the trainees shut down and offer no further criticisms one of them immediately thanks the Operations Manager for her time. Even though the *survival Discourse* appears to have been the lesser *Discourse*, the effect appears to have been the same as if the Operations Manager had specifically told the trainees to stop. Whilst the intentions of the Operations Manager are not clear, what we can conclude is that in this instance the *Discourse* did not just ground the arguments being made, it outshone them.

#### 5.4 The discursive construction of power relationships

As Fairhurst et al (2020) argued, "Collective leadership is inescapably embedded within a field of power relationships" (p.605). The findings presented here focus on the discursive construction of power in a collective setting, with a focus on the relevance of power to the collective construction of leadership.

The primary focus is on the way in which individuals construct, assert, and soften their stance<sup>15</sup> in the context of instances of leadership. Conversation analysts have identified of epistemic orders<sup>16</sup> and deontic orders<sup>17</sup> as being key to the construction of stance, (see literature review) and as such these concepts were given particular consideration.

As discussed in the literature review, stance, although usually closely related to an individual's position on the hierarchy, is not fixed in the same way as a hierarchy position (status). It fluctuates, as the findings demonstrate, from moment to moment, frequently changing significantly multiple times within a single meeting. During the research, instances were observed in which the stance (and with it the leadership capabilities) of some individuals surpassed that of others of a higher status (standing on the hierarchy). The concept of stance, however, was not simple to measure. Each person's stance is relative to all others present and to the context of what is being discussed at any particular time. Combined with the complexity and nuance associated with an individual's actions and the effect on stance it becomes fascinating in its relevance and its elusiveness.

In the following subsections, the relationship between the concepts of stance and epistemic and deontic authority is considered, including consideration of the ways in which the *Discourses* identified affect the process. I will also consider the techniques participants were observed to use to influence their contributions to leadership, along with a discussion of their effectiveness.

#### 5.4.1 The Assertion of Epistemic and Deontic Authority and its Effect on Stance

The findings highlighted numerous ways in which participants can affect their stance, some appear intentional, some accidental, some are achieved by the individuals themselves, and some by other

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<sup>15</sup> 'Stance' refers to the actors' positioning of themselves to one another concerning perceived authority and power and can be contrasted with 'status' which refers to an individual's relatively fixed and stable position within an organisation's hierarchy (see literature review and methods chapters for further discussion).

<sup>16</sup> Epistemic orders refer to the authority of the actors to display knowledge about the way things are and the rights of others to be accurately informed (see literature review and methods chapters for further discussion).

<sup>17</sup> Deontic orders refer to the authority and obligation of the actors to determine the future actions of others (and themselves) (see literature review and methods chapters for further discussion).

participants, many were affected by more than one factor. One common way in which individuals altered their stance was in the way in which they asserted their deontic and epistemic authority. The following contrasting example taken from a Board Meeting in September 2022 demonstrates this. The discussion concerns some of the teams not making sufficient revenue. The worst-performing team is under discussion and Director S says;

Director S: If I was a Head of a Department and I saw that I was going to bill less than my salaries, I'd 've probably dropped my pricing for a couple of clients just to get some cash in the bank for my department, (0.1) I've seen a lot of clients being turned away. (Board Meeting, September 2022).

Director S's assertion of deontic authority is softened to the point where it becomes more of a suggestion than an instruction. In response Director D, after some discussion on the subject makes a much firmer assertion of deontic authority to make the same point:

Director D: So I agree, I think that they're just ( ) they're gonna have to ask themselves seriously, 'would we get the work if our prices were slightly lower?' And do it. (Board Meeting, September 2022).

Through this interaction, the stance of Director D is enhanced. The decision to instruct the department under consideration to lower their rates was made and it appeared to be Director D who has led this change coming into being. His firm assertion of deontic authority brings about the desired action even though Director S made the observation and suggestion. Whilst this conclusion is clearly an interpretation and may not have been viewed in the same way by another researcher it was a trend that was observed on more than one occasion. In fact, the same theme is replicated moments later in the same meeting. Director S makes the following argument;

Director S: But then I don't know whether this is sort of like a general issue where people are feeling very safe. They're not feeling the pressure (0.4) I don't know. (Board Meeting, September, 2022)



The soft assertion of epistemic authority is again so soft that could be classified as a question rather than an assertion of epistemic authority. This can be contrasted with Director D's input. Initially, the CEO responds but Director D interrupts and firmly asserts his epistemic authority.

CEO: Yeah [Director Y] and I were talking about this weren't we? (-)

Director D: (excited interruption) I think that what they're ( ) what they're seeing, though, is a lot of positive messaging around how we're growing and all the exciting things that are happening and all the new people that are joining the business. So the assumption is that if we can afford to recruit all these new people, we must be doing all right. (Board Meeting September, 2022)

The hard assertion of epistemic authority raises the actor's stance. He is confident in his assertion (contrasted with Director S saying "I don't know" at the end of her sentence), even interrupting the CEO, who is arguably of higher status, to make his assertion.

Whilst this suggests that an increased stance leads to more effective instances of leadership this was not always the case as the next section makes clear.

#### 5.4.2 The Effectiveness of Softening Stance When Linked to the Appropriate Cultural Discourse.

As the examples above suggest, Director S typically preferred to soften her stance and assert her epistemic and deontic authority so softly that in some instances it is questionable whether it would count as an assertion of such authority at all. Director S, though was a very effective leader and indeed was the only person promoted to the Board in the organisation's history (all other board members were recruited from external organisations). By frequently grounding her approach to leadership in the 'Community: Consensus/Team/employee-centric/Fun' Discourses, with the Caring Discourse a close second, Director S instilled a sense of loyalty, almost devotion, among some members of the organisation. When Director S decided to resign (toward the end of the research period), all four of the members of staff reporting directly to her resigned within two weeks of her

resignation<sup>18</sup>. As an example of Director S pulling together the various sections of the findings to present an unorthodox approach to effective leadership the following is taken from the SLT Catch-Up in November 2022:

Director S: So it's really making the most of when we are together (0.2) we can just give a bit of a goal, or progress update, on what's happening in our individual departments ( ) and then we're going to move on to discussing our current road blockers, and together, rank them discuss them, and see what is the most important roadblock (0.1). Or are there some quick wins that we think we could prioritise for instance in the roadblockers? So basically (0.2) form what the future discussions or future SLT get-togethers are going to be about. And then yeah ( ) I guess from there, make a decision, what we're going to tackle first and put a structure to our next SLT get-together. (0.3) So we all come armed with insights, ideas, areas of debate, and basically just make the most of these meetings. (0.2) Does that sound good to everyone? (0.4) I can't see anyone when I present so (-) [Director S is sharing her screen and can't see the other participants]

CEO: everyone is nodding I think [Director S]. (SLT Catch-up, November 2022)

Director S's softened stance allowed others to increase theirs. The effect of the elevated stance amongst the group could be used effectively in their contributions to leadership. This worked particularly well as Director S grounded her contributions to leadership in Community and Caring Discourses. Director S effectively opened the meeting to encourage everyone to contribute, asserting herself not as an authoritative figure but as the facilitator for achieving consensus ('Community: Consensus' Discourse) which the other participants appear to have responded well to.

Director Y achieved similarly effective leadership when he grounded a soft assertion of a deontic authority in the 'Caring: Support' Discourse during the Board Meeting in April 2022. In discussing whether the IT department can achieve the deadlines the Board has set within the timescales, Director Y softly asserts the need for the Board to support (or "protect") the Head of the IT Department from being distracted by other employees asking him to complete tasks for them:

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<sup>18</sup> From the CEO's reflexive diary.

Director Y: The only challenge here is that erm ( ) he has already got (0.5) quite a lot going on, a lot going on and he will genuinely be able to hold his ground... saying, 'no I can't do this. This is really my only thing'. ( ) I think if he's able to do this and hold his boundaries... I think we should be ok. But if he isn't then erm ( ) or if we can't protect him, then I think it'll be more difficult because of these interruptions. (Director Y, Board Meeting, 26<sup>th</sup> April 2022).

Rather than opting to assert his deontic authority in a forceful manner in arguing that the board needs to provide the IT manager with the appropriate level of support to allow him to achieve his targets, Director Y opts for a much softer approach, grounding his argument in the 'Caring: Support' Discourse. The appropriately soft assertion was sufficient to carry the argument in this instance.

#### 5.4.3 Raising Stance Over Status

On occasion, it was noted that some individuals had raised their stance sufficiently to appear as having more power than those higher on the official hierarchy. Head of Department B was particularly good at employing techniques to raise his stance. In the SLT Meeting in April 2022 Director N, having recently returned to work from a holiday, began to give her team's update. The Head of Marketing remarked that a member of Director N's team had done a great job in her absence, Head of department B concurs:

Head of Department B: She's really unflappable [employee 1's name], she's brilliant. She doesn't get stressed she just gets on with it, she helps out, she's bangin'.

Director N: She doesn't show that she's getting stressed (laughs).

Head of Department B: No well that's the key isn't it? Everybody gets stressed, she works through it and she was really helpful last minute on a couple of things n she's always ( ) erm really helpful....

Director N: and actually [Employee 2's name] has been amazing as well cos <she> took over DSAR<sup>19</sup> that ( ), I think that would have been the thing that completely broke [Employee 1] if she'd had to deal with that as well...

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<sup>19</sup> Data Subject Access Request

Head of Department B: Are you looking at, cos we get a lot of those DPA<sup>20</sup> subscriptions now [Director N], are you still looking at hiring someone to do the donkey work on that sort of stuff? Especially the DSAR stuff as well, cos that doesn't need solicitors on.

Director N: Yeah exactly. I think ( ), yeah, I think if we keep getting the DSAR ones through then definitely it would be useful to have (0.2) so yeah I think there's a bit of a learning curve with the DPA subscription but the more we get (-)

Head of Department B: [excited interruption] What's your max for that, are you gonna go, 'we've got ten we can't do anymore'? Or are you just gonna (-)

Director N; I don't think so because basically, the only additional work we've got for each one is a quarterly meeting and a quick review of their documentation, so we could do a lot of them (0.2) so its quite easily, you know quite scalable.

Head of Department B: Is the DSAR, ( ) is the DSAR work included in the sub?

Director N: Nope.

Head of Department B: Oh that's good.

Director N: Not any significant work anyway (0.3) So it's, yeah, it's pretty good really.

Head of Department B: Yeah

Director N: Well we'll see hopefully they won't end up being too much work. We're quite careful to limit what work we'll do under the subscription, cos it's not very expensive (0.1) We'll see.

CEO: That's cool.

Director N: [shakes head] They're hard work [laughs]

Head of Department B: Plan is to seduce them on [to the subscriptions team for additional support], once they're on.

Director N: Yeah

Head of Department B: We'll hook them.

Director N: And if they have other overflow work we can do that

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<sup>20</sup> Data Processing Agreement

Head of Department B: we can help with that (0.2) sure.

(SLT Meeting, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2022)

This section of the transcript (despite being abbreviated to remove two instances in which the actors briefly go off on a tangent) is included at length because it demonstrates the techniques Head of Department B uses to raise his stance over Director N's. The first instance to note is that Director N's attempt at contradicting Head of Department B is reciprocally contradicted. Head of Department B asserts an epistemic authority over N to explain his compliments toward the 'unflappable' employee who stepped up in N's absence. The assertion is grounded in a 'Caring: Recognition' Discourse which softens the contradiction, especially given the notable absence of gratitude, or recognition from Director N which would have been in keeping with the organisation's cultural norms. The second instance occurs when Head of Department B softly asserts a deontic authority over N. Whilst posed as a question, Head of Department B is clearly making the suggestion that hiring a paralegal to do the work that is currently being done by a solicitor (a cheaper option, therefore grounded in 'Professional: Financial' Discourse) would be sensible. Director N supports the argument and may well have been intending to take this course anyway but the inference is that it was Head of Department B's idea, which Director N supports. The third instance arises when Head of Department B questions Director N over other aspects of her work, in an exchange which would suggest Head of Department B was now the more senior member of staff (indicating an incommensurate stance/status level has been achieved). In the fourth instance, Head of Department B encourages Director N to upsell to clients ('Professional: Progress'/'Professional: Financial' Discourses) and then offers to help with the resultant work ('Caring: Support').

Head of Department B successfully builds his stance beyond his status through a combination of drawing on appropriate Discourses and asserting deontic and epistemic authority effectively and

appropriately, whilst clearly asserting suggestions that are in keeping with the organisation's values<sup>21</sup>.

The assertions of epistemic and deontic authority are tailored well to suit the context, using a stronger assertion of epistemic authority to contradict when aligning with a caring *Discourse* and initially using a very soft assertion of deontic authority to suggest hiring a paralegal. Head of Department B then incrementally increases the strength of the deontic authority he asserts as his stance increases, "the plan is [for you] to seduce them on [to upgrading to a subscriptions package]." The last assertion of deontic authority is much firmer.

Had Head of Department B chosen to assert himself more forcefully, or to contradict Director N on another topic the result may have been very different. The nuances of contradictions specifically are the subject of the next section.

#### 5.4.4 The Effect of Contradictions on Stance

In considering the example of Head of Department B raising his stance over his status the importance of contradictions was touched upon. In this section contradictions are considered in more detail. In the Board Meeting in November 2022, the directors were considering how additional capital might be raised if necessary:

Director D: People just don't invest in companies that aren't profitable<sup>22</sup>.

CEO: Well, they do. I was speaking to [Name], who's got her own law firm and she had to raise 150k in 48 hours because she couldn't get financed for her PI<sup>23</sup> insurance. And she found a legal tech ( ) US legal tech company that invested in her at the last minute for that. (0.2) So it is, ( ) it is possible.

(Board Meeting, November 2022)

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<sup>21</sup> These are detailed throughout the findings but specifically in this instance relate primarily to the 'Caring: Recognition' and 'Professional: Financial' *Discourses*.

<sup>22</sup> Whilst this may appear to be a foolish statement, it appears likely that Director D had chosen his words poorly – his other contributions to the transcripts do not suggest that he would believe this to be true and I suspect that he meant that the prospect of gaining investment was limited due to the profitability of the organisation.

<sup>23</sup> Professional Indemnity

The response from the CEO contradicts Director D's assertion of epistemic authority unequivocally. The effect was that the hard assertion of epistemic authority from Director D lowered his stance. He made a statement that was incorrect whether through a poor choice of words or being unaware of the inaccuracy, and when contradicted has no recourse. His stance is therefore detrimentally affected.

The same can be seen in regard to deontic authority. In the SLT catch up in November 2022, Director S calls for a brainstorm in the last 15 minutes of the meeting to discuss ideas that may improve profitability:

Director S: Are there particular roadblocks and challenges that you feel we're facing as a business that could be addressed by the SLT? (0.4) I appreciate an agenda wasn't circulated beforehand for you guys to have a think.

[Silence for 2.5 seconds]

Operations Manager: I was just going to say it might be worth maybe having some time to think about it.

Director S: Yeah.

Operations Manager: maybe we could like pop suggestions into the chat by the end of the week or something? ( ) Unless anybody's got any ideas now.

CEO: I think it would be helpful if we could just have a bit of a brainstorming session now. (0.1) I'm consciously aware that you might well think of things after this call, but I'm sure that we can still have ( ) have a useful discussion off the top of our heads.

(SLT catch-up, November 2022)

Director S is contradicted as the Operations Manager asserts a deontic authority (albeit softly) incommensurate with her status. This would have been accepted by Director S but the CEO steps in and we see a second contradiction. This example is particularly interesting as we catch a glimpse of an alternative outcome. The incommensurate assertion of deontic authority from the Operations Manager is accepted by Director S. If the CEO hadn't stepped in we could identify another instance of

informal leadership and a resultant increase in stance for the Operations Manager. As it happened, the CEO contradicted the Operations Manager and consequently her stance was diminished.

#### 5.4.5 Complimenting, Supporting, and Thanking: Some of the less obvious challenges to stance

In some instances, the effect of an individual's assertion of epistemic authority was mitigated not by contradiction or challenge, but by support for their arguments. Throughout the SLHQ Meeting in May 2022, the Head of Marketing took the lead and built her stance through assertions of epistemic and deontic authority. Toward the end of the presentation, she was asked a question about the appointment of a business development manager to the marketing team. The Head of Marketing answered the question and then Director N, the only director present in this meeting, contributed a short explanation herself. Director N's contribution in no way detracted from the Head of Marketing it was coded in the first reading as 'support for the argument', but as became clear with a more holistic consideration of the meeting the contribution lowered the Head of Marketing's stance. At the end of the Head of Marketing's presentation Director N said:

Director N: That was good. Thanks [Director of Marketing], it was good to see what you guys are beavering away at in the background. (SLHQ Meeting, May 2022)

At first glance this appears to be supportive, complimentary, and an expression of gratitude (and indeed it may have been intended as all of these things), but the written account of the instance misses subtleties in the actors' body language. The notes from my reflexive diary on this instance are cited below in two parts, as I came back to this instance in writing up the findings:

[Director N]'s response gave me a sense that it was disingenuous. Reading the transcript, there is the mention of 'beavering away in the background' which when describing someone's profession is perhaps inappropriate, maybe it's just me, not how I would put it? [Head of Marketing] didn't seem overly bothered by it but maybe she was being polite. (Reflexive Diary entry during the conversation analysis of the incident).



[Head of Marketing]'s reaction whilst outwardly polite and friendly is betrayed somewhat by an almost imperceptible narrowing of her eyes. It seems I picked up on this without being aware of it the first few times. She almost looks confused, as if she's unsure of [Director N]'s intent (maybe she was). The language is also not typical of [Director N], she hasn't spoken like this in other meetings before or since. Overall then there are a number of abnormalities about this which lead to me to interpret [Director N]'s response as being condescending as opposed to genuine appreciation. [Director N] didn't need to summarise what [Head of Marketing] had argued – it's not something she normally would do and not something I've seen others do. In addition the use of the phrase 'beavering away' and what I can only assume was a patronising 'well done' preceding it. [Director N] and [Director D] have both been vocal in Board Meetings that the amount of resources taken up by the marketing team is disproportionate, so there may have been some ill feeling. Furthermore, subtle changes in the body language from [Head of Marketing] suggest she picked up on this being an unusual occurrence. (Addition to the Reflexive Diary Entry for SLHQ Meeting, May 2022).

Whilst there can be no certainty in this matter whatever the intention of Director N, my perception was that the effect was to lower the stance of the Head of Marketing through condescension. Director N, whether consciously or otherwise asserts herself as the most senior participant in the meeting, much as a teacher might compliment a student on their presentation to the class.

#### 5.4.6 Representation and its Effect on Stance

A common way in which participants affected their own stance was coded as 'representation' - the use of words such as 'we' or 'us' to create a sense that the actor is representing a larger group. This could raise or lower the individual's stance depending on the way the actor used it.

Two examples, from Director D and Director S, from different meetings, demonstrate this. In September 2022, an SLT Meeting was called which, it was made clear, was mandatory, even the recording, sent to me was entitled 'SLT Mandatory Meeting 13 September 2022'. The board had decided, the week prior, to call this meeting to explain to the leadership team that the organisation was facing financial difficulties. The context is particularly important here because the board recognized that informing the SLT could lead to panic and create an even more difficult scenario. The primary goals of this meeting, it was explicitly stated, were to encourage the SLT to rally together, to come up with ideas to gain additional work, and to ensure write-offs (time written off and therefore not billed) were minimalized. Director D was chosen to open the meeting to ensure this objective was achieved and to ensure the potential for panic was minimized. Director D's opening to the meeting was as follows:

Director D: Right! ( ) I'm going to call this meeting to order. (.hh) So this is this is unfortunately one of those times where I have to put on my lesser spotted strict and serious face. Straight off the bat ( ) just to say [the organisation] is not insolvent. It is not going fast. Nobody's been made redundant today. But (0.2) but we do need to have a serious conversation because as members of the senior leadership team, ( ) we are leaders in the business. And that means that when things are going well, we have to celebrate those things together and when things aren't going so well, we have to discuss them and support each other to find ways through them. The situation that we have at the moment is that cash is tight. Not yet in a position where we can't afford to pay everybody's salaries but we shouldn't be in that position because we have very achievable targets across the business that simply aren't being met. (Director D, SLT Mandatory Meeting, September, 2022).

In this example Director D asserts his epistemic authority strongly from the beginning, using 'we' to define the leadership team in the business not only in terms of what it is but what it should be doing and what it is failing to do. The use of representation here strengthens the stance of the actor, he has the epistemic authority to define the most senior levels of the business, not by suggesting what it should be, but by stating unequivocally what it is.

This can be contrasted with another instance of representation from Director S:

Director S: We [the board]... thought we'd come up with a structure for our future SLT get-togethers. (SLT Catch Up, November 2022)

In this context, the representation is used not to assert epistemic authority but to soften it. Director S preferred to state the new structure as a Board decision, not as her own. As was her general preference. In this example, the softening is perhaps more extreme than it appears at first glance. The recording of the preceding board meeting made clear that this was exclusively Director S's proposal, hence she is the one presenting it to the SLT. The structure she proposed was aimed at creating a sense of community and the softer assertion therefor appears to have been the more effective option.

#### 5.4.7 Consistency in the Expression of Epistemic/Deontic Authority and the Effect on Stance

Participants frequently showed inconsistencies between their assertions of epistemic and deontic authority and their asserted stance. This was typically observed to have a detrimental effect on the effectiveness of their contributions to leadership. For example, consider Head of department W's assertion:

Head of Department W: I mean I've got very limited experience, but... when trainees aren't picking up on stuff like that, like taking the initiative or responding to clients... that's never going to get better (Supervision Meeting, May 2022)

The claim to "very limited experience" immediately softens her stance but the assertion which follows that some trainees are "never going to get better" is a hard assertion of epistemic authority. Similarly in the Board meeting of 26<sup>th</sup> April 2022, during a discussion on a mistake made by the IT department concerning which font to use, Director N responds:

Director N: "Yeah, my (0.1), my naive sense would be, if it's things like getting the wrong font, just tell them which font to use".

CEO: "Yeah, we did that. ( ) That's the point. (Board Meeting, April 2022)

In this example, there is a discord between the opening (the claim to being 'naïve' and to having limited experience) and the ending of the argument (the hard assertion of deontic authority).

It is not the softening of stance at the start of these examples that causes these instances of leadership (or attempted leadership) to be less successful (as has been demonstrated above). It is the jarring inconsistency between the softening of stance, and then the hard assertion of epistemic or deontic authority that has the effect. There were many similar examples throughout the data and whilst the apparent effects varied, no instances of such contradictory pairings appeared to constitute effective contributions to the leadership.

#### 5.4.8 Deferring to Increase Stance

Whilst it would seem commonsensical that deferring to another would lower stance, the reality appears to be somewhat more complex. Certainly, there were plenty of instances where a question was posed to an individual and they deferred to another whom they considered more suited to answer. In these instances, typically, the deferrer's stance was not affected. It seems to have been considered sensible (perhaps intelligent) to defer if someone else had better knowledge. The individual to whom the deferment is made tended to have their stance elevated as might be expected. In other instances, deferment can be used to attain solidarity or to support an argument. The effect on stance in these examples is minimal. However, the following example of reciprocal deferment raised the stances of both participants. Directors D and Y seemed to play off one another as they relayed to the CEO the performance of the IT department (which both had been involved with).

CEO: Ok. So they're working well as a team?

Director D: (.h) they seem to be a pretty happy team, ↑ don't they [Director Y]?

Director Y: Yeah I think they're a pretty happy team, I think erm,( ) we haven't seen any (X) out of them yet, in terms of things we planned to do, these are things we got done. That's probably going to be the next phase but otherwise, yeah, they seem to be quite coherent.

CEO: And how is [Head of Department I] getting on leading that team? Do you think he is doing OK? Do you think he needs any more support?

Director Y: I think erm. (0.2) My take on [Head of Department I] is, ( ) I think erm, (0.2) he erm, (0.2) I think he's fine, I think he lacks (0.4) because of experience a bit of pragmatism in terms of how long something takes and how it all pans out in the end vs the project plan and I think we just need to support him a little bit and give him the tools and raise his awareness about what is coming ahead so we don't have these issue arising again stemming from 'I made a plan - it's going to go to plan'. ( ) Well, you know. We know how it is in real life, and I think we know from experience, which he is lacking, and we can support him in. [Director D],  
↑what do you think?

Director D: Erm ( ) I think he's trying super hard to keep things on track and there's still an element of naivete there for sure but I think he is learning.

Director Y: For sure. ( ) yeah. (Board Meeting, June 2022).

The way in which Director D and Director Y defer to one another has the effect of establishing them both as knowledgeable about the subject. There is a sense that Director D is deferring to Director Y because Director Y is an expert, and in turn, Director Y is referring to Director D because he is an expert, and since Director Y is an expert, his opinion of Director D holds particular relevance, and so on.

#### 5.4.9 Taking and Evading Responsibility in Relation to Stance

In most instances taking responsibility for a poor outcome raised the individual's stance, and trying to avoid responsibility lowered stance. There were some exceptions to this though.

A typical example of taking responsibility having the effect of increasing the individual's stance can be seen in the Board Meeting, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2022:

CEO: I've never wanted to be the type of firm that is beating people over the head because they're not meeting targets but I just don't know what else to do...

Director S: Are... (0.4) Is this a problem with the heads of department?

CEO: I think it's a problem across the board.

Director Y: I was just going to say it's a DNA issue we never tested. So yeah [trails off]

CEO: People are too relaxed about it. And we have to take responsibility for that ( ) I have to take responsibility for that.

(Directors S and D nod). (Board Meeting, September 2022)

In taking responsibility for the complacency of the organisation's senior leaders the CEO's stance appears to be raised. Director D, in particular, mentioned in the Supervisory Feedback Meeting, in May (four months before the September Board Meeting) his concern that the emphasis on a caring culture was having a detrimental effect, so the affirmation from the CEO that she has made a mistake in not sufficiently limiting the *Discourse* was well received by other members of the board who placed a higher value on other aspects of the organisation's culture. That said, even though the CEO is showing that she made a mistake the Board members show appreciation for it and rally behind her –examples of this can be seen in the language of Director D later in this meeting (used above as an example of layering discourses) and in the example in this section under the sub-heading 'Representation and its effect on stance' which is taken from The SLT Mandatory Meeting, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2022 one week after the meeting from which the example under discussion is taken, with the explicit objective of shaking up the SLT.

In contrast, evading responsibility typically diminishes stance. In the June Board Meeting 2022, Director N describes herself as being "notionally responsible" for the team she heads up. The word "notionally" was inappropriate, she was responsible for the team she was referring to (made clear in the slides presented during the Performance and Progression Framework Meeting in June 2022). Her stance was accordingly diminished. Similarly, Heads of Departments H and L defended their teams' poor performances in relation to their targets in the SLT Mandatory Meeting, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2022. Both made similar claims that they were not at fault and blamed the economic climate. They both then claimed that they expected things to improve significantly in the future. A difficult argument to reconcile unless a significant and immediate upturn in the UK's economic climate was anticipated. The reaction to the first account (from H) was an authoritative contradiction from Director D. When L

attempted the same argument his argument was met with silence, the significance of which is specifically addressed below.

There is a middle ground though. Individuals were required at times to evade responsibility to maintain or even raise their stance. In the SLT Mandatory Meeting, on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2022 Heads of Departments B and W evaded responsibility for the overall poor performance of the organisation by explaining that based on their teams' relative contributions to revenue, and proximity to their targets they were not to blame for the organisations poor performance overall. In these instances, the stance of both B and W was raised. They astutely took the opportunity to implicitly ground their arguments in the 'Superiority: Team' Discourse by explicitly citing their teams numbers ('Professional: Financial' Discourse) in relation to their targets.

#### 5.4.10 Humour, Stance, and Cultural Discourses

The use of humour to raise stance was not immediately evident, perhaps because in some instances, it was so obvious it was overlooked. In the SLHQ meeting, on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2022 Head of Department B introduced himself to a new employee:

Head of Department B: [New employee] already knows me, I'm the big dog in charge of the subs team and [new employee] and I will be working closely together, looking forward to that as [new employee] well knows. Welcome. (SLHQ meeting, May 2022)

Such an obvious and blatant elevation of one's stance, when done humorously, is less likely to cause offence or even to be seen as self-promotion. It's interpreted as silliness with other participants laughing in reaction to it, and yet it has the effect of raising stance. Head of Department B was the head of the subscriptions team at this time so he wasn't making a false claim but in the context of the organisation describing yourself as 'the big dog in charge' of anything was taken as being silliness. Head of Department B also employed the 'Caring: Welcoming' Discourse in his introduction which reduced the likelihood of being perceived as being arrogant or self-serving. He therefore, in

practical terms, endears himself to the other members of the organisation as a funny, caring person whilst reminding them that he is a senior member of the team.

In another example, from the SLT Meeting in April 2022, Head of Department B uses humour to strongly assert epistemic authority. In a discussion about the update to the firm's branding he exclaimed that he is excited to see the new branding and is looking forward to it, he goes on;

Head of Department B: No pressure [Head of Marketing], no pressure! (laughing)

Head of Marketing: (smiling) well, you're the one who's like 'no cartoons allowed' it's just like hmmm (laughing) there are none in the new branding [Head of Department B] (pulls a comical face to show she's being disingenuous) none! (laughing)

Ben: (laughs) Excellent! Glad to hear it. (everyone laughs). I didn't say no cartoons allowed, I said minimise the cartoons. (SLT Meeting, April 2022)

Head of Department B had no official input into the branding, this was a decision made between the Marketing team and the CEO and subsequently approved by the Board, but Head of Department B's comical assertion suggests he has a higher stance than he does, and that he made a contribution to the branding incommensurate with his status.

## 5.5 The Discursive Construction of Collective Leadership

The vast majority of the instances of leadership were collectively constructed. It was very rare for an instance of leadership to be recorded as an instruction made by one person to another. Even in instances where a specific instruction was given the instance of leadership typically included a buildup to it which formed part of the instance. This may have been influenced by the types of meetings that were analysed. The purpose of the research was to explore the collective construction of leadership and as such Board Meetings, senior leadership team meetings, and other instances in which a number of leaders came together in a meeting were selected.



In this section, the themes identified concerning the language used to lead are considered. These include strategies the actors adopted and their effectiveness, silence and its numerous effects and the types of interruptions observed and how they were used.

#### 5.5.1 Identifying Patterns in the Instances of Leadership

Based on the extant literature (e.g. Simpson et al., 2018), it was expected that patterns would become apparent in the language used in the instances of leadership and that from these the analysis would enable the researcher to discover sequences that would explain how instances of leadership were collectively constructed. The following entry from my reflective diary after analysing 7 months' worth of transcripts thoroughly:

Sequences or patterns of sequences do not seem to be apparent. In the early stages of the analysis I thought there might be a pattern of 'setting the scene'; 'raises a concern'; and then 'suggestion for improvement' but there are a couple of examples on p.2 and 3 [of the transcript of the Board Meeting 31st October 2022] where [the CEO] addresses these codes in different orders, suggesting there is no pattern unless you force it, the sequences can be equally effectively mixed and to look for patterns is probably an over-simplification and misleading. Similarly, there are couple of instances where codes are merged like at the top of page 12 [of the transcript of the Board Meeting 31st October 2022], [Director D] merges 'setting the scene' with a 'suggestion for improvement' to make his point, there is no discernible separation between them and yet it's obvious that he is doing both – language works in such complex way that there are infinite ways of communicating the same themes, so looking for patterns doesn't seem to be working. In another instance on p. 15-16 [of the same transcript] [the CEO] presents a new pricing policy to the board. See also the fifth instance [of leadership] in which [Director D] makes a suggestion for improvement without ever actually suggesting they use the service provider he is recommending, he does so simply by explaining the benefits. (Reflective Diary entry, Board Meeting, October 2022).

It seems likely that in adopting a wider definition of leadership, there is less likelihood of identifying patterns. It would also seem likely that a more prescriptive approach to the data analysis, such as Glaser and Strauss's (1967) variant of grounded theory, or the Gioia Methodology (Gioia et al. (2013), would have forced the researcher into identifying patterns, particularly in the axial coding, or second-

order themes stages of the coding. By redefining leadership to a smaller number of instances and forcing the data into pre-specified categories, patterns could have been constructed but this would be more of a researcher construction than an understanding of the actor's construction of leadership.

Far from being disappointed with the failure to identify patterns in the language used, the research revealed far more complex and nuanced themes which are discussed below.

#### 5.5.2 Speaking with Confidence (or lack of it)

The use of conversation analysis was particularly beneficial in identifying instances where the actor was nervous or uncomfortable and portraying a lack of confidence. A higher-than-average (for the individual) frequency of pauses and/or broken sentences in an actor's dialogue, along with consideration of the context helped identify such instances.

For example, during a Board Meeting in April 2022 Director D offered the following critique of the Head of Marketing:

Director D: Erm ( ) I also think as well that erm (0.5 ) they've got all these projects, but you know (0.5) I guess ( ) if we take marketing, [Head of Marketing] is ( ) [Head of Marketing] is very good at demanding what she wants, she's pretty persistent, I've been on the receiving end of [Head of Marketing]'s tenacity and erm, errr (1.0) other things are going to be deprioritised over marketing if they become a priority for [Head of Marketing] (0.2) and I think that [Head of IT] hasn't been very good at managing her expectations in particular (1.0) erm and communicating with her about whether or not they can deliver what she wants. Erm (0.5) So I think all in all (3.0) I think all in all we ( ) we ( ) we do need to be a bit more patient (1.0) erm, with them [the IT department]. (Board Meeting April, 2022)

Whilst Director D pauses occasionally as most participants did, he tended to speak fluently and with an assertive confidence well above the average participant in this study. In the critique of the Head of

Marketing however, he would have known that his argument would not be well received by the CEO, and this may explain the lack of confidence evident in the pauses and broken sentences<sup>24</sup>.

The effectiveness of the language used, in terms of achieving the actor's goal, or in presenting an argument that could be construed as being persuasive, was significantly reduced when the actor displayed a lack of confidence or expressed nervousness. In the example mentioned above the CEO simply and authoritatively shut the argument down. In another example, the Operations Manager shows a degree of nervousness as she addresses the organisation's supervisors at the start of the Supervision Feedback meeting in May 2022<sup>25</sup>. She runs through a list of critiques of supervisors given by trainees, within a few minutes one of the Directors present laughs derisively and then assertively interrupts to contradict the arguments being made. The degree to which nervousness affected the success of the leadership is not clear<sup>26</sup>. The actors are likely nervous because they expect their arguments to be poorly received, but it seems that presenting the argument in a nervous manner increases the likelihood of a contradictory argument being presented.

The longitudinal study made apparent that it is not that individuals either are or are not confident. Both Director D and the Operations Manager demonstrated far more examples of confident speech than example suggesting nervousness. It is also not simply the case that speaking confidently is effective and speaking without confidence is ineffective. When an individual expresses confidence and others accept that confidence then their contribution to leadership is more effective and their stance increases. However, the opposite is true when an individual presents their argument confidently but it is not accepted by others (as shown above in the subsection of power dealing with contradictions).

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<sup>24</sup> The CEO had admitted to prioritising marketing on numerous occasions and the organisation spends a lot more on marketing than the average law firm (based on a survey reported by Thomson Reuters (2019) which found that the average spend in the industry was around 2% (SL's average was around 5 times that number). Thomson Reuters (2019)

<sup>25</sup> This excerpt is quoted in part in the 'Home Life' subsection of the first section of the findings.

<sup>26</sup> The lack of cultural discourses is another factor that may have affected the effectiveness as is discussed above.

### 5.5.3 Consistency of Expressed Opinions

Another apparent hindrance to instances of leadership being successful was observed in actors who were inconsistent in expressing their opinions. This not only affected the effectiveness of their contributions (or attempted contributions) to leadership but affected the stance of the individuals as well (as was noted in section 5.4.7.). In a Board Meeting in June 2022 the following exchange took place:

Director Y: I would encourage us to worry not so much what has and what has not been paid ( ) because that's a chasing process, right? I think the more pertinent question is what has been invoiced and that should give us a more (0.2) provided the debt collection actually happens

Director N: yeah

Director Y: It should give us confidence that we're managing our WIP (work in progress).

Director N: Yeah definitely. (0.2) The problem with not knowing if something has been paid is (0.4) we'll be completely oblivious to the fact that the client is massively behind and they ask us to do something and we do it and ( ) certainly where I've worked before that was an absolute 'no', like if a client was overdue with their bill, it would flash up on the system as soon as you tried to put time and you would say, you know, 'oh sorry, you've got to pay before I pick up this next bit of work'.

Director Y: Erm [CEO], we could do this quite easily manually, we could just update the debtors list and update it every Friday.

CEO: Hmmm, well let's have a chat with [Head of Department H] about it, I mean, I know [member of the finance team] does involve lawyers when clients aren't paying their bills and we don't have a policy of just not picking up work if an invoice is slightly overdue erm

Director N: It's a good nudge though even if it's a friendly 'ooh, I'll do this thing for you but I notice you haven't paid, I'm not going to be allowed to carry on working for you if it's not paid soon' it can be a sort of kick up the bum, that's the reason why it is really useful to have that in whatever system we have.

CEO: yep (0.2) Ok (0.3) Thanks [Director Y]. [Director D] CSOP<sup>27</sup>? (Board Meeting, June 2022).

In summary, Director Y advocates that the fee-earners do not concern themselves with what hasn't been paid yet, and Director N responds 'Yeah definitely' before expressing the contradictory argument that they should be concerned with what hasn't been paid. In response, Director Y defers to the CEO, the CEO loosely supports Director Y's argument with her language but tellingly she thanks Director Y for his contribution before inviting Director D to move to the next topic. She does not thank Director N for her suggestion. It is what is not said by the CEO in this instance that made clear that Director N's attempt to lead had been ineffective in this instance (her suggestion was given minimal consideration and no thanks was expressed for the contribution). The policy advocated by Director N was not flawed in any way, other firms have adopted it, but the way in which the argument was presented was not effective.

Another example can be seen in the SLT Mandatory Meeting, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2022. In this case the lack of consistency is not within one person but two people trying to present an argument to suit them both, but doing so in an inconsistent manner.

Head of department H: From my side errr, it was a slower start to September than I had hoped... 88,000 pounds in quotes out for fixed fee work, waiting for someone to accept. And as soon as they do that... changes the picture entirely doesn't it?...

Director D: Okay. So just on that, [Head of Department H], in terms of those proposals that are outstanding, I think when we had a quick catch-up last week, you were saying it feels like clients... have absolutely no cash at the point at which we're giving them a proposal...

Head of Department H: So... most of the proposals out at the minute are for registration, and of course, as you know, you can't do business until you're registered. So by definition, pre-funding, so... I can't really help that scenario...

Director D: Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

Head of Department L: ...So addressing that issue of our clients that don't have enough money... I've been... trying to help them get money. And we've done that successfully with

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<sup>27</sup> Company Share Option Programme. The CEO is inviting Director D to move on to the next topic.

[Client name 1] to the tune of about 500,000. We were speaking to [Client name 2] before, but we've done a lot to help close that funding round... and they've said ( ) they've agreed to 40k's worth of work as of today, well, (0.3) yesterday, actually, and billing some of that upfront. So yeah, from my perspective, I'm feeling a lot happier about September now. We had very little visibility coming out of August. Exactly what (-)

CEO: (assertive interruption) But [Head of Department L], just to double check, though. (0.2) So I know you've got a lot of proposals out there, but obviously, there's a time lag in those proposals being accepted, the client being onboarded, the work being done, and the invoice. So when you say that you're feeling better about September is your expectation that you're going to be able to convert and complete those instructions and bill them within September?

(SLT Mandatory Meeting, September 2022)

To appreciate the context of this exchange it is important to note that Head of Department H and L were joint heads of the same department. Head of Department H argues that they are getting quotes out but if clients don't have funding yet the quotes can't be accepted and there's nothing they can do about it. Head of department L then offers an inconsistent argument that they can do something about it, and he has successfully helped one client raise half a million in funding. Head of Department L then tries to argue that September (the month in which the meeting takes place) will be a better month as a result but as the CEO forces him to concede, his argument doesn't quite add up. There are several examples of inconsistencies in arguments during the analysis and in all of them the attempted contribution to leadership is ineffective.

#### 5.5.4 Posing Arguments as Questions

In some instances, arguments were presented as questions<sup>28</sup>. This was particularly common when the actor's argument was a challenge to someone of a higher position on the organisation's hierarchy and it could be an effective way of challenging or contradicting an argument without asserting epistemic authority inappropriately. For example, in the Board Meeting, June 2022, The Operations

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<sup>28</sup> An example of this was given in the subsection on raising stance over status, specifically Head of Department B used this strategy to make a suggestion to Director N in order to avoid instructing her (which might have come across as an inappropriate assertion of deontic authority).

Manager presents an argument for removing the mention of the required experience in job adverts. It is standard in the legal industry for job advertisements to be marked with '[number of] years 'PQE' meaning a solicitor's 'post-qualification experience'. At the organisation, this had created ill feeling amongst some members of staff who had more experience than others who were in more senior roles. Instead of making a hard assertion to the board that the reference to experience should be removed, she asks, "Do we need to include the indicative PQEs?" This is an example of this technique being used appropriately and effectively.

However, there is a suggestion that the technique may be detrimental if overused. In the June Board Meeting, Director N posed four arguments as questions within a period of a few minutes, there are another four instances (8 total) from Director N in the same meeting, compared with just two other instances, both from the operations manager (who was the only attendee of lower status). The overuse of posing questions as arguments appeared to create ill feelings which made the repetitive posing of questions as arguments less effective. There were no other instances in which this technique was used so frequently and as such it is difficult to make a firm conclusion as to whether it was the over usage of the technique or another factor which wasn't picked up on.

#### 5.5.5 Standing on the Shoulders of Others

Another technique employed more frequently (but not exclusively) by those of lower status within the organisation was coded as 'standing on the shoulders of others'. It covered instances in which the actor would build an argument based on (and immediately following) an opinion, argument, or assertion expressed by someone else (typically of high status/stance). The new argument was frequently not directly related to the argument on which it was based and was very similar to someone in everyday language saying "speaking of X..." and building on it. The 'standing on the shoulders of others' code required the actor to use what had been said to support their argument, whether the original statement was being interpreted correctly when using this technique was not a requirement and led to some interesting instances of informal leadership.

In the Supervision Feedback Meeting in May 2022 Director D commented on some of the issues arising at the organisation which would not be present in bigger firms. Director D doesn't comment on whether these were good or bad in regard to supervising trainees but Head of Department A builds an argument based on this assertion to suggest that being a smaller firm requires the supervisors at the organisation to work harder to ensure the level of supervision is adequate to produce competent NQs<sup>29</sup>. The implication in Head of Department A's argument is that it has already been supported by Director D (even though he hadn't actually said it).

The following example, from the same meeting, is considered in more detail as it is a little more complicated. Director D presented an argument that trainees should worry less about making mistakes (as part of an overall argument that trainees are too needy and supervisors don't have time to qualify every aspect of the job). The Operations Manager uses the 'standing on the shoulders' technique to try to steer the conversation back to a consideration of how the supervisors can best support the trainees (the purpose of the meeting which has at this stage been somewhat overlooked).

Operations Manager: There is definitely this, ( ) you know, being scared of making mistakes, and you guys are fantastic right? So maybe they just don't see mistakes happening that much.

(laughter)

Head of Department L: She should hang out with me more (laughs)

Head of Department A: But are the mistakes visible [Head of Department L]

Head of Department L: <Oh> yeah, it's like 50/50.

Operations Manager: we all make mistakes right ↑?

Head of Department L: We all do make mistakes, we're all human.

Director D: It's also like it isn't black and white, (0.2) despite what you're led to believe when you go to law school, nothing is black and white, and most clients would get really pissed off

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<sup>29</sup> Newly qualified solicitor



if we tried to make everything black and white, like ( ), the world would stop turning pretty quickly.

Operations Manager: Yeah, my point is though that yours is a good approach [Director D] because you know if people don't see mistakes happening, even if they are, that's where that culture is developing from because people don't see them happening people think 'shit, what's going to happen to me if I make a mistake?'... just sharing those experiences and asking the questions that [Director D] is asking his team, 'what is the worst that can happen?' and if it did happen what would we do about it?

(Supervision Feedback Meeting, May 2022).

In this example, we can see the Operations Manager take Director D's argument that trainees should be less worried about making mistakes and whilst explicitly aligning herself with aspects of the arguments, she steers the conversation to an argument that supervisors need to make themselves available for questions and to make trainees feel comfortable asking them. This represents quite a remarkable instance of informal leadership. Rather than asserting epistemic authority to make her argument, the Operations Manager implies that Director D has already made the claim on which her argument is based (which clearly he had not). The perception then becomes that the Operations Manager is supporting the argument of Director D.

It should be noted that 'standing on the shoulders of others' can also be detrimental when the argument being relied upon is weak. In the Mandatory SLT Meeting in September 2022, Head of Department L stands on the shoulders of Head of Department H in asserting (as H had done) that his team's performance has been adversely affected by the economic climate but that it will improve imminently (without explaining how poor economic climate was not still a factor). When the argument was presented by Head of Department H it was poorly received, when Head of Department L tried to stand on Head of Department H's shoulders to present the same argument it was received with silence ( the relevance of which is discussed in section 3.6 below).

### 5.5.6 Silence

Whilst an exploration of the use of language in the construction of leadership does not immediately bring to mind the effects of silence the research showed that the act of not speaking can have a significant effect (as discussed above in relation to *Discourse*). A technique used by some individuals involved pausing to underline points in their arguments. The term 'underlining' in conversation analysis can be used to refer to the emphasis placed on a word or phrase. In the Jeffersonian Transcription System the literal underlining of a word denotes it as having been emphasised by the actor (see Appendix B). 'Underlining' was adopted as a code in this research when the actor emphasised an argument or aspect of it. The most common instances of underlining in this context were not raised voices, standing up, or banging tables, the actors most frequently achieved the effect through pausing. In the following excerpt, the CEO is talking about a phenomenon known in the legal industry as 'time dumping' (an industry-specific discourse) in which the fee-earner, records time they have spent working on something (as if it could be billed but knowing full well it should not be) and then writes it off when it comes to charging the client. It appears that the solicitor has been busy and clocked up billable hours, but the reality is that they haven't.

CEO: But actually, we're just, (0.1) you know, like 9k on your corporate pre-instruction matter that [employee's name] put down as chargeable time [Director D], none of which is chargeable. (0.2) But, ( ) but when we're looking at those billable hours reports at the end of each week, you know, that's being reflected in her billable hours, and we're not seeing that actually, she's just putting sales activity down as chargeable (0.4) chargeable work.

Director D: Yeah.

CEO: So it's giving us a false picture of utilisation.

[A pause of 4.1 seconds]

Now I've had a really strong word with [Head of Department H] and [Head of Department L] about their performance last month because it's just quite frankly horrendous. And I said, you know, we, ( ) we can cope with peaks and troughs, but when you're not even billing

enough to pay for your own salaries, and you've got two new starters in the pipeline. That really, really, really worries me.

(Board Meeting, September 2022)

The long pause following the statement about the effect on utilization creates a sense that this is a very important issue (even before the CEO emphasizes the point by using 'really' three times to express her concern).

Silence can also be used to communicate dissent. In the SLT Mandatory Meeting, September 2022 the CEO presents a slide showing that most teams are falling well short of their target for the previous month (August). One of the lowest performing Heads of Department tries to justify their position by explaining that they have done a lot of proposals for clients and it takes time for those proposals to be accepted, and for the work to be completed and billed. He goes on to say he thinks his department will have a better September. The CEO seeks clarity on the positivity expressed by Head of Department L by asking;

CEO: So, when you say that you're feeling better about September is your expectation that you're going to be able to convert and complete those instructions and bill them within September?

Head of Department L: Some of them Yes, ( ) not all of it. Because for those kinds of fees, there's a lot of work, (0.2) and I'm not sure that even if they said yes, we would be able to because in there, not all of that work is just dependent on us doing things, there are external things that also need to happen with their business before they want to push go on parts of that.... And when projects don't have much money, they cut back on legal fees. So yeah, we're trying to do multiple different things to try and lock people in as fast as possible. And, ( ) and bill them. (SLT Mandatory Meeting, September 2022)

This is followed by 8 seconds of silence being broken by another Head of Department offering to present their account. All the other Heads of Department presented their accounts and none of them were followed by silence, in this or any other meeting analysed. There was either support for their arguments, questions aimed at clarifying aspects of the argument, or some simple words of

thanks. The silence following Director L's account was an extremely strong expression of dissent and to put it in context, the board has already discussed (in their meeting the week before) their frustration that Director L had offered a job to a very senior solicitor and had asked for pay rises for members of his team despite his team generating insufficient revenue to cover their salaries.

Silence, though, is not limited to being a technique for emphasizing points or dissent. This became clear through its unintentional use in the Board Meeting in September 2022. In this instance, there was a clear expectation on the CEO to speak. Director D had just finished answering a question posed by the CEO which was followed by silence which lasted for around 30 seconds. The discomfort experienced by the participants was palpable. Director D broke the silence by asking "Why is nobody saying anything?" and Director Y asked the CEO if he should move on to the next point. At this point it becomes clear the CEO was having issues with her internet connection and the tension eased. It was in this accidental pause that the need for the use of language to follow the expectations of the participants became apparent, unfortunately, the single occurrence doesn't enable a great deal of analysis.

#### 5.5.7 Deferring

Deferring was observed to be used in various ways, above it is discussed with regard to its effect on stance. In this section, it is discussed with regard to specific instances of leadership.

In essence, deferment was frequently and intentionally used to strengthen arguments when the actor felt the need to do so. In some instances, the actor defers to colleagues whom they know will support the argument, as was the case in the SLHQ Meeting in May 2022. Director D is explaining to the participants the minimum amounts to be charged:

Director D: and we just decided that rather than saying it's a minimum of 2 hours based on the hourly rate of the fee earner doing the work, it's just easier for everyone if we have a flat minimum fee of 700 across the board ( ) so yeah (0.2) and for fixed fees, I think we should

make clear that the minimum is still 1500, I think we agreed on that, didn't we [CEO] and [Director N]? Agree that the fixed fee is still 1500?

CEO: Yeah

Director N: Yep.

(SLHQ Meeting, May 2022)

It is very unlikely that Director D wasn't sure if the minimum rate was still set at 1500. Not only was the language use inconsistent with Director D expressing uncertainty in other instances, but Director D was very familiar with the minimum rates having been instrumental in deciding them. Nor is the deferment simply to clarify the point, he could have done that by restricting his question to the CEO. He called on both of the directors present to strengthen his argument and to explicitly demonstrate that he had their support.

At other times this same effect is pre-determined by the actors. The CEO, and Directors D and N, presented a 'Performance and Progression Framework' to the rest of the team in June 2022. In this presentation, the directors set out what is expected (in a general sense) from each level of the hierarchy in the organisation and from this explain to participants what they will need to do in order to advance. Each section is covered by a different board member and at the end of their section they defer to the next. In this way, a united front is created. The deferments make clear that the board is united in their expectations.

### 5.5.8 Interruptions

Interruptions were common in the meetings analysed but in some cases very different from one another. A total of 11 categories of interruptions were identified (see Appendix A), 12 if one counts 'failed interruptions'<sup>30</sup>. Categories of interruptions were not always clearly distinguished, for example, an actor might interrupt in a way that involved 'steering' and 'corrective' aspects, or

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<sup>30</sup> Instances in which the actor attempts to interrupt but the original speaker carries on speaking and the 'would be interrupter' gives up.

'assertive' and 'suggestive', they could be layered in a similar way to the layering of *Discourses* discussed in section 5.3.6.

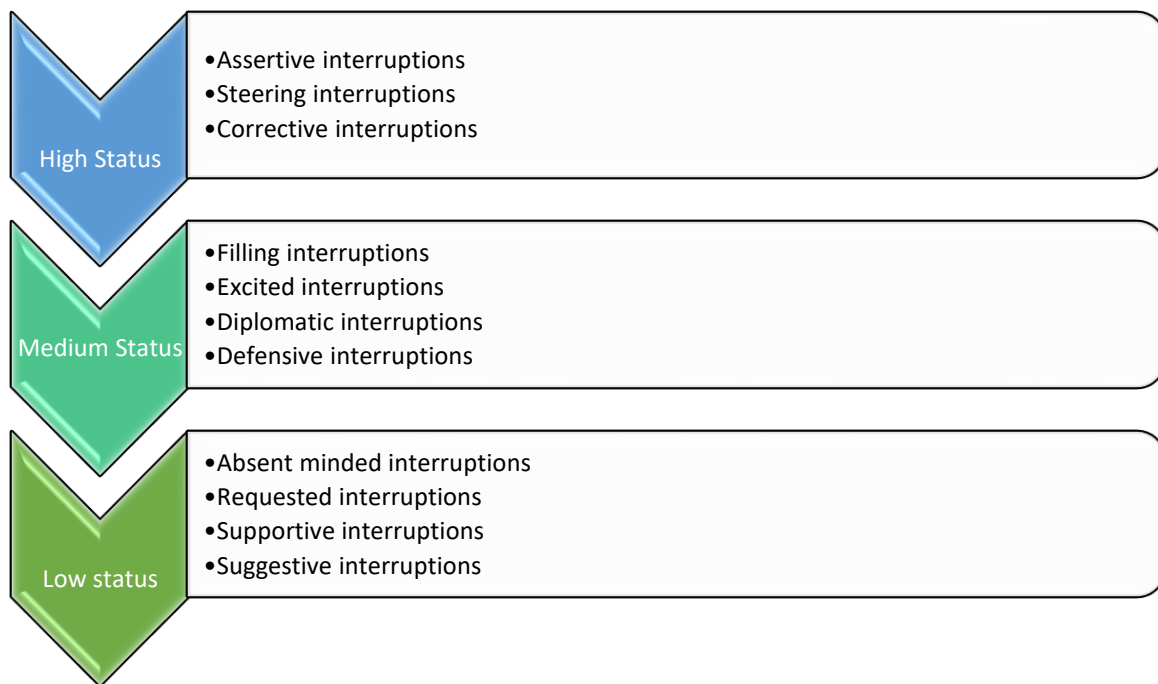


Figure 5.2 Types of interruptions identified and the status of the participants most commonly using them.

Typically, the categories of interruptions were associated with a certain level of status (see Figure 5.2). Those of higher status could use any of the categories of interruptions, whereas those of lower status tended to use those at the lower end of the diagram. Assertive interruptions were never used by persons of low status. There were some, albeit rare, instances of 'corrective' and 'steering' interruptions used by a person of lower status to correct or steer a person of higher status. These were classified as instances in which the interrupter's stance had exceeded their status in the context.

Interruptions were also used more effectively when congruent with the stance projected by the actor. For example, Director Y frequently softened his stance effectively, as was the case in the following example:

CEO: Yeah. So just (-)

Y: Sorry, can I just ask a quick question? (Board Meeting, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2022)

In requesting permission to ask the question Director Y successfully interrupted the CEO to clarify some issues and change the course of the conversation to the area he wanted to address.

This can be directly contrasted with an example of a requested interruption from Head of Department L which is followed by an incongruent assertion of epistemic authority:

CEO: Okay, I don't want to hear about these rumours happening anymore. (-)

Head of Department L: (Requested interruption) [CEO]↑?

CEO: Yeah.

Head of Department L: One thing I say back to that at the risk of you shooting me, I think, when you create a meeting, in the circumstances where we all know, things are quite difficult [pauses] (-)

CEO: (Filling interruption) I know what you're gonna say. There's inevitable speculation.

Head of Department L: Yeah, they don't. Yeah, of course, of course, inevitable speculation. It's not necessarily creating rumours, it's just people are concerned (-).

CEO: (Assertive interruption) It is, though, and what you're doing is, ( ) is not helpful, and it's not mature. (Mandatory SLT Meeting, September 2022).

Head of Department L's request to interrupt is very soft, and there is some suggestion in the pause that follows his initial statement, that he realises he is in a difficult position as he prepares to make the hard assertion that the Board should expect speculation when calling an urgent meeting. As was discussed above in relation to instances in which the actor softened their stance and then strongly asserted epistemic or deontic authority, such instances did not achieve the actor's intended contribution.

## 5.6 Chapter Summary

Whilst the findings have been presented in three categories (leadership, power, and culture) the instances of leadership did not reflect any such distinction. In addressing the research question, ‘How is organisational leadership collectively and discursively constructed in a small law firm?’ this research confirms that CL does not operate in isolation but is inherently connected to power and culture. Most of the contributions to instances of CL are explicitly underpinned by *Discourse*. Even in instances where the cultural effect is not explicitly brought into effect through language, its presence is typically felt (see section 5.3.4). We can also see that the extent to which individuals contribute to the leadership in a collective setting is determined in part by power, and that power is affected by the interplay between actors, not simply the individual’s position on a hierarchy. Power, culture, and leadership are therefore all perennially shifting.

The longitudinal nature of the study revealed findings that demonstrate the “incredible complexity and nuance” of CL (Empson et al., 2023, p.219). It has been noted that comparisons of instances of leadership revealed that the language used did not conform to identifiable patterns. Language is complex and used in innumerable ways to communicate an argument, sentiment, or other contribution to an act of leadership. The subtle (and the blatant) differences in the way individuals communicate, and the ever-changing context suggest that unless we define leadership within narrow and specific parameters, then such patterns would be an oversimplification at best. When we add a consideration of the infinite variety of effects *Discourse* has on leadership, and that the power relationships in an organisation are constructed on an ongoing basis, changing from moment to moment, the likelihood of identifying a pattern to which all instances of leadership conform to appears chimerical.

The findings add some valuable contributions to our understanding *how* CL is discursively constructed.



The research into *Discourse* revealed three distinct types of *Discourse* within the organisation (cultural discourse, organisation-specific discourse, and industry-specific discourse). These distinctions are important in understanding the effect of *Discourse*, not least in understanding the degree to which each category contributes to the cultural norms (see Discussion). This section of the research also contributed to our understanding of how Discourses are constructed, limited, and challenged. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that the strength of any given *Discourse* is dependent on the individual, the context, and the appropriateness of its use.

Some of the techniques identified in the leadership section of the findings add to our understanding of how leadership is collectively constructed in relation to the status and stance of the contributor. In observing leadership as a collective process, the varying techniques of the contributors add to our understanding of how contributions can be made more or less effective. Posing arguments as questions, standing on the shoulders of others, consistency in expressing opinions, confidence, and in some cases interruptions were all shown to be effective techniques through which those of lower status could effectively contribute to leadership. Limitations were also identified, highlighting the danger of oversimplifying the practice of leadership. The findings show rather than there being a 'correct' technique for effectively contributing, the effective contribution depended on an array of factors and was dependent on context.

The section on power demonstrates how the stance of the actors not only changes and is affected by others, but also how it affects the effectiveness of leadership. The findings also demonstrate the importance of combining the 'right' leadership techniques with the individual's portrayed stance. Whilst the extant literature typically claims that those of higher status have more power to influence (as did these findings), these findings explain that this is, at least partially, because those of higher status have more techniques with which to influence available to draw on (see section 5.5.8 for examples this concerning interruptions).

CL is typically constructed through the discursive intercourse of an organisation's members. When actors assert epistemic or deontic authority in a manner commensurate with their perceived stance and concurrently employ an appropriate *Discourse* to support a sound and consistent argument an effective contribution to the leadership was achieved in the vast majority of instances.

Overall the research identified techniques that practitioners of collective leadership in this organisation (and quite probably others, although the intention is not to make generalisations) can draw upon to increase the likelihood of making effective contributions to leadership in a collective setting. In the following chapter, the findings are discussed further in relation to the extant literature and the contributions of this research.

## 6. Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore the interplay of language and to consider how the participants use language to construct leadership in a collective setting. Specifically I sought to answer the research question, 'How is organisational leadership collectively and discursively constructed in a small law firm?'.

The findings of the study were extensive and whilst much support was found for the themes reported in the extant literature the unique method employed in this research revealed findings which have to date remained unidentified. In other areas, the themes identified in this research complement, in an explanatory sense some of the extant knowledge in the field of collective leadership (CL), particularly in addressing *how* CL is discursively constructed. The findings will be discussed in the same format as they were reported in the previous chapter, albeit in a different order.

The first section considers the findings from the 'leadership' section and highlights some of the inconsistencies between the findings of this study and other similar studies in the extant literature. The inconsistencies appear to be largely explained by the wider definition of leadership used in this research, the methodology, and the longitudinal nature of this research.

The second section considers the ways in which language was used to affect power dynamics. The unconventional use of conversation analysis allowed for concepts rarely considered in leadership studies to be explored in the context of CL. The concepts of deontic and epistemic authority, stance, and status are discussed in the ever-changing context of a longitudinal study which revealed new insights.

In the third section, the language used to construct culture is discussed in relation to its influence on leadership. The importance of distinguishing between the different types of *Discourse* is highlighted with reference to the extant literature. The dynamic nature of *Discourse* is discussed in relation to

the findings in this study of how the relevant *Discourses* are influenced by the actors. Context is also considered in relation to *Discourse*, the extant literature demonstrates the relevance of context, and the findings from this study add to our understanding of context by explaining the extent to which *Discourse* can affect leadership (something which appears to have been underestimated in the extant literature, at least in organisation studies) as well as considering some of the specific ways in which context may affect the influence of the *Discourse*.

The three sections together offer insights into how CL is discursively constructed. The methodology designed specifically for this research (discursive construction analysis (DCA)), reveals not only the discursive strategies used relative to the individual's status within the organisation's hierarchy but also the effectiveness of these strategies which frequently required the benefit of the longitudinal nature of the study. Furthermore, the findings contribute to our understanding of the way in which various *Discourses* are employed in the collective construction of leadership, again taking into account the power dynamics at play. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the contributions made as well as a consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of the research.

## 6.1 Collective Leadership

### 6.1.1 What is Collective Leadership?

The findings focussed on instances of organisational leadership conforming to the definitions discussed in the Methods chapter. Whilst this steers the findings toward more relational instances of leadership (e.g. Clarke, 2018), and would discount simple commands, such as one person telling another what to do, the instances of commands made in isolation were minimal (5 in total vs 137 instances of leadership as defined in this study). This may be, as Clifton (2019) argued, because leadership involves more than simply issuing instructions, a view supported by many scholars, indeed Haslam et al. (2024) claim that a majority consensus would adopt this view in defining leadership. The individuals observed in this study appear to have appreciated this sentiment, frequently building

up to instructions with explanations, suggestions for improvement, questions aimed at clarifying ambiguities, and other tactics seemingly designed to influence people to want to perform the task, rather than simply demanding that they do (see codebook (i) in Appendix A for a complete list of codes attached to strategies employed).

The conceptualisation of CL in this study would sit somewhere between cells 3 and 4 of Ospina et al.'s (2020) matrix, embodying elements of interpersonal relationships and systemic dynamics, supporting the argument of Robinson and Renshaw (2021) that the distinction between these two cells may be an oversimplification. The argument of Edwards and Bolden (2023) that how we define leadership has a performative effect, is also supported by the findings. In describing leadership as collective we construct a process that has multiple participants, an alternative definition would have led to a different understanding. For example, if leadership was defined as a top-down process by a dominant and controlling leader (as was the case in De Cremer's (2006) study of autocratic leadership) then the findings would be very different. Rather than considering the relational aspects of leadership and the interactions between multiple actors, a definition such as De Cremer's would lead to short instances of what was typically coded in this study as 'authoritative responses', some instances of 'critiquing' (participants, groups, or organisations), 'contradicting', and 'assertive interruptions' (with some others possibly being included depending on the context). Alternatively, if a more specific definition of CL had been used, (e.g. Denis et al.'s (2012) types of plural leadership) this would also reduce the instances of leadership recorded. In this respect, the research should be viewed as an exploration of CL as a lens, emerging from the interactions of individuals and taking into account systemic aspects of the phenomenon. As mentioned above, CL in the context of this research refers to organisational leadership and there is no suggestion that the findings are transferable to other contexts.

With the specific intent, as mentioned in previous chapters (see Introduction and Methods), to avoid the positivist influence that affects so much of leadership research, I am cautious to caveat any

discussion of what CL is with the explicit provision that this is the perspective adopted in this research and therefore far from any attempt at authoritatively defining the concept. Alternative understandings are equally valid and as Edwards and Bolden (2023) suggested the term CL may be an 'empty signifier' to which the researcher brings meaning. With that said the observations in this study suggest that when applying a definition of leadership such as Yukl's (1989) definition, which Haslam et al. (2024) noted in formulating their own definition, has a broad consensus of approval, CL could be defined as follows:

CL is a constellation of contributions in which the actors influence one another and from which either the achievement of, a commitment to, or compliance toward a task objective(s); a strategy; an identification; or an influence in organisational culture occurs.

It is, within this conceptualization, not only possible for acts of (or contributions to) leadership to be informal or formal, but normal for both to be involved, albeit with actors using different strategies and with varying degrees of effectiveness, according to their status. As the findings demonstrated, the range of techniques the actor may employ to contribute to leadership is increased commensurate to their status. The stance of the actor affects the effectiveness of the contribution, not simply in a linear fashion, in which increased stance equals increased effectiveness, but in a nuanced way. The assertion of stance (through epistemic and deontic authority) is most effective when aligned correctly with the prevalent *Discourse*. Typically, although not necessarily, the more caring, inclusive, understanding *Discourses* were more effectively paired with a softer assertion, and the *Discourses* associated with finance, superiority, blame, etc. were more typically effective when paired with a stronger assertion.

Having explained the concept of CL in the context of this research, the following sections of this chapter delve more deeply into a discussion of the specific elements of language that significantly affected the success of the observed contributions to CL.

### 6.1.2 Language and Context in the Discursive Construction of Collective Leadership

Whilst much of the research investigating the discursive construction of leadership has identified distinct patterns of language use (e.g. Carroll & Simpson, 2012; Simpson et al., 2018; Wodak et al., 2011), this study did not. This is perhaps due in part to the wide definition applied in this study, and the much narrower definitions used in other studies. For example, Simpson et al. (2018) applied Austin's (1962) concept of the performativity of language to 253 specific instances of leadership in which a remembrance of the past was immediately adjacent to a consideration of the future. Wodak et al. (2011) considered instances of consensus building specifically. Carroll and Simpson (2012) considered instances of leadership development posted on an online forum.

The wide definition adopted in this research considered instances of leadership to include all the contributory participation that surrounded the instance (as discussed in the previous section), provided they were perceived to influence the act of leadership in some way. No attempt was made in this research to limit or reduce the instances of leadership under consideration. By contrast, Simpson et al. (2018) discarded circa 80% of the recorded data, choosing to focus on a relatively narrow definition of leadership. Whilst either approach can offer us insights and contribute to our understanding of leadership, they will inevitably reveal discrepancies in the findings when compared to one another.

Simpson et al. (2018) concluded that leadership can be broken down into three stages: generating ideas, negotiating a united stance, and moving forward together. This research takes a more nuanced consideration of leadership. As Bourdieu (1991) noted in consideration of Austin's (1962) performatives, many scholars apply the concept too specifically to the language without sufficient consideration of the context and power dynamics at play. The findings from this research do not support Simpson et al.'s (2018) conclusion, or at least suggest that it may be an oversimplification. There were plenty of instances considered in this research in which the actors disagreed with one another, and in which power dynamics and context dictated the direction of leadership far more than

a consensus being reached. The consideration of power dynamics, and cultural influences on the directions leadership took is considered below, at which point specific instances are considered in more detail.

The method employed in this research further explains the difference between the findings of other research in this field. The longitudinal study was specifically chosen to take into account changes in context, the importance of which has been demonstrated by studies such as Empson (2020) and Sanfuentess et al. (2020), as well as commented on by many scholars (e.g. Edwards & Bolden, 2023; Sweeney et al., 2019). The ever-changing contexts of the data collected reduce the likelihood of consistent patterns emerging, especially when considering the extreme challenges the organisation faced especially during the latter stage of the research period.

Furthermore, the conversation analysis in this research allowed for a more detailed analysis than most methods which gave me the scope and flexibility to consider the nuances and complexities of the data. Rather than grouping open codes into axial codes, or first-order concepts into second-order themes, I was able to embrace the nuances in the data and consider them in more detail. As quoted from my reflexive diary entry in section 5.5.1. of the Findings chapter, it became clear after analysing 6-7 months' worth of data that the identification of a pattern would be an oversimplification, not an observation, and possibly worse still, a construction of the researcher. Identifying themes in the language used such as 'setting the scene', 'raising a concern', or 'making a suggestion for improvement' could be applied in any order during a contribution to the CL. Two or more themes could be conveyed concurrently with no discernible differentiation in the words used, and this is just in consideration of three of more than eighty themes identified. Had the methodology required it, it would no doubt have been possible to narrow the definition of leadership, place the identified themes into a small number of more generic categories, and consequently identify a single, or perhaps two or three patterns.



As the Findings chapter makes clear this research emphasises the complexity of CL and supports the argument of many other scholars (e.g. Carroll & Simpson, 2012; Foldy et al., 2008) that CL is an intangible, complex, and relational phenomenon. This is not to say that linguistic strategies do not exist, indeed quite the opposite, a number were identified and discussed, but the findings do not support the idea that a consistent linguistic pattern can be identified in all instances of CL.

### 6.1.3 Inconsistencies Between the Findings and Extant Literature

As mentioned above the methodological approach in this study identified nuances and complexities in a number of themes discussed in the extant literature. A simple example of this is the effect of confidence in leadership. Confidence, as a concept, is more typically associated with trait theory scholars (e.g. Stogdill, 1948, 1974) and sometimes aspects of some of the models of leadership such as transformational leadership and charismatic leadership (e.g. House, 1977). It has also been shown repeatedly by scholars assessing the effectiveness of leadership to be an important component (e.g. De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2004; Shamir et al., 1993) and as such was not considered in the literature review, being that it is less commonly associated with studies of CL. As it turned out, confidence was a significant aspect of the findings of this study, but not in the way a reading of the extant literature would suggest.

The degree to which actors displayed, or lacked confidence was measured using aspects of the Jeffersonian Transcription System which enables the researcher to consider unusual pauses, repetitions, broken sentences, and similar anomalies in an individual's speech patterns. Combining this with a consideration of the context helped the researcher to assess the levels of confidence of the actors. Based on the findings from this study, it would be an oversimplification to claim that confidence is a requisite trait of leaders (as argued by Stogdill, 1948, 1974; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991 and others), or even that an assertion of confidence leads to more effective leadership (as argued by scholars such as De Cremer and van Knippenberg, 2004; Shamir et al., 1993). It did seem to be the case that a marked lack of confidence was commonly associated with ineffective

contributions to leadership, but this may be due to the fact that actors who knew their arguments would not be well received were not confident in presenting them. Rather than the trait of confidence being the determining factor, the persuasiveness of the argument in the context presented was the factor of most relevance, and the level of confidence displayed a result rather than the cause. It was also the case, as noted in relation to the discussion above on stance, that assertions of confidence which were contradicted or otherwise successfully challenged could be more detrimental to the stance of the actor than would have been the case had the actor softened their stance by expressing less confidence in their arguments.

#### 6.1.4 Strategies used by actors to encourage CL

It could be argued that all leadership is collective (Ospina et al., 2020). Viewed as a relational phenomenon in which one person influences another in a given context it would be impossible for an individual to lead in isolation, and this has been a premise of this research. That said, certain discursive strategies discussed in the previous chapter, have the effect of encouraging contributions to CL and some discourage it.

The pairing of a softened stance with *Discourses* such as 'Caring' and some of the 'Community' *Discourses* (caring; consensus; fun; team; employee-centric), were particularly effective at encouraging others to contribute. By contrast assertive interruptions, the 'Survival' and 'Superiority' *Discourses* particularly when paired with strong assertions of epistemic and deontic authority, contradictions, and various forms of critique were all notable deterrents. In the most extreme example, cited in the Findings chapter in section 5.3.9, the Operations Manager's mere hint at the Survival *Discourse* was sufficient to shut down the contributions from the trainees who had, up until this point been quite vocal.

#### 6.1.5 Strategies used by actors of lower status to effectively contribute to CL

The findings identified two strategies that, when employed strategically, were a particularly effective means through which actors of lower status could contribute to acts of CL. ‘Standing on the shoulders of others’ and ‘posing questions as arguments’ are discussed with examples in the findings chapter. The significance of these findings appears to result partly from the definition of leadership adopted for this research and partly from the use of DCA as a methodology. In using a wider definition of leadership which specifically allows for contributions to CL to come from all levels. Rather than considering the often overlooked instances of ‘informal leadership’ (as, for example, Clifton (2017) has noted), as an act in which leadership is solely attributed to an individual of lower status (e.g. Van De Mierop et al., 2020), this research considered instances of leadership to contain contributions from multiple actors, inevitably then, contributions could be made from all levels, which met the definition of the various acts of influence identified by Yukl (1989)<sup>31</sup>. This meant that ‘informal’ contributions were commonplace in this research, occurring in most of the instances of leadership recorded, whereas in Van De Mierop et al.’s (2020) study only one instance of informal leadership was identified in 50 recorded instances of leadership.

As was the case with the majority of the findings of this study, the strategies employed by those of lower status to effectively contribute to instances of leadership were not always successful. It would be an oversimplification, to sum up the strategies as being universally effective means to contribute the organisation’s leadership. Furthermore, the organisation studied was welcoming of contributions to leadership from all levels. The cultural differences between other organisations will undoubtedly mean that attempts to implement the following strategies in other environments would have mixed results no matter how well the actor employed them. These caveats noted, the strategies identified provide a contribution to the academic literature on leadership and to the practice of leadership.

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<sup>31</sup> “influencing task objectives and strategies, influencing commitment and compliance in task behavior to achieve these objectives, influencing group maintenance and identification, and influencing the culture of an organisation” (Yukl, 1989, p. 253)

Holm and Fairhurst (2018) concluded from their analysis of transcripts of meetings that leadership is complex, co-constructed process rooted in authority, established through dominance and deference. As the findings in this study make clear, leadership (depending on how it is defined) may be even more complicated than Holm and Fairhurst suggest. Whilst the conclusion that leadership is rooted in authority could be made in some instances of leadership considered, the contributions can come from any level in the organisation, and the influence process is more subtle than such a claim would suggest. The example given of ‘standing on the shoulders of others’ (see section 5.5.5 of the Findings chapter) could, without the benefit of an in-depth analysis be interpreted to be an instance in which the orator supports the argument of another of higher status and is therefore submitting to their authority. A more thorough analysis reveals that whilst authority is certainly relevant, the Operations Manager is using the status of the director to further her argument, she is not supporting his argument at all – she is almost contradicting it by ostensibly interpreting it to mean something that supports her argument. Similarly, a less in-depth analysis of the instances in which actors pose suggestions as questions could be interpreted as instances in which those of lower status defer to the authority of their superiors. This is only partially true, the suggestions are posed as questions and this reflects an outward show of respect for those of higher status, but this appears to be a discursive strategy, to make an argument without upsetting the established norms within the organisation. The act of leadership in the instances of arguments being successfully posed as questions is not then rooted in authority, the leadership itself comes from the individual of lower stance making a direct contribution to leadership – it is simply done (or said) in a way that disguises the root of the leadership. The findings do not necessarily contradict Holm and Fairhurst’s (2018) conclusion, there may not have been instances of arguments being posed as questions or actors standing on the shoulders of others or other such instances of informal leadership (or contributions to leadership) in their organisation. Alternatively, the difference in the definition of leadership used by Holm and Fairhurst may explain the different conclusions reached. Another possibility is that the methodology

reveals an alternative perspective in each study. Quite possibly the explanation involves elements of all of the above.

#### 6.1.6 Interruptions and silence and their relevance to the construction of leadership

The findings identified 11 categories of interruptions, each having a different type of influence on the contribution to leadership depending on the context. The various interruptions were considered in relation to the minimum level of status the actors appeared to need to use the varying types of interruption. As with the findings on confidence, the relevance of interruptions was not considered in the literature review, this later turned out to be of little relevance since a search of the extant literature on interruptions in leadership revealed very little. Puranik et al. (2020) conducted a review of the literature on interruptions in the context of management but defined interruptions as being distractions from work, rather than interruptions in the discursive sense. Beattie (1982) considered interruptions in speech in looking at political interviews, but the research took place when Margaret Thatcher (the subject of the analysis) was the recently elected prime minister and focussed on her conversation with the opposition leader Jim Callaghan. A significant gap appears to exist in the contemporary literature.

Similarly, I could find very little consideration in the extant literature on silence as a significant factor in leadership. Searches of the literature reveal reference to employees or followers being silenced by more autocratic leadership styles (e.g. Duan et al., 2000; Grint, 2010) or even the silencing of leadership as a concept for the renowned postmodern researchers Calas and Smircich (2019). I could find nothing though on using silence as a discursive strategy and yet its significance was evident in the findings (see section 5.5.6 of the Findings chapter)

In some regards the use of a method rarely used, or new to the field, is a disadvantage in that the findings may lead to themes that remain under-researched leaving the researcher little to draw on in terms of extant knowledge. Of course, the advantages outweigh this. The researcher can uncover

concepts that can lead to suggestions for further research, as is the case here (see chapter 7, section 7.2).

#### 6.1.7 Consistency and deferring and their relevance to the construction of leadership

The themes of consistency of expressed opinion and deference have received little attention in the extant literature. Expressing opinions consistently may be a concept that appears too basic, or too obvious to researchers looking at discursive constructions of leadership. In the article by Wodak et al. (2011) on consensus building the words 'consistent' and 'consistently' do not appear in the main body of the article, however, Wodak et al. included large sections of the data from their study in the appendix. A search of these transcripts reveals a participant quite clearly highlighting consistency as an important factor.

“Because these people need to know why we're doing this, where they fit in, and what we as an organisation expect of them as a result. I think without that context it won't succeed. But certainly, leadership and having a [sighs] - oh what I call a consistent narrative around that, from all of us and our next level down, as to why we're managing this, why we're managing in this way and behaving consistently in accordance with the model that we agree, then - you know - as Bradley says as leadership or another element of leadership.” (Participant known as 'Larry', line 346-353 of the appendix in Wodak et al., 2011, p. 636).

The participant ('Larry') from Wodak et al.'s (2011) study makes clear that a “consistent narrative” from the Board of Directors, and the “next level” of management down, along with “behaving consistently” is an important part of the leadership required. There could be any number of reasons for Wodak and her colleagues not to mention 'consistency' in their findings. It may not have been a recurring theme, it may have been a first-stage code and been incorporated into one of the reported themes or it may have seemed too obvious to mention, to name but a few of the possible reasons. In this research, the importance of consistency has been demonstrated. It is an important component

of effective contributions to leadership and whilst most actors were consistent in their expressions of opinion the consequences of deviating from this can be detrimental.

A similar discussion can be had in consideration of deference as an aspect of leadership. It is difficult to find papers on the relevance of deference, or even deference being identified as a relevant theme in papers considering the discursive construction of leadership. When the term is mentioned it tends to be a passing reference to a side point. For example, Seers et al (2003) in a chapter from Pearce and Conger's *Shared Leadership* mentioned that "Individuals who choose not to seek status<sup>32</sup> may effectively defer leadership to others" (p.91). The comment was made in the context of assessing whether individuals in a team setting could share leadership.

The concept of deference in the extant literature tends to focus on individuals giving up the opportunity to lead, or passing the power on to someone else (e.g. Holm & Fairhurst, 2018). Whilst this aspect of deference is certainly supported by this research, the findings suggest it is a more complex concept. Deference can be used strategically to strengthen arguments, establish stance, and demonstrate consensus. It is, again, the in-depth analysis made possible with conversation analysis that allows the researcher to assess more than the words being used but to ask why those words are being used, in that context (Clifton, 2019). This then leads to a discussion of the findings in relation to the power dynamics within the organisation.

#### 6.1.8 Relating the Findings on *discourse* to the Research Question and Aims

In the respect of language as a small 'd' discourse being used to construct leadership the findings provide the following contributions to addressing the aims of the research and answering the research question: Actors effectively encouraged contributions to the leadership effort by softening stance and employing caring and community *Discourses*. Actors of lower stance contributed to the collective leadership by posing arguments as questions and 'standing on the shoulders of others'. The

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<sup>32</sup> Seers et al.'s use of the term 'status' is not in keeping with the use of the term in the rest of the paper, what they are referring to here is termed 'stance' in this paper.

findings also contribute to our understanding of the discursive construction of leadership in highlighting the importance of silence and interruptions (which appear to have been largely overlooked in the extant literature). Furthermore, the findings contribute a more nuanced understanding of concepts such as deference, confidence, and consistency.

## 6.2 Discursive Power Dynamics and the Effects on Leadership

The *discourse analysis* in this study focussed on how instances of leadership were discursively constructed (discussed above) and how individuals vied for power. It is this latter part of the analysis to which we now turn. The importance of the jostling for power between individuals within the organisation is difficult to overstate. Scholars such as Fairhurst et al. (2020) and Empson (2020) have explicitly stated the importance of power dynamics in CL and whilst, as Foldy and Ospina (2022) note, there has been research that contributes to our understanding of power dynamics in the field of CL, the concept has not been given adequate attention - a sentiment many have commented on (e.g. Bolden, 2011; Denis et al., 2012; Gronn, 2011, 2015).

### 6.2.1 The types of power relationships analysed

Whilst not commonly used in leadership studies (Clifton, 2019) conversation analysis offers the researcher the opportunity to conduct a detailed analysis of naturally occurring instances of leadership. Conversation analysts from other fields (e.g. Stevanovic and Peraklya, 2012, 2014) have identified the concepts of deontic and epistemic orders. As discussed in the methods chapter these refer to the authority and obligations of actors to instruct others or receive and adhere to instructions (deontic orders), the authority to make claims about how things are (epistemic authority), and the right to know (epistemic rights – Watson, 2021) collectively, epistemic authority and epistemic rights are known as epistemic orders. The concepts of deontic and epistemic orders relate to the concepts of stance and status. Status is the individual's power and position in the organisation relative to others (without regard to their position on the hierarchy) and status referring



to their fixed position on the organisation's hierarchy. There has been little consideration of these concepts in the field of leadership, but Jonathan Clifton and colleagues have made some substantial exceptions to this (e.g. Clifton, 2019; Van De Mieroop et al., 2020).

It should be noted that this research has considered concepts such as epistemic and deontic authority, and stance at a general level. Assertions of deontic authority can be considered in terms of their urgency, with 'proximal' instances being the most urgent and 'distal' being distant (in the context of time) commands (Clifton, 2019; Stevanovic and Peraklya, 2012, 2014; Van De Mieroop et al., 2020). We can also consider stance and status in more specific senses such as deontic stance and deontic status (Van De Mieroop et al., 2020). Such distinctions were not made in this research as they did not have a significant bearing on the findings and I felt their inclusion may detract from the themes being uncovered by unnecessarily overcomplicating the concepts.

In terms of Fleming and Spicer's (2014) distinctions of power (see section 3.6 of the literature review) status would fall into the 'systemic' category, and stance would fall into the 'episodic' category. The additional distinction specific to collective leadership, added by Foldy and Ospina (2022) would place status in the 'entitative' category and stance in the 'emergent'. The consideration of status and stance, then, covers all four of the categories in Foldy and Ospina's (2022) 2x2 matrix, providing a rounded consideration of power dynamics (although, it is certainly not the claim that the focus on these concepts provides a holistic consideration of power dynamics).

The focus on stance and status (and the assertions of deontic and epistemic authority) omit a consideration of other important aspects of power. One notable omission is the antecedent conditions that enable a CL configuration (and therefore the ability of the actors to vie for stance in the context considered). This has been considered by other scholars (e.g. Currie and Lockett, 2011) but given the context-specific, and complex nature of the phenomenon further research into this area is needed. Stance and status are aspects of power that reside at an individual level but as has been shown in the extant literature (e.g. Collinson, 1992; Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007) power may reside

at group levels too. The concepts used in this analysis are largely focused at the individual level and whilst the interactions between actors provide some insight in to the group level power dynamics in certain contexts the research lacks a thorough analysis of power at the group level. It should also be noted that the data in this research was collected from the senior leadership team meetings and board meetings, as such there is little consideration of how other groups within the organisation may have engaged in the negotiation of power.

The encouragement within professional services firms generally, for power to be distributed rather than held by an elite group has been well documented by Laura Empson and her colleagues (Empson, 2017; Empson, 2020; Empson & Alvehus, 2020; Empson & Langley, 2017). Conducting my research in a professional services firm, whilst increasing the likelihood of instances of CL overlooks aspects of the study of power. This research misses some of the important questions posed by Bolden (2011) “*why leadership is distributed, who controls this distribution, and what (if anything) is being distributed?*” (p. 259-60, Italics original). It does however offer an in-depth insight into the individual dynamics of power distributions.

### 6.2.2 Inconsistencies between the findings and extant literature

As with the findings in the ‘leadership’ section, discussed above, there were some inconsistencies between the findings of this study and others in the extant literature. This, again, appears to be partially due to adopting a wider definition of leadership and considering instances of leadership in varying settings. For example, if we take Gibbeau et al.’s (2020) study of co-leadership, they highlighted six different configurations of co-leadership in one organisation, noting differences in power dynamics in each of the six settings. Studies that focus on a single setting like Simpson et al. (2018) who focused on a series of management meetings with the same managers (more or less) present on each occasion, or Clifton’s (2019) study of a specific fundraising team’s interactions in a hospital (again with the same participants) may be analysing meetings in which the actors have established power dynamics (and therefore fewer instances of vying for power could be observed). In

the meetings analysed in this research, there was a lot of change over the course of the 12-month research period, employees were promoted, resigned, and some were made redundant. The research also considered a range of different types of meetings. The result was a series of varying contexts in which power dynamics were not necessarily well established, leaving plenty of room for some of the actors to vie for increased stance, to have more influence, and ultimately to further their career advancement.

The frequency of what could be classified as instances of informal leadership, or perhaps more accurately, as informal contributions to leadership (i.e. contributions made by those of lower stance) were more common than the expectations garnered from the extant literature. The specific strategies used are considered above in the section on leadership. In this section, the focus is on the ways in which the actors alter their stance to contribute to instances of leadership. For Van De Mieroop et al. (2020) informal leadership occurs when the actor's leadership identity is “talked into being” (p.496), and they identify the successful incongruent assertion of deontic authority (in relation to status) as being one way in which informal leadership is achieved. The findings from this research were more nuanced. Whilst support was found for Van De Mieroop et al.’s (2020) findings, see for example the instance noted in section 5.4.3 of the Findings chapter in which Head of Department B talked his stance up to the point at which it appeared to exceed his status, such that his interactions with Director N (who had a higher status) were not typical of such a relationship. This was done with a combination of assertions of deontic and epistemic authority<sup>33</sup> and importantly by grounding his arguments in resonant *Discourses*.

While the findings of Van De Mieroop et al. (2020) are supported in the sense that instances of informal contributions to leadership were achieved in the way they identified, the findings from this

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<sup>33</sup> The relevance of asserting epistemic authority is likely to come down to the definition of leadership the researcher is working with. In this research the definition of Yukl (1989) specifically allows for the actor to influence organisational culture, which can be achieved through the assertion of epistemic authority. A narrower definition that requires the actor to effect change in behaviour would be more focussed on the effect of deontic authority.

research suggest this is only part of the picture, as Van De Mieroop et al. inferred by describing their finding as “one way of doing this” (p. 497) implying that there are more. The findings from this research suggest though that whilst actors can talk themselves into more influential roles, the successful assertion of deontic authority is contingent on numerous other factors. In section 5.4.4 of the Findings chapter the excerpt demonstrating the effects of contradictions on stance involves the Operations Manager asserting deontic authority toward Director S, an instance of an unsuccessful incongruent assertion of deontic authority. Van De Mieroop et al.’s (2020) contribution prompts the question, ‘what makes incongruent assertions of deontic or epistemic authority successful?’

Part of the answer to the question was touched on above. It appears (although I am hesitant to make generalisations from a single case study) that the success of incongruent assertions may be affected by the use of resonant *Discourses*. There are also, it seems apparent, to be factors relating to the context. It may be entirely inappropriate in some settings (certain situations in the military spring to mind as a probable example) for those of lower status to assert any authority (whether epistemic or deontic) in which case grounding the argument in an appropriate *Discourse* would be unlikely to change anything.

The examples of discursive strategies for informal leadership discussed in the section on leadership above add further to the concept of informal contributions to leadership. In these instances, the actors do not assert deontic authority (nor epistemic) in an incommensurate way. The strategy of standing on the shoulders of others allows the actor to piggyback on the assertions of those of higher status. Posing questions as arguments is similarly commensurate with status, the actors in these instances seem to purposefully avoid incommensurate assertions but could influence the leadership process effectively.

There is no simple answer to the question, ‘What makes incommensurate assertions of deontic or epistemic authority successful?’ nor to the question ‘How are instances of informal leadership constructed?’ While this research adds to understanding and builds on the findings of Van De

Mieroop et al. (2020) there is very little research that takes into account the concepts of stance and epistemic and deontic orders. There is certainly scope to improve our understanding of what makes informal contributions to leadership effective. This research expands on the research of Van De Mieroop et al. (2020) in exploring the nuances of informal leadership but with so little research in this area, there is undoubtedly more that could be uncovered from research that addresses informal leadership in groups other than the senior managerial teams, and research carried out in a range of contexts.

Clifton (2019) noted that in some situations actors may intentionally lower their stance to lead more effectively. This was not only supported by the findings but expanded on. As section 5.4.2 of the Findings chapter made clear the softening of stance is not sufficient in itself to make the contribution to leadership more effective. Frequently occurrences of lowered stance in the data were recorded as being ineffective contributions and more frequently met with contradictions (see section 5.5.2. of the Findings chapter which deals with speaking with a lack of confidence). The differentiating factor appeared to be the alignment of a resonant *Discourse* with the softening of stance, and importantly a consistency in the assertions of epistemic or deontic authority with the stance asserted. Director S was particularly effective in combining resonant *Discourses* (in her case usually *Community* and *Caring Discourses*) with a softened stance. She was also typically consistent in her assertions (or lack of them) of epistemic and deontic authority, often (as is noted in the Findings chapter on numerous occasions) asserting such authority so softly that it became debatable as to whether it should constitute an assertion at all. By contrast, the Findings make clear that when the actor's stance and assertions were inconsistent, the attempted contribution to leadership was frequently ineffective.

As with the section above on leadership, much of the findings reported appear to be relatively unique to this research, and whilst this will clearly have something to do with the context, as with the section on leadership, much of this can be attributed to the DCA (particularly, in this section the influence of conversation analysis).

It may be the case that to write a paper, or even a section of a paper on the finding that being contradicted is typically detrimental to an individual's stance would be such an obvious statement, that it wouldn't merit a significant contribution. Perhaps the same can be said for the more subtle findings (in section 5.4.5 of the Findings chapter) that simple expressions of gratitude, compliments, and support can impact stance, or the effects of taking and evading responsibility on stance (see section 5.4.9). Or perhaps the findings haven't been reported because the use of conversation analysis in the study of leadership is rare. Whatever the reasons the findings appear to be significant not only at a theoretical level but at a practical one too. Whilst it is not the suggestion of this research that a 'one size fits all' discursive strategy for practicing leadership in a collective environment could be produced, the discursive strategies identified could be transferable to other organisations, particularly those that encourage CL.

Whilst representation (see section 5.4.6. of the Findings chapter) has been considered in the extant literature (e.g. Kitchell et al., 2000; Wodak et al., 2011), it has typically been considered in regard to forming group identities in contexts such as building consensus or establishing separate groups. In this research, the use of terms like 'I' and 'we' were noted to have the additional function of embellishing stance by presenting arguments or assertions as those of a wider group. In essence, an individual can align his/herself with a wider group to present an argument, as 'we' rather than 'I', and in doing so rely on a cumulative stance superior to their own individual stance. This is an important contribution and further research into areas such as resistance leadership where the identification of groups is a key component would be beneficial to our understanding.

In analysing power dynamics using the concepts of epistemic and deontic authority, stance, and status the research offers both contributions to the extant literature on power dynamics in CL and several suggestions for further research. The specific contributions and limitations are discussed in detail in the relevant sections within this chapter below, the next section deals with the influence of

*Discourse*, which as the Findings Chapter made clear, influence both the leadership strategies identified and power dynamics in the discursive construction of CL.

### 6.2.3 Relating the Findings on Power Dynamics to the Research Question and Aims.

The findings expand on the work of Clifton (2019) and Van De Mierop et al. (2020) in identifying additional ways in which individuals may affect their own stance and the stance of others, and in identifying additional means through which informal instances of leadership may occur. These discursive strategies help to explain the relevance of power dynamics in the discursive construction of collective leadership and contribute to answering the research question by highlighting the importance of informal contributions to collective leadership and how power dynamics affect the likelihood and effectiveness of informal contributions.

## 6.3 The Influence of *Discourse* and How it is Used

### 6.3.1 The ambiguity of the term *Discourse*

The influence of *Discourse* on leadership has been well established with several scholars highlighting its importance in the field of organisation studies (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2018; Maupin et al., 2020; Sutherland, 2018, etc.) but as Maupin et al. (2020) highlighted, what we lack is a comprehensive understanding of *how Discourses* come into being, develop, and change and *how* this affects CL. Addressing this was a key focus of this research and a first step was the decomposition of the term *Discourse* itself. As Mumby (2011) argued, the term *Discourse* is ambiguous. In some studies it refers to ‘organisation-specific discourse’ or ‘industry-specific discourse’ and in others it is the more general use of language to construct culture, values and norms, termed in this study as ‘cultural discourse’. Take for example the studies of Fairhurst and Coreen (2004) and Gordon (2010), both were studies of Police forces (in the US and UK respectively) and both studies looked at the influence of *Discourse*. Fairhurst and Coreen focussed on the use of technical jargon to create a sense of identity and

associated the usage of such terms with a professional *Discourse* that reduced the propensity of the actors to panic during a very stressful encounter (organisation-specific discourse). Gordon (2010) focussed more on the everyday language used in the organisation which contributed to a culture in which the actors felt they knew their own organisation better than anyone outside it could, and that this pernicious aspect of the culture resulted in an unwillingness to change (cultural discourse). The two studies considered different aspects of language use that fall under the umbrella term ‘*Discourse*’, the distinctions identified in this study help to identify how the various types of *Discourse* play their part.

Cultural discourse, organisation-specific discourse, and industry-specific discourse, whilst distinguishable for the analyst are not used in distinct ways within leadership practice. As such the distinction helps the researcher identify the source of effects on culture but not necessarily the overall effect. A consideration of one aspect of the *Discourse* may be helpful in studies considering a specific aspect of an organisation’s culture, as was the case with Fairhurst and Coreen’s (2004) of a specific incident.

### 6.3.2 Relating the Caring *Discourse* to the Extant Literature

As mentioned in the Findings chapter, the Caring *Discourse* was one of the first to be identified. This is perhaps unsurprising as West(2021) has specifically noted that what he calls ‘compassionate’ leadership is particularly well suited to CL:

“Compassion implies sharing power and influence by encouraging collective leadership, where all feel they have leadership influence.” (West, 2021, p.5)

Caring, as a theme within the phenomenon of leadership creates something of a divide among scholars. There are those who view caring as a feminine value or trait which is at odds with the idea of a strong masculine leader (e.g. Fletcher, 2002) along with those who have suggested that the caring leader is essentially acting in their own interests, expressing concern to get the best results



from their employees (e.g. Tourish, 2013). Then there are those scholars who view caring, compassionate, empathetic leaders as being a superior form of leadership (e.g. Helgeson, 1990) and associations made between caring leaders and improved commitment (Lilius et al., 2012), reduced anxiety (Kahn, 2001), improvements in employee self-esteem (McAllister & Bigley, 2002), improvements in innovation and quality (West, 2021) and improvements in performance and productivity (Cameron et al., 2003; Kroth & Keeler, 2009).

Tomkins and Simpson (2015) suggest an alternative understanding of caring leadership, based on a Heideggerian perspective. They argue that caring leadership is not about being nice, kind or compassionate. It is about enabling others, allowing autonomy, and accepting that the complexities of organisational life mean that the soothing idea of sticking with 'best practice' is seldom the answer.

The caring *Discourse* in this study suggests that the concepts of caring (or compassionate) leadership presented by West (2021) and Tomkins and Simpson (2015) are not mutually incompatible. Indeed there is considerable overlap; West (2021) argued a significant part of compassionate leadership is the sharing of leadership, and Tomkins and Simpson (2015) emphasised the importance of employees receiving autonomy. The characteristics of West's 'compassionate leadership' were evident in the organisation studied, but so was the autonomy advocated by Tomkins and Simpson (2015).

### 6.3.3 How *Discourse* is constructed and used in the process of leadership

The aim of identifying how *Discourse* is constructed was made more challenging by considering the use of the word 'constructed'. Whilst it is not incorrect to say that the actors in an organisation construct the *Discourses*, there is an implication that the language brings the *Discourse* into being in a fixed state. This, as the findings show, is most certainly not the case. Whilst the analogies from Sutherland (2018) and Fairhurst and Coreen (2004) of *Discourse* being the ground on which leadership (or in the latter example 'organisational life') is built are helpful in understanding the concept, they are misleading in the sense that there is an implication that *Discourses* are fixed,

permanent entities. Instead, I have used the analogy of lighting to reflect the idea that the multiple Discourses at play within an organisation are constantly varying between states of being on or off, but also, and frequently more subtly, in terms of being brighter or softer at varying points. Whilst Sutherland is correct in the astute conception of leadership's discourse typically being 'grounded' in one or more Discourses, if we think of the language being presented in different coloured lights, we get the sense of the dynamic nature of Discourse.

The dynamic nature of Discourse can be understood, as the findings explain, in the ways in which the actors establish, build momentum for, limit, and challenge the Discourses during their interactions. This, as Maupin et al. (2020) highlighted, hasn't been given much consideration in the extant literature. In most studies, either the effects of one identified Discourse have been considered, e.g. Fairhurst and Coreen's (2004) study of an organisation-specific discourse, or the separate effects of multiple Discourses are considered independently of one another, as was the case in Connaughton and Daly's (2004) study of remote working. It is less common for research to address how the identified themes related to one another, or whether the themes varied in the strength of the effect they had. Wodak et al. (2011) provide something of an exception in their study of consensus building. Their study looked at two meetings in the same organisation five months apart. In addition to identifying discursive strategies for building consensus they identified 'directing' and 'encouraging' Discourses relating to leadership styles and concluded that a mix of these appears to be optimal. Nyberg and Svenningsson (2014) and Empson et al.'s (2023) consideration of Discourse in identity construction, noted that the Discourses could be contradictory and that this presented the individuals with a challenge. In Svenningsson and Nyberg's study the individuals had to balance their identity as 'authentic leaders' whilst constraining their authentic selves. In Empson et al.'s study, the individuals balanced their identity as leaders with the Discourse of 'collectivity'. Clifton (2014) provides a rare example of the strengths of Discourses relative to one another noting that the Discourses he identified as 'market forces' and 'quality service' were strong enough to mean that the potential for a Discourse around avoiding the exploitation of hourly workers was not considered.

Whilst all of the studies mentioned above make significant contributions to our understanding of the importance of *Discourse* and the often contradictory nature of competing *Discourses*, the findings from the current study add to our understanding of *how* the *Discourses* gather momentum, or lose it, and *how* multiple *Discourses* can simultaneously influence the leadership through the process of ‘layering’ (using multiple *Discourses* simultaneously).

That said, as the findings demonstrate, there appears to be a limit to the effect the participants could have on the *Discourses*. The survival *Discourse* when employed during the more challenging months of the analysis was so strong that the participants could do little to limit or challenge it. As Director D noted, in the Board Meeting in November 2022 (quoted in full in section 5.2.1. (ii) of the Findings chapter) when in ‘survival’ mode the more desirable aspects of the organisation’s culture take a back seat. This may in part address Carroll et al.’s (2017) unresolved question as to why directors resort to conformity over strategy in challenging times.

#### 6.3.4 The Context-Specific Nature of *Discourse*

The *Discourses* identified in various studies can be very specific, Fairhurst (2011) refers to the ‘Martin Luther King *Discourse*’, Bennis and Thomas (2002) identified specific *Discourses* relating to ‘Geeks’ (leaders under 35 years of age) and ‘Geezers’ (leaders over the age of 70), and Fairhurst (2007) uses the term ‘emotional scaffolding’ to refer to an aspect of the cultural discourse used by Mayor Giuliani in his response to the attack on the twin towers in New York in 2001. Even *Discourses* that appear to sound general such as Fairhurst and Coreen’s (2004) use of the term ‘technical’ to denote the language sometimes used by police officers in a distress call have a very context-specific meaning. The same is true of the *Discourses* identified in this study, their importance is difficult to overstate, they appear to infiltrate almost every area of the leadership, power, and cultural aspects of organisational life, and yet they are largely specific to the organisation. Even industry-specific discourse, whilst by definition not specific to the organisation, is still affected by the specific context. This is also true within the organisation. Industry-specific terms such as ‘trainee’ appeared to invoke

different responses from various actors, most notably by trainees (identifying with the term) and supervisors (invoking a sense of superiority).

The importance of *Discourse* in this research highlights the need for leadership scholars to consider the context-specific nature of the phenomenon (as others have done before – indeed this research was heavily influenced by the call by Maupin et al. (2020) to consider the context-specific nature of CL).

Not only can we portray the influence of *Discourse* with the analogy of coloured lights to explain its infinite possible effects, and dynamic nature, we can use the analogy to demonstrate the ways in which the effects of a *Discourse* may be perceived differently by different individuals. In the same way that researchers may interpret the use of *Discourse* differently (or judge the shade of light differently) depending on their perspective, so too do the participants. What raises the confidence of one participant may make another feel inadequate. Another layer of complexity is added to the concept.

#### 6.3.5 Relating the Findings on *Discourse* to the Research Question and Aims.

The findings in relation to the use of *Discourse* were particularly significant. The extant literature makes clear that the discursive construction of leadership is heavily influenced by *Discourse*. The findings of this research identify the ways in which actors may manipulate the *Discourses* to affect their influence on the leadership in the organisation. The findings also shed some light on the effectiveness of *Discourses* in varying contexts and add to our understanding of how CL is discursively constructed.

### 6.4 Addressing the Research Question and Considering the Main Contributions

Bringing the findings together to address the research question ‘How is organisational leadership collectively and discursively constructed in a small law firm?’ it is perhaps best to start by addressing what we mean by leadership. If we take Yukl’s (1989) definition of leadership (quoted in the Methods

chapter, section 4.4.1) as being a process of influencing organisational culture, objectives, strategies, etc. we can interpret this to mean that leadership is a collective phenomenon as Yukl's later writings suggest he intended,

“the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives” (Yukl, 2011 p. 8).

We can think of leadership as a relational process, and consider the interactions between individuals to be contributions to leadership (some effective some ineffective). By analysing these contributions we can identify discursive strategies which vary depending on the individual's stance. Stance is partially raised with status, but to focus on status misses the ways in which individuals vie for power (which can improve the effectiveness of their leadership contributions). The combination of discursive strategies to affect stance in the way the actor perceives most effective to contribute to leadership, and the language used to present these arguments presents a complex interplay of language with a lot of elements interacting with one another in a complex and dynamic way. We can then consider the *Discourses* involved as being the light the actor uses to best present their arguments.

The discursive construction of CL is the result of the contributions of multiple actors to an influence process. The effectiveness of the contributions is affected by the relative stance of the individual, the language used to present the contribution, and the extent to which the actors draw upon appropriate elements of the organisation's culture.

#### 6.4.1 Contributions

In answering the research question the study makes several contributions to the study of CL. The extant literature makes clear that *Discourse* shapes the cultural context in which CL takes place. The findings from this research identify specific effects of the identified *Discourses*, for example, the

'Caring' and 'Community' Discourses encouraged collective contributions to leadership, whereas the 'Survival' Discourse constrained collective contributions. The findings identify three strategies that actors use to shape the Discourses on an ongoing basis; building momentum for the Discourse, limiting the Discourse, and outright challenges to the Discourse. In looking at Discourse as a dynamic and ever-changing phenomenon, this research alters the perspective of the concept, from the 'ground' on which leadership is constructed (Fairhurst and Coreen, 2004; Sutherland, 2018) to a more unstable phenomenon, the analogy chosen in this research being the lighting in which leadership is presented.

Furthermore, the analysis technique employed highlights, what I have termed the 'layering' of Discourses. None of the instances of leadership observed involved a single Discourse in isolation. This research highlights the importance of being open to the influence of multiple Discourses. The research also highlights the varying strengths of Discourses both in the more nuanced sense that individual actors may (and probably will) differ in the importance they attribute to specific Discourses, and in the more generic sense that certain Discourses will have what an almost overpowering effect – in this research the survival Discourse exemplified this trend.

Expanding on the work of Clifton (2014, 2019) and Van De Mieroop et al. (2020) in applying the concepts of stance, status, epistemic and deontic orders to the study of CL, this study has explored the complexities and nuances of the concepts. The findings go further than Van De Mieroop et al.'s (2020) research which argued that instances of informal leadership are the result of actors raising their stance above their status. Whilst the findings certainly supported this, this research explains some of the ways in which actors were effective in raising or lowering their stance (or doing so to others) and also identified strategies for effective informal contributions to CL ('standing on the shoulders of others' and 'posing arguments as questions'). In considering instances of organisational leadership to be collective endeavours with contributions from various actors instances of informal leadership are increased beyond the narrower definition of Van De Mieroop et al. (2020). This

widens the scope of consideration concerning informal leadership and has allowed for the identification of significant discursive strategies that may otherwise have remained overlooked.

The findings have identified several discursive strategies the actors used to contribute to the CL and each of these instances is arguably a contribution in itself. Perhaps the most significant contributions have been identifying the discursive techniques that encourage and discourage CL and identifying the discursive techniques that were most effective in contributing to instances of leadership. In the case of the latter DCA allowed for consideration of not only how actors contributed, but also how effectively actors contributed, and in particular the significance of the actors' use of stance and epistemic and deontic authority. Had the research considered the language used (*discourse*) without a consideration of the *Discourse* and power dynamics our understanding of the effectiveness factor would be significantly reduced.

Further consideration of the more general contribution DCA makes to the study of leadership (and other fields) is discussed in the following chapter.

## 6.5 Strengths and Limitations of the Research

The significance of the methodology has been made clear in discussing the findings. Overall DCA appears to have been one of the primary strengths of the research, revealing several insights that to date appear to have been overlooked, along with adding more detail to the extant literature. DCA though does have inherent weaknesses.

The focus of conversation analysis on the detail is often said to be at the expense of the context (Fairhurst, 2007). This is particularly evident in DCA's consideration of power dynamics within the organisation. As mentioned above, the focus on the individual actors vying for stance omits an in-depth consideration of the questions posed by Bolden (2011), regarding why leadership is distributed in the first place and therefore how the situation came about that allowed for this vying for stance in the first place (Currie & Lockett, 2011), what exactly is being distributed, and who is in control of the

distribution process. The focus of the analysis is also very much on the individuals and therefore omits a consideration of power at a group level (Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007)

An additional criticism of conversation analysis specifically is that analysts often under-knowledge their role in assigning meaning (Haslett, 1987). A fundamental part of conversation analysis is the interpretation of the data (Clifton, 2019) and as Haslett (1987) points out if an interpretation of the data is presented without the researchers making clear how and why they have interpreted the data in the way they have reported it, a significant aspect of the information is missing for the reader. The reflexive element of DCA is an integral part of the overall approach, and whilst intended to reduce this aspect of the criticism any interpretative research method is prone to the critique Haslett identified. There is a counter-argument to Haslett's (1987) critique, as is made clear in both the Findings and Discussion chapters, that the interpretive element of DCA allows the researcher to go beyond the words used and to consider the meaning behind them (Clifton, 2019; Heritage, 1997) although Haslett's observation is a relevant limitation of any analysis involving interpretation.

The primary strength of thematic analysis in regard to this research is its flexibility. As noted in the Methods chapter, this was a significant advantage over the grounded theory approaches recommended as a complementary method for discourse analysis by Fairhurst and Putnam (2019). As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, thematic analysis allows the researcher the opportunity to summarise features of large bodies of data (such as the transcripts in this research) and to offer thick descriptions where appropriate. These advantages are equally applicable to DCA and including the thematic decomposition elements within the DCA methodology makes it a rather unique approach in leadership studies (or elsewhere it seems). The disadvantages of Thematic analysis have been well reviewed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and later by Nowell et al (2017). In regard to this research specifically, despite the efforts to reduce it, the subjective nature of DCA is apparent. Many of the findings could be attributed to the researcher's judgment or perspective and whilst the reflexive element of DCA has allowed these to be identified it does not eliminate them. As Nowell et al (2017)



argue “flexibility can lead to inconsistency” (p. 2), the flip side of the advantage of flexibility and is an acknowledged weakness of this research – it is a subjective analysis and portrays the researcher’s perspective. Another researcher analysing the same data would very probably use different coding and perhaps interpret significant instances of dialogue in a way that alters the conclusions drawn. That said a significant amount of effort has gone into reflecting and reporting on the interpretation of the data and it is my belief that whilst the reported findings unquestionably represent my perspective, this is not so unique as to render the research nothing more than this – I hope I have provided enough discussion of the interpretations made to allow the reader to make an informed decision in this regard. The approach advocated by researchers (e.g. Gioia et al., 2013) to dealing with inconsistencies between researcher’s perspectives has been to use multiple coders and to triangulate the findings. DCA intentionally avoids this. DCA encourages the researcher to embrace ambiguity, not to stifle it, but at the same time to be aware and to reflect on the researcher’s influence.

As has been noted above, the way in which the researcher defines leadership (whether explicitly or otherwise) will affect the findings. This is true for any leadership research and since there is no universal consensus on a definition of the phenomenon there are no signs of this changing imminently. What has perhaps not been made clear thus far is the extent to which defining leadership is subjective. It would be incorrect to assume that another researcher adopting the same definition would have identified the same instances of leadership noted in this study. Some instances could easily have been re-classified into one longer instance, whilst others could have been broken into multiple instances. This is not so much a weakness of this research as a weakness of most leadership research, but perhaps rather than thinking in terms of strengths and weaknesses we can appreciate this conundrum as a matter of perspective. Whilst your perspective and mine may differ, the more perspectives we add to the consideration of leadership the more our understanding grows (provided of course we are willing to consider a multitude of such perspectives).

One of the greatest strengths of this research has been the access to the data, this level of access is rarely afforded to researchers or third parties generally (Bryman, 2004; Carroll et al., 2017; Kempster & Stuart, 2010; Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Sutherland, 2018). This was not without ethical challenges, as discussed in section 4.3.2. of the Methods chapter, but provided an unusual perspective in the context of leadership studies. It is my view, although I appreciate not an overwhelmingly popular one given the influence of positivism, that the more perspectives we open ourselves to the better our understanding is likely to be.

In the following chapter I present my conclusions along with suggestions for further research and consideration of the practical and theoretical implications of the research.

## 6.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter considered the primary contributions of this research in relation to the extant literature, noting the importance of the definition chosen by the researcher in comparing the findings with other studies and the relevance of the methodology employed. The strategies used by participants of varying status were considered and the lack of attention paid to interruption and silence was noted. Furthermore, the focus on concepts such as deference and consistency has been suggested to be too narrow in the extant literature.

Similarly, in regard to the consideration of power, it is noted that this research focussed on a specific aspect of power, but that even when compared to other studies focussing on the same aspect of power the findings are significantly affected by the definition of CL used. The inconsistencies between the findings of this study and the extant literature were often explained by simple differences in the definitions of CL, and highlight the importance of the reflexive element of DCA.

In the discussion on the concept of *Discourse*, the ambiguity surrounding the term was addressed and discussed, with steps taken to clarify the approach taken in this research as a reflexive measure rather than a prescriptive one. The extant literature surrounding the prominent caring *Discourse* was

considered noting that there are numerous potential interpretations of what this may mean. How *Discourses* come about and how their influences waxes and wanes over the course of dialogue were discussed in relation to context.

The chapter concluded with a consideration of the main contributions and the strength and limitations of the research.

## 7. Conclusion

This research project started with the premise that despite the increasing trend within leadership studies to consider leadership as a discursively constructed collective phenomenon there has been a dearth of research into *how* collective leadership (CL) is constructed. I set out to answer the research question, 'How is organisational leadership collectively and discursively constructed in a small law firm?' This quickly led me to consider that a very probable explanation as to why we know so little about how CL is constructed is that it is incredibly difficult to research. The most commonly used research methodologies in leadership studies are not well suited to the investigation of a phenomenon that is so complex and nuanced, that changes from moment to moment and adapts to the situation, that spans the hierarchical levels within an organisation, and that is irrevocably intertwined with power dynamics and with organisational culture. My naivety in this regard proved to be something of a blessing in hindsight. I am not sure, that had I known the extent of the challenges I would face in tackling the research question, whether I would have pursued it. Creating a methodology suited to the purpose was a major challenge with many failed attempts to use extant methods resulting in having to start the analysis process from scratch. My decision to conduct the research in an organisation owned and run by my wife made the application for ethical approval a more difficult process than it would otherwise have been, but a decision that I maintain was the right one, offering not only an unusual perspective but an opportunity that independent researchers would rarely be afforded (especially given the challenges the organisation faced during the research period). Perhaps though the greatest challenge faced was the complexity of the project, at times during the analysis process, the volume of data, and the complexities and nuances of the ways in which the various concepts related to one another gave me the feeling I had entered a maze from which I may never emerge. Emerge though, I did, and with answers to the research question which perhaps generate even more questions.

To conclude the thesis I consider the theoretical and practical implications of the research with particular consideration of discursive construction analysis (DCA) and the effects this has had on the research. I then consider suggestions for further research and finally, briefly reflect on the overall process.

### 7.1 Theoretical and practical implications.

The primary reason for commencing a Ph.D., for me, was to make a theoretical contribution to the study of leadership which should include a practical element. The result, I hoped, would equip the organisation studied with information and insights that could result in practical changes to the benefit of its members. Unfortunately, the organisation in which I conducted the research went into administration toward the end of 2023. That said, the CEO had founded a second business which had been running for about a year before the administration came into effect. The new company was able to take on the employment of the employees from the company entering administration, and as such I remain hopeful that the findings from this research will enable the newer company to draw on the findings to implement some practical changes.

As was mentioned in the Discussion chapter, certain discursive strategies have been identified that encourage (and discourage) contributions to collective instances of leadership. Whilst it would be naïve to imagine that the discursive practices discouraging the participation of a diverse range of actors within the organisation would be withdrawn completely, the organisation may benefit from an awareness of the effects of contradictions, assertive interruptions, critiquing others, hard assertions of epistemic/deontic authority and the potentially pernicious influence of *Discourses* coded in this research as ‘Survival’ and ‘Superiority’. Such an awareness one would hope would lessen instances in which the contributions of others are unintentionally shut down. Equally, an awareness of the effects of softening stance, inviting contributions, and using resonant ‘Caring’ and ‘Community’ *Discourses*, will enable the actors in this (or other organisations) to encourage CL.

More generally the methodological approach used in this research has contributed to our understanding of *Discourse* both in revealing some of the complexities and nuances in the concept and in contributing to our understanding of how *Discourse* affects the discursive construction of leadership. The Concept of 'layering' *Discourses* and the nuances in the ways different *Discourses* can complement or contradict one another, contribute to an explanation of the effectiveness of an actor's contribution. The focus on *how Discourses* come into play led to the analogy of the coloured lights by which actors present their contributions, with concepts such as 'building momentum', 'supporting', 'limiting', and 'challenging' being identified as techniques used by the actors to affect the strength of the varying *Discourses*, or the brightness of the varying colours to use the analogy, according to their own individual preferences and the context. Such theoretical contributions apply not only to the study of leadership but beyond as well. The study of *Discourse*, or Foucauldian *Discourse* is a central feature of many subjects (e.g. Philosophy - Foucault derived his concept from Nietzsche (Foucault, 2002), Sociology – consider Gramsci's revival of the concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), History – much of Foucault's theory was based on his study of historic uses of *Discourse*, Politics – I have drawn on examples from Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum to provide examples within this context, and many other subjects) and as such the implications of the findings are far-reaching indeed, although for the examples in the fields beyond CL these are more suggestions for further research than necessarily transferrable knowledge.

The expansion of the research carried out by Clifton (2014, 2019) and Van De Mieroop et al. (2020) into the concepts of stance, status, epistemic and deontic orders in the field of leadership (building itself on the work of sociologist conversation analysts Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012, 2014)) highlights the importance of the concepts, and the nature of power more generally in leadership studies. Whilst social constructionism has gained popularity in the field of leadership studies (e.g. Fairhurst & Grant, 2010) in recent years, and the discursive constructionism element of this is central (Clifton, 2019), with scholars for some time advocating a greater emphasis on the study of leadership from the communication perspective being advocated (e.g. Tourish & Jackson, 2008; Tourish, 2014)

concepts such as stance, status, and epistemic and deontic orders remain under-researched, as has the use of methods such as conversation analysis (Fairhurst, 2007; Clifton, 2014). The implication of highlighting the significance of these concepts within the field of leadership leads to another significant implication/contribution from this research – the methodology.

DCA has been developed specifically for this research. Designed to enable research into CL to deal with the challenges of the context-specific, multiple-level, and dynamic nature of the phenomenon, whilst also allowing for a consideration of the power dynamics, and cultural influences which we know from the extant literature to be important factors in the study of CL (e.g. Empson, 2020; Fairhurst et al., 2020). DCA, however, need not be a methodology for the study of CL exclusively. As Samra Fredericks (2003) has shown in her research, strategy could equally be considered a discursive construction, and in fact as Berger and Luckman (1966) argued, so could a very wide range of phenomena. DCA is a methodology designed to research any phenomenon that is deemed by the researcher to be discursively and collectively constructed.

## 7.2 Suggestions for further research

A single, in-depth case study such as this will almost inevitably lead to calls for further research of a similar nature in other areas. No exception is made here. DCA seems to be well suited to the exploration of discursive CL and meets the criteria set out by Maupin et al (2020) to cover the multi-level, context-specific, and dynamic nature of CL. The use of DCA in this research has yielded findings with very little coverage in the extant literature. It is these areas that the focus for suggestions for further research centres.

The discursive techniques described in the ‘leadership’ sections of the Findings and Discussion chapters, particularly in regard to instances of informal contributions to leadership (e.g. standing on the shoulders of others and posing arguments as questions) may be present in other organisations, and the likelihood seems to be that further research would uncover more given the variations in contexts that could be studied.

The relevance of silence in the discursive construction of CL was made evident in the findings and further research is needed in this area. It appears that in some instances what is not said has the potential to be as powerful an influence as what is said. Similarly, the various instances of interruptions (in a discursive sense, rather than as a synonym for distractions) identified in this research contributed significantly to our understanding of the way power dynamics enable actors, particularly those of higher status (and in rare instances for those able to raise their stance above their status) to employ strategic interruptions to enhance the effectiveness of their contributions to CL, or to reduce the effectiveness of the contributions of others. There is a dearth of research in this area reflecting the relative scarcity of the use of methods suited to investigate such discursive strategies in the field of leadership studies.

It was noted in the Findings and Discussion chapters that participants appeared to respond differently to the varying *Discourses*, with preferences being identified. As noted in the literature review (section 3.5) there is some evidence that there may be gender differences in the way in which language is used and actors are perceived by their peers (Bongiorno, et al. 2014). It is therefore suggested that further research investigate the preferences for *Discourse* in the context of societal categories (for example, gender, race, religion, age, etc.).

The concepts of stance and status proved particularly useful in this research in examining the power dynamics of informal leadership. The dearth of research in this area would benefit from studies considering alternative contexts and groups within organisations other than the senior managerial teams.

The techniques discussed for raising and lowering stance in order to make the actors' contributions to instances of CL more effective seem unlikely to be a comprehensive account, and rather than viewing these findings as establishing a series of techniques used, they should be viewed as scratching the surface of an under-researched area. The findings from the exploratory approach taken in this research focus on the interactions of individual actors and do not answer questions



about the construction of CL at an organisational, or societal level. There has been some research into this, for example, Laura Empson and her colleagues have carried out research at the organisational level in professional services firms (Empson, 2017; Empson, 2020; Empson & Alvehus, 2020; Empson & Langley, 2017) and others have considered the effects of mergers and acquisitions (Chreim, 2015) and catastrophic events (Sanfuentess et al., 2020), but our understanding of the effects of context on leadership configurations and how they come into being are limited (perhaps unsurprisingly so given the innumerable possibilities (Gronn, 2009)).

DCA adds a layer of depth to our understanding of the effects of *Discourse*. Adding the interpretive elements of conversation analysis and the reflexive overview enables the research to go deeper than identifying *Discourses*, to consider how the *Discourses* integrate, not only with each other but with *discourse* and discursive strategies for leading. This approach could be applied to other settings and contexts. In studies in which the data is available for re-analysis, it would be particularly interesting to apply DCA to see if additional insights could be uncovered.

### 7.3 Final thoughts and reflections

This research project has, it feels, almost taken on a life of itself at times leading me to unexpected places on more than one occasion. From the original formulation of a research question at the start of this project, I had been advised, and accordingly expected, that I would revise the research question and many aspects of the study between its commencement and completion. The research question was one of the few things, as it turned out that remained stable, but beyond that, the advice was certainly prescient.

Whilst analysing the data was, at times, an arduous and frustrating task with several false starts each time it became apparent that the methodology I had attempted to use wasn't up to the task, it has resulted in the development of a methodology which was neither an intention, aim nor even a vaguely conceived proposition until it seemed to materialise all of a sudden, sculpted as it were, by

the challenges I faced in analysing such a nuanced and complex phenomenon. This was something of a theme throughout a process that at times I never thought I would end up describing as 'enjoyable'.

The research question, whilst answered, leads to more questions and a feeling that there is a lot more work to be done. In writing up the Findings and Discussion chapters of the thesis I was forced to reconsider the extant literature in order to understand why I had missed so many important concepts, my search suggested that the reason I hadn't considered it prior to the research being carried out is because there is so little research on these concepts. The use of DCA, and particularly the influence conversation analysis has had on the methodology, has revealed insights that appear to have been neglected in the extant literature. I am confident that applying DCA methodology to other contexts will reveal more insights and further areas to explore, as well as being a welcome opportunity to make comparisons with the findings in this research. The end of this project appears to be the beginning of a much bigger one.

#### 7.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter considered the theoretical and practical implications of both the research and the methodology developed for it. This leads to a summary discussion of the numerous possible avenues for further research to explore and concludes with my final thoughts on a challenging, rewarding and overall enjoyable journey.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Codebooks

#### Codebook (i) Coding of the *discourse*.<sup>34</sup>

Name of code	Description	Example	Number of meetings in which the code was observed (out of 30) <sup>35</sup>
Setting the scene	When the orator introduces their topic or argument	Y: The next thing is looking at discounts and this is where Alice was involved in some of the discussions about how do we achieve discounts June Board Meeting 2022	30
Re-setting the scene	When the orator challenges an orator who has set the scene with a correction	CEO: They didn't design this though [D]. [S] designed this. And they copied [S's] designs	4

<sup>34</sup> Codes relate to specific instances of leadership

<sup>35</sup> The figures in this column don't necessarily reflect the frequency of occurrences. A code may appear multiple times in the same meeting, this column simply records whether the code was recorded in a meeting or not.

		(April Board Meeting 2022)	
Raises a concern	When the orator brings up a specific issue to address	CEO: if we were to get everybody in the business together face to face once a year, I mean that's really expensive. (April Board Meeting 2022)	14
Dismisses a concern	The orator shows why a concern raised is not concerning	D: I don't think that there's a great degree of scope for error on the design front with Roost because it's largely already there. (April Board Meeting, 2022)	6
Explain	The orator provides an explanation to support their argument, detail their concern, etc.	CEO: it's got nothing to do with trust. We're just trying to understand what's happening within the business. That's all it is. (November Board Meeting 2022)	27
Adding clarification	the individual adds to the explanation of another in order to provide greater clarity.	CEO: And where does that call go? D: Over the internet. (November Board Meeting 2022)	13
Demonstrate understanding	The orator shows that they have understood another's argument.	CEO: So he says the Microsoft team's calling plan is 1130 a month and In the geeks voice is 17 pounds a month. (November Board Meeting)	12
Reasoning	Using reason to justify an argument or request	Y: [J] knows Roost really well and probably better than anybody else, and since it's a critical system it's going to be much easier to give this to... [J] (April Board Meeting)	8
Authoritative response	A hard assertion in which the orator makes their position clear in an effort to end a discussion.	CEO: that's not really the point though because, [S] gave them, you know, very clear designs of what it should look like. (June Board Meeting).	6
Mitigation	When the orator to softens their claim, mitigating its effect	JT: But I think what I would say as a positive thing is that obviously, if	6

		you ever do need help, people are lovely here (Supervision Round Table November)	
Humour	When the actor tries to make their colleagues laugh through the employment of jokes, or being less serious.	JC: You know, I've got all the thoughts happening all the time since I arrived, wasn't going to miss it for the world (Supervision Round Table November)	16
Complimenting a non-participant	Complimenting an individual not present in the meeting	B: [two employee names] just get it (Supervision Feedback May)	7
Complimenting a participant	Complimenting an individual who is present in the meeting	N: Would you like to be [employee's name's] mentor [A]? A: yeah, yeah I would love that. N: You'd be a good person.	11
Critiquing a non-participant	Critiquing an individual who is not present in the meeting	B: [employee name] is really frustrating because she is this callow youth who has got no idea how to work in a work in a work place	5
Critiquing a participant	Critiquing a participant who is present	CEO: What you're doing is, is not helpful, and it's not mature. (SLT Mandatory Meeting September)	1
Critique of the organisation as a whole	When the criticism is of the organisation is systemic rather than related to a person or group	JT: there isn't really a clear structure here on what should and shouldn't be supervised (Supervision Roundtable)	4
Defining the organisation	When the orator states what the organisation is, or what the culture is, or what's important to the organisation.	N: [The organisation], as a business, prioritises marketing quite highly	4
Complimenting the organisation	When the orator makes positive statements about the organisation.	D: We all love [the organisation]. We love everything that it stands for. (SLT Mandatory Meeting September)	6

Seeking support	When the orator actively seeks support for an argument or proposal	N: [D] correct me if I'm wrong but if the work did just suddenly flow in then you could be confident [employee name] would pick it up right?	4
Seeking understanding	Asking questions to clarify something	OM: Is that something that happened in inductions, or you're reminded at appraisals? Or was it just something that happened from the outset? (Supervision Round Table November)	9
Seeking understanding (feigned)	When the orator appears to be seeking understanding but is actually making a counter argument	Y: But wouldn't that be representative of your rate as a result? (Board Meeting April)	5
Contradicting	When the orator explicitly contradicts someone	L: It's not necessarily creating rumors, it's just people are concerned. CEO: It is, though: and what you're doing is, is not helpful (SLT Mandatory Meeting)	6
Suggestion for a topic of conversation	When the orator proposes a topic for conversation (as opposed to 'steering' or 'setting the scene' when they would just start talking about it.	Y: Well, shall we talk about that then (Board Meeting Sept)	8
Suggestion for improvement	When the orator suggests a solution to a problem, concern or issue.	CEO: I wonder if there's a way that we can progress IMP <sup>36</sup> externally (Board Meeting April)	29
Counter suggestion for improvement	When suggestion for improvement is met with a counter suggestion	it's not massively unjustified in the same way... I'm not saying we shouldn't pay her more but I know she will feel under more pressure if she's paid more (Board Meeting April)	19

<sup>36</sup> Information management Platform (software)

Suggestion for improvement posed as seeking understanding	Where the orator appears at face value to be seeking understanding but their question is leading to the extent that it is a clear suggestion in itself	OM: Do we need to include the indicative PQEs? (Board Meeting Sept)	7
Call for suggestions for improvement	Where the orator explicitly invites suggestions	CEO: the money's got to come from somewhere. Anything else that we can do? (Board Meeting Sept)	4
Call to an individual to perform	A specific instruction from the orator to another	CEO: Can you send it to me again. I haven't seen it (Board Meeting April)	5
Call to a group to perform	As above but when directed at multiple participants	Would the members of SLT mind giving a quick introduction to [new employee] (SLHQ 3 May)	6
Indirect call to perform (group / individual)	as above but where the orator is not specifically telling someone to do something, but implying it	S: If I was a head of a department and I saw that I was going to bill less than my salaries, I'd 've probably dropped my pricing for a couple of clients just to get some cash in the bank for my department (Board Meeting September)	3
Derisive laughter	the expression of contempt or ridicule through laughter/snorting	OM: They'd just like a bit more clarity on expectations and... whether we could actually provide like a set format for that, but erm I think it's really gonna vary per team [derisive laugh from Director N] (Supervision Feedback May)	1
Assertive Interruption	when the interruption is made purposefully to stop someone's argument from continuing	OM:...so just to be sort of conscious of (-) N: I have to say, I push back quite strongly on that... (Supervision Feedback May)	7
Supportive Interruption	when the interruption is made to support or	D: (interrupting) I agree, they need to use their own initiative as well	9

	encourage the orator	(Supervision Feedback May)	
Filling interruption	when the interruption fills a pause or stumble from the original orator	N: Is that because the invoice hasn't been... raised or [trails off] (-) Ed: That can't be right because some of those are super old.	4
Steering interruption	when someone interrupts to keep a topic on point, stopping the original orator from veering off topic	S: I have a question regarding obviously, we given shares to many people within (-) CEO: This is a [D] question. He can answer this question. So yeah, basically [steers the topic back] (Board Meeting September)	4
Absent minded interruption	when the interrupter's interjection appears to be due to their thinking about something else and they seem unaware that they're interrupting.	D:...so there's a disconnect to between the two (-) Y: So literally... (Board Meeting September)	9
Excited interruption	When the interrupter leaps in on a point that arises midway through the orators dialogue seeming as though they can't wait	Y: there are some ambiguities and [J] and I are going to through them and interrogate them (-) D: It's also interesting how many of the old, as in pre-flamingo retainer files are marked as inactive (Board Meeting September)	7
Corrective interruption	When the orator interrupts to correct a false claim	D: Nobody has raised the issue of pensions as an issue but I think that it is generally accepted that (-) N: One person did in the feedback form (Board Meeting April)	3
Suggestive interruption	When the orator interrupts with a suggestion	CEO: So I think it's just really important we keep it (-)	2

		S: We could have all the different elements of the business... (Board Meeting October)	
Diplomatic interruption	When the orator interrupts to reduce tension or avoid conflict	Y: (interrupting) Well it's the it's the dynamic of the team... (Board Meeting, April)	2
Defensive interruption	When the orator interrupts to defend themselves or to mitigate a critique against them	CEO: Okay, I don't want to hear about these rumours happening anymore(-) LI: One thing I say back to that the risk of you shooting me... (SLT Mandatory Meeting)	1
Requested interruption	When the orator requests permission to interrupt	CEO: Yeah. So just (-) Y: Sorry, can I just ask a quick question? (Board Meeting Sept)	1
Failed interruption	When an interruption is attempted but the original orator continues on track and the interrupter concedes and lets them continue.	Y: I think judging by the (-) [D Tried to talk over Y, but gave up with a shake of the head] Y: Sorry, go on D. D: No go ahead Y, it's fine (sits back with arms folded) (Board Meeting April)	8
Representation	Using 'we' or 'us' to create a sense that the orator is representing a larger group	D: as members of the senior leadership team, we are leaders in the business (SLT Mandatory Meeting Sept)	25
Underlining	Using a statement to affirm a point	S: Sure, yeah, yeah, just to underline obviously, we're here for you guys (SLT Mandatory Meeting)	6
Shifting/assigning the problem	When the orator makes clear the problem lies somewhere else.	D: other things are going to be deprioritised over marketing if they become a priority for [S] (Board Meeting April)	5
Support for an argument	When the orator directly provides	CEO: The challenge with the DPO <sup>37</sup> subscriptions	30

<sup>37</sup> Data Protection Officer (a subscription service whereby clients can instruct the organisation to take care of their data protection obligations instead of employing a data protection officer).

	support for another's argument.	is that they're not paying up front. N: Yeah, exactly. (Board Meeting April)	
Mitigated Support	When the orator provides limited support for an argument	Y: if we believe that we can make it work, revenue wise, you know, we can take the calculated risk... maybe it would be helpful for us to think of a backup plan. (Board Meeting November)	2
Adding third-party support	When the orator claims to have the support of others	D: And they agree. I spoke with [two employee names]... (June Board Meeting)	4
Frustration	When the orator expresses frustration	CEO: if we can't get our revenue up, then we have to look at cutting either lawyer costs or overhead costs (Board Meeting Sept)	3
Worry	When the orator expresses worry	CEO: Yeah, so it is concerning. I am worried about it (Board Meeting Sept)	4
Aligning	When the orator aligns themselves with another's argument in order to make a different point.	D: I agree with you to a point but every bright young thing with the right qualifications needs the opportunity to get that experience... there will be plenty of high quality, well educated, sharp candidates that don't have that experience (Supervision Feedback May)	7
Steering	When the orator changes the direction of the conversation	OM: Well on that point, how do you guys think the supervision is going from your perspective?(Supervision Feedback May)	30
Rhetorical question	The use of rhetorical questions	D: what's the worst that can happen? (Supervision Feedback May)	3



Backtracking	Backtracking: when the orator's previous argument is not well received and they seek to mitigate the impact it has had.	N: Yeah exactly, exactly. But we pay for what we use so...(Board Meeting April)	2
Modulating	From Wodak et al (2011)'s study on consensus building this code refers to situations when the orator uses pressures (e.g. time constraints or monetary concerns) to add a sense of urgency	Y: I'm just conscious that it's 11 o'clock. (Board Meeting, April)	5
Reassurance	when the orator reassures an individual or group	Y: Oh there's a million and one options it's, it's no problem (Board Meeting April)	16
Ethics	When an orator's willingness to do (or not do) something is being guided by a moral code.	D: I think that we'll probably have to explain what it means in terms of confidentiality, privilege, quality of service (Board Meeting Sept)	5
Invitation	When an orator invites another to do something (differs from a 'call to perform' in that there is a sense the invitee has a choice)	CEO: [S] Is there anything you want to add on your what you've been doing?	21
Defer	When the orator defers	Y: I think we know from experience which he is lacking and we can support him in. D, what do you think? (Board Meeting June)	7
Positivity	When the orator expresses optimism or satisfaction with a past, present or future scenario	CEO: The subs team and the employment teams are consistently overperforming, they are doing really, really well. (Board Meeting Sept)	19
Negativity	As above but a negative sentiment is expressed	CEO: So I don't know how we fix this (Board Meeting Sept)	6

Offering help	We can help you towards building a following, gaining more clients, and more	We can help you towards building a following, gaining more clients and more (SLHQ 31 May)	7
Accepting an offer of help		W: Happy to do the recruitment for IP <sup>38</sup> [OM] if that helps? OM: erm. That might actually	5
Declining an offer to help	When the orator turns down an offer of help	B: is there anything we're giving to you that we shouldn't be giving to you? Just in terms of, you know, lightening your load making it easier for you. OM: No, I don't think so (SLT Meeting 19 April)	2
Volunteering		S: On the marketing side... ordering the onboarding packs, that's so easy for us to do and take over (SLT Meeting 19 April)	7
Expresses thanks	Orator expresses gratitude in some form	L: thanks Louie appreciate that! (SLHQ meeting 17 May)	30
Apology/admission	Orator takes responsibility for something through and apology or admission of wrong doing	CEO: I have to take responsibility for that (Board Meeting Sept)	6
Contradictory/inconsistent expression of opinion	When the opinion expressed does is inconsistent with something said immediately prior to it.	OM: Do we need to include the indicative PQEs? N: Maybe not, I don't know. D: ...I think people just need to understand that as a business we've got to be free to decide who should n shouldn't... Alison: yeah exactly	4
Welcoming	When the orator explicitly welcomes.	S: They will be getting a branded water bottle,	12

<sup>38</sup> Intellectual Property (a department within the organisation)

	Typically examples were a new member of staff or an attendee for another reason but there were other instances	and a little welcome note when they join the community (SLHQ 31 May)	
Exemplification	Using examples to strengthen an argument or make a point	Y: last week, for example, the available search billable time to total hours worked was about half. (Board Meeting September)	20
Self-depreciation (and humorous self-depreciation)	When the orator puts themselves down (often done for comical effect)	JC: I mean, Jesus, you all thought you were rid of me, and here I am! (Supervision Roundtable November)	4
Evading responsibility	When the orator makes clear they do not believe they are responsible for an issue raised.	W: I don't feel like that's the case in my team it's the usual story in my team. I feel like we're really super busy (Mandatory SLT Meeting September)	7
Taking responsibility	When the orator makes clear they are responsible for something.	B: I'm taking responsibility for their career by saying come work for me, we'll look after you and give you a job (Mandatory SLT Meeting)	8
Procrastinates	When the orator delays taking action perhaps suggesting speaking to a non-participant or suggesting time to think it over	CEO: Mmmm, well let's have a chat with [H] about it	6
Dismissal	In relation to a raised concern to suggest that the concern was never an issue in the first place.	D: She's in a different role anyway so it's irrelevant to her	3
Compensatory gesture	When the orator has won an argument or forced someone to adopt their position against their will they may offer a	(After Forcing D to agree to making a redundancy the CEO offers him a choice – a compensatory gesture perhaps to suggest he still has some	4

	compensatory gesture	control of his department) CEO: If you had a choice between [employee 1] and [employee 2, who would you rather keep?	
Justification	Could be for a specific action, a general strategy, or sometimes to justify the existence of a particular individual or department	S: , the value of our newsletter subscribers is 107, well just over 107 grand.	5
Setting a target	Requiring a high level of epistemic authority, the orator sets the participants a target for future performance	CEO: our target for the month is about 1600 1650 <sup>39</sup>	7
Concluding	The orator explicitly sums up their argument to conclude it.	We're currently making about 13 grand a day, including IP, and we need to be making 15 grand a day to get to where we need to get to. Now, that's only another 10 billable hours a day, which split between all of our advisors is actually only about half an hour extra that we need everybody to do.	6
Encouragement	Where the orator actively encourages others to participate (going beyond a simple invitation). It requires the orator to try to persuade another to take part or contribute.	OM: Okay, so, um, you obviously don't have to like divulge how all of their processes worked. But is there anything at [the organisation] that you think is happening particularly well, and actually things you think 'not so much?' You'd change this, you've seen this in other places, or just your own ideas?	3

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<sup>39</sup> Billable hours per year

Codebook (ii) Coding of the *Discourse*

Name of Theme	Description	Example	Frequency of occurrence (as codebook 1)
Caring	The use of language that demonstrates or supports a compassionate or caring approach	<i>(The head of IT discusses the fact that the organisation has organized and paid for his therapy sessions)</i> J: going to therapy and kind of getting myself right... honestly, having access to that, like thanks [OM] for setting all that up (SLHQ Town Hall Oct)	30
Home Life	When children, pets, home life generally is accepted as part of the working environment.	K: I'm gonna have to shoot off in about 45 minutes because I've got gym at 12:30. Sorry. OM: No, it's ok. (Supervision Roundtable November)	10
Superiority	Where one group (or individual) is perceived to be superior to another	<i>(Superiority: The organisation over competitors)</i> D: [the organisation] is in many ways the company and the employer that we all deserve, because we're all good people, we're all capable of doing great things (SLT Mandatory Meeting September)	21
Professional	A direct focus on ensuring the business is successful, and/or maintaining professional standards	CEO: So there's about a 25k saving in the first year of spring bird (Board Meeting November)	30
Ethical	When the willingness to do (or not do) something is being guided by a moral code.	CEO: but I just don't know if I can make her redundant three weeks before Christmas. It just feels like a really shitty thing to do (Board Meeting November)	6

Survival	When the orator is creating an urgency that the action suggested is required for the firm to survive.	But we need to be able to pay our staff, pay our PAYE <sup>40</sup> , and to pay the outgoings that we've got and also have a little bit of cash left over so that we can start putting aside some for our next VAT bill. (Board Meeting November)	9
Community	When the orator speaks about 'we' or 'us' as a community, group, or organisation in a way that defines the group	Y: We, as a board need to... (Board Meeting October)	25

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<sup>40</sup> Pay As You Earn – tax the employer pays on behalf of the employee.

## Appendix B: Jefferson Transcription System

(-)	Indicates the point at which a speaker has been cut off by another actor.
↑↓	A upward arrow marks a distinct rise in pitch, a downward arrow marks a drop in pitch
<u>Underlining</u>	The word, words, or parts of a word that are underlined have been emphasized by the orator.
CAPITALS	Capitals denote a raise in volume outside of the orator's normal fluctuations.
° °	Text enclosed in raised circles ('degree signs') is noticeably quieter in volume.
hhh	Denotes an audible exhalation with the number of 'h's (between one and three) showing the proportionality.
.hhh	Denotes an audible inhalation and as above the number of 'h's show how long and forceful the inhalation was.
( )	Denotes a noticeable pause which is too brief to record a time for (less than one-tenth of a second)
(0.7)	Denotes a measured pause in seconds. In the example given this would be seven tenths of a second.
>word<	denotes speech within the carats is faster than usual
<word>	denotes speech within the carats is slower than usual
(X)	The word was not clear and couldn't be accurately transcribed.

## Appendix C: Sub-themes of the main Discourses

<b>Discourse theme</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example of the sub-themes</b>
Caring	Recognition	Instances where an individual or group was complimented, congratulated, or acknowledged for their contribution to the organisation.	Head of Finance: “I mean, also, just absolute kudos to [OM] as well, because I think we decided, was it Tuesday or something Wednesday, we were like it, we're gonna do it from the first of April. So she has really managed to turn it around very quickly. (Head of Finance,SLT March 2023)
	Reassurance	Instances of language being used to reassure another/others	“So we are not really there yet. But we are moving in the right direction” (CEO Board Meeting November 2022)
	Concern	Expression of concern for the wellbeing of other members of the organisation	“I was on a call with her earlier and she really doesn't look good. She really does not look well at all.” (Director D, Board Meeting September 2022)
	Support		“Support and be kind to each other. I know it doesn't need to be said because I know that you're already doing this. But it is really, really important to make us all you know, feel like we want to be here”.



			(CEO, SLHQ Meeting 29 November 2022)
	Inclusive	Instances in which the actor specifically sought to include people	“And I think the advantages of everybody getting together is, is going to be huge” (CEO Board Meeting September 2022)
	Incentivising	Refers to instances in which the orator, on behalf of the organisation offers rewards of any sort for desirable behaviour or performance (overlap with Professional Discourse.	“putting a bonus scheme in place try and incentivize people for the rest of the year to catch up on their targets. (CEO Board Meeting September 2022)
	Welcoming	Instances in which the actor welcomed new employees or new members of a team.	“It’s Amy and Becky’s first Town Hall call. So hello, and welcome” (Operations Manager, SLT Meeting August 2022)
Home Life	Accepting	When an issue from an individual’s private life that interrupts or detracts from the meeting is accepted (without comment or any non-verbal communication to suggest disapproval)	“Would love to share the slides but... (some noises from a small child) my daughters maths lesson has just appeared” (Head of Department H SLT Meeting, May 2022)
	Welcoming	When the meetings are interrupted by children or pets (there were no other examples in the data) and the other participants welcome the interruption by engaging with the	See section 5.2.1. (iv)

		subject of the interruption.	
Superiority	Fee earners vs support staff	Dialogue which supports the theme that the solicitors (and others) who bill clients for the work they do are superior to the support staff (or non-fee earners) who support and enable them to do so.	And as soon as we cut lawyers from the team, once we finally have the work, and we need people to do that work, and we know how hard and how hard it is to recruit lawyers, and how long that takes is a massive gamble to lose. (Director D, Board Meeting September 2022)
	individual	instances in which an individual holds themselves as being superior to another, for example by saying they could do the job better, or wouldn't have made the same mistake – the only sub-theme in which an individual is held to be superior (as opposed to a group).	"If I was a head of a department and I saw that I was going to bill less than my salaries, I'd 've probably dropped my pricing for a couple of clients just to get some cash in the bank for my department" (Director S, Board Meeting November 2023)
	Business winners vs Workhorses (Industry specific discourse)	Distinguishing between those who can win the work (and do it) and those who do the work but are not winning new clients. With Business winners being the superior group.	See section 5.3.5
	Supervisors vs Trainees (Industry-specific discourse).	Expression of the sentiment that supervisors have greater knowledge, skill, awareness, and other aspects of	See section 5.2.1 (iii)

		superiority over trainees.	
	Seniority	Expression of the sentiment that there were greater obligations and responsibilities associated with the more senior roles (typically heads of department or directors) and that therefore the more senior personnel were superior.	“Although you might not have a sort of a personal connection or relationship with [CEO] or other members of the board. To them this this business is everything. And you know, you might not be having a one-on-one with them every week, but they do genuinely care about this business. They have to make really hard decisions” Operations Manager, Supervision Roundtable Meeting, 8 <sup>th</sup> November, 2022.
	‘9 to 5ers’ vs ‘whatever it takes’ (Organisation specific discourse)	‘9 to 5ers’ referred to people who only worked their contracted hours, as opposed to those with a ‘whatever it takes’ attitude who work late and ensure the job is complete before they finish (the latter being superior).	See Section 5.2.1 (iii)
	Size of firm	This sub-theme could be used either to suggest the superiority of larger firms over smaller (in terms of prestige, credibility, resources etc.) or in the superiority of smaller firms (as nicer places to work, less encumbered with some of the negative stereotypes in the industry, more innovative etc.).	“I think what you have to think about, I mean we’re not a big law firm with lots of associates and hundreds of mids, and seniors who can take all that load. I think we have to be realistic about what we can and can’t do.” (Head of Department B, Supervision Feedback Meeting May 2022)

	Superiority of teams or departments	Instances in which language was used to differentiate a team or department as being in some way superior.	“I don't feel like that's the case in my team it's the usual story in my team. I feel like we're really super busy. There's a lot of work going on.” (Head of Department W, Mandatory SLT meeting, September 2022).
Professional	Financial	Language which focusses on the financial impact or that emphasises the importance of finances in relation to the organisation.	“So it feels to me that there needs to be a financial plan before we can make the decision both for our sake and her sake” (Director Y, Board Meeting November 2022)
	Progressive	Other instances in which the progression of the organisation's goals is anything but financial	[Director S] and her team have been working really, really hard on the branding and the website. They have found a developer that can build the website. We've had a quote, they've agreed monthly instalments. I mean, it's crazy what they've agreed to be honest. (CEO Board Meeting September 2022)
	Reality	instances in which the actor bases their argument on industry norms, expectations, or requirements	“I mean, the fact is if any of our clients want to, they can do so because under our terms they can. That's because, that's because, as an SRA-regulated entity, we can't stop clients from terminating their relationship with us if they want to.” (Director D, Board Meeting, September 2022).

	Etiquette	Refers to the adoption of certain manners in keeping with the organisation's standards.	"I would argue it's Roost... Director D, I interrupted you" (Director Y, April Board Meeting 2022) In context Director D actually interrupted Director Y but Director Y carried on speaking.
	Shifting/assigning the problem	Refers to instances when the actor either shifts the blame for a problem away from the party being accused or associated with it or assigns the blame specifically to another party.	"I've been on the receiving end of Director S's tenacity and other things are going to be deprioritised over marketing if they become a priority for Director S" (Director D, Board Meeting April 2022).
	Client-centric	When the focus is on the client and they are given priority in the consideration.	"So there's going to be two options, a subscription or a fixed fee. And what we would ideally like to be able to do is to give clients choice" (CEO, Town Hall Meeting, October 2022).
	External accountability	When an individual or organisation is blamed for a failure or detriment.	So we're having ongoing challenges around getting the support that we need from [accountancy firm] (CEO SLT November 2022)
	Internal accountability	When an individual or group within the organisation is blamed for a failure or detriment	But that's not the right approach. So, you know, if you're doing a fixed fee matter, and you've got out of scope, then you need to have that conversation with the client (CEO Town Hall October 2022)
	macro-level reality	When the failure or detriment is based on a macro-level event or situation.	"when everything that you're looking at the news is about inflation and economic instability and

			recession, and massive tech companies making 1000s of people redundant on mass at a moment's notice. People are just like shit, is that going to be me?" (Director D, Board Meeting November 2022)
	Positivity <sup>41</sup>	Instances of positivity specifically concerning the outlook on the company's status	"The sub team and the employment teams are consistently over performing, they are doing really, really well. The IP team is steady, their profit margin, they struggled to meet the targets. They generally fall slightly under the target, but at least they are consistent. We don't see, you know, big swings with the IP team. So I'm not too worried about them. Alison's team is relatively consistent as well, to be honest" (CEO Board Meeting September 2022)
	Cultural	Reference to the specific cultural values of the firm	"A place that cares about its people, a place that cares about their learning and development and growth". (Director D, Board Meeting, 28 November 2022)
Ethical	Professional code of conduct	When the actor refers to regulatory body such as the SRA <sup>42</sup> in terms of what can and can't be done.	"As an SRA-regulated entity, we can't..." (Director D, Board Meeting September 2022)

<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that this differs from the first stage code 'positivity' used in the conversation analysis to refer to all instances of positivity, in the context of the Discourse 'Professional: Positivity' it is more specific, referring only to instance in which the positivity refers to the outlook for the organisation.

<sup>42</sup> Solicitor's Regulation Authority

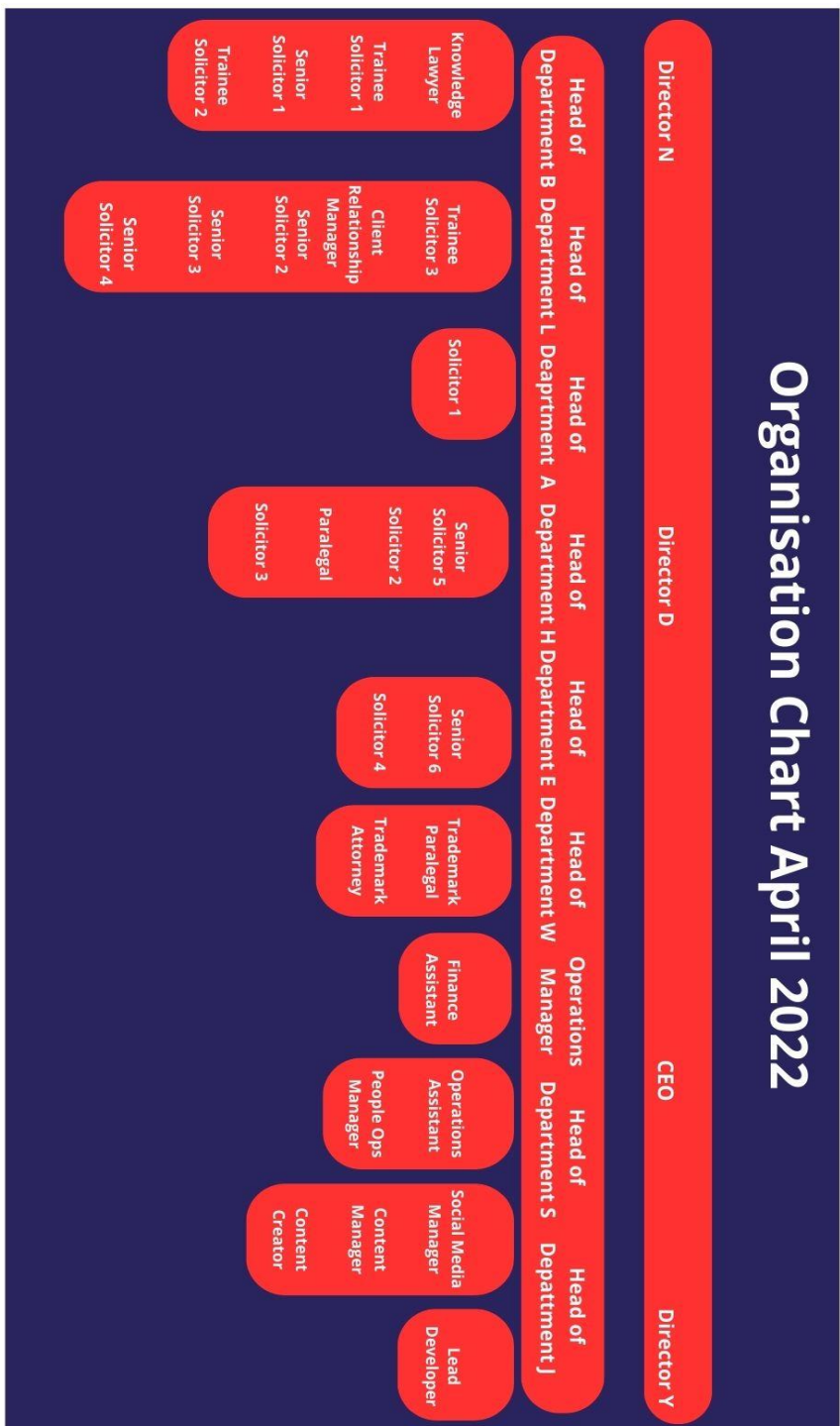
	Personal moral standard	When the actor imposes their own individual moral code on the situation.	“But I just don't know if I can make her redundant three weeks before Christmas. It just feels like a really shitty thing to do”. (CEO, Board Meeting 28 November 2022).
	Fairness	When the actor refers specifically to what is fair in a situation in order to argue that action needs to be taken or avoided on this basis.	I mean, like I said, I think the numbers are fine but it would look more fair.” (Director N, Board Meeting 26 April, 2022).
	Transparency, honesty or integrity	As above but when the actor refers to a need for transparency, honesty or integrity in order to justify an action (or lack of it).	“we should be giving our clients full transparency around what they're paying, I don't want any surprise invoices” (CEO Twn Hall October 2022)
	Cultural	When the moral code is based on the organisation’s culture.	“So we have a policy. This is how we embed that in our culture.” (Solicitor V, 1 <sup>st</sup> July 2022).Mandatory SLT Meeting, September 2022).
Survival	No Sub-themes	Instances where the orator is creating an urgency that the action suggested is required for the firm to survive.	“We're in we're in survival mode at the moment... We're not really exhibiting the characteristics of an ambitious and growing organisation at the moment because we're in safe mode.” (Director D, Board Meeting, November 2022)
Community	Caring	When the organisation is described or alluded to as being a caring place or having a caring culture.	“So we have to fix that root cause we have to get to a place where everybody is busy, nicely busy. Like nobody wants to, people don't like being

			quiet, but they don't like being flat out. It's a really difficult balance to strike.” (Director D Board Meeting November 2022)
	Professional	Descriptions of the culture of the organisation relating to the ‘Professional’ Discourse	“We have very achievable chart targets across the business” (Director D, Mandatory SLT Meeting, September 2022)
	Consensus	Suggestions or statements that the organisation values arriving at a consensus (vs autocracy)	“we could have all the different elements of the business, the relevant data and having different people going round smaller groups and brain storming, and then at the end you present all of the ideas that have been brainstormed and everyone will have had a smaller group to discuss it.” (Director S Board Meeting September 2022)
	Fun	When the culture of the organisation centred on being a fun place to work.	“they’re all to do with dating... clusters – I guess, we have 142 people who are about to dump us, that means they purchased a while ago, but then they stopped buying.” (Director S, SLT May 2022)
	Team	This is an open term and is often paired with other Discourses but specifically relates to instances in which the actor is defining the culture (or sub-culture) within the organisation.	“We, as a board, need to...”. (Director Y, Board Meeting, October 2022)



	Employee-centric	This can be contrasted with the client-centric sub-theme of the Professional Discourse but it is not (as may appear be an either or situation). The employee-centric sub-theme is in the 'community' theme because professionally the actors referred to putting the client first, and in terms of discussing the organisational community culture (who 'we' are) the employee's welfare was frequently a primary consideration.	"if you aren't happy and for those reasons you're thinking of leaving or you know you're deciding you might want to do something else with your career. Please say something rather than nothing" (OM Supervision Roundtable November 2023)
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Appendix D: The organisational chart



## The Social Construction of Collective Leadership

This consent form will have been given to you with the Participant Information Sheet and Privacy Notice. Please ensure that you have read and understood the information contained in these and asked any questions before you sign this form. If you have any questions please contact a member of the research team, whose details are set out below.

Signing this form indicates that:

- You consent to participate in this research study
- You understand that you will be participating in the study on a voluntary basis.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time (within limits as indicated on the participant information sheet) without giving a reason.
- You understand that all information provided will be treated as confidential.
- You understand that extracts from the recorded board meetings / MS Teams correspondence may be quoted in the PhD thesis and associated presentations and publications, but you will not be personally identified in any output of this research study.

Date:	
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Name of Participant:	
Signature of Participant:	

Name of Researcher:	
Signature of Researcher:	

*Thank you for agreeing to take part.*

If you have any questions about this research, please contact the researcher Peter Stephenson [Peter.stephenson@live.uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Peter.stephenson@live.uwe.ac.uk)

If you would prefer to speak to a third party about the research please feel free to contact Professor Richard Bolden or Associate Professor Harriet Shortt at the University of the West of England.

Richard Bolden [richard.bolden@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:richard.bolden@uwe.ac.uk)

Harriet Shortt [harriet.shortt@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:harriet.shortt@uwe.ac.uk)

## The Social Construction of Collective Leadership

### What is the nature and purpose of this research project?

This is a PhD project being carried out for the University of the West of England (UWE). The project is being supported by Stephenson Law Ltd to investigate the ways in which leadership is practised within the organisation with a view to making the leadership a more collective phenomenon.

It is the opinion of the directors of the company that better understanding the ways in which leadership is currently practised will enable the firm to encourage a greater degree of contribution from employees in the future and to consider the influences on the ways in which leadership is practiced.

The research questions for this study are:

1. *How are speech and text ('discourse') used to practise leadership in the context of Stephenson Law?*
2. *What impact do other 'Discourses' (broader cultural and historically constructed expressions of norms, values, power) have on the practice of leadership at Stephenson Law?*
3. *How can these insights be used to more actively foster a culture of collective leadership at Stephenson Law?*

Through an analysis of the speech and text used within the company the aim of this study is identify both the ways in which leadership is practised through discourse (the everyday use of text, language and non-verbal communications) to lead, resist, influence and challenge and Discourse (the cultural, historically constructed expressions of norms, values, power) which influence leadership within the organisation. We are particularly interested in the ways in which collective leadership can be promoted more actively across the entire company.

Findings will be presented in a PhD thesis and may be published/presented in relevant industry and academic journals, conferences, books etc.

### Who is conducting the research?

The research will be carried out by a PhD student under the supervision of Professor Richard Bolden and Associate Professor Harriet Shortt at the University of the West of England (UWE).

### What does my participation involve?

As an employee of Stephenson Law your communications to some extent reflect the values, norms, culture etc. of the organisation. The researcher will (if you consent to it) analyse patterns of interaction between discourses and consider the implications on how we might make a the leadership culture at SL more collective.

The potential sources that will be analysed are as follows:

Director's weekly meetings and bi-monthly senior leadership team meetings will be recorded and analysed with the consent of all participants. If consent is withheld from any contributor to the meeting for any reason that meeting will either not be recorded or analysed or the individual may request that a specific section of the transcript may be disregarded in the analysis.

Contributions to the company's shared Teams account will be analysed. Only the Teams account which is available to all members of staff within Stephenson Law will be analysed. Any other communications via Teams will not be analysed (this includes private communications or department specific communications). Only the comments of those members of staff who consent will be analysed. Any other contributions will be disregarded.

Additional meetings will take place as required by the directors and senior leadership team at SL and the transcripts of some of these may be analysed with participants' consent. Should you be included in one of these meetings you will be informed and have the choice whether your contributions may be analysed or not.

### **How will the data be used?**

The data will contribute to a PhD thesis and to try to encourage a more collective approach to leadership at SL. SL recognise the value of each and every team member and would like to ensure that, with so many talented and knowledgeable individuals, that the leadership of the organisation is not restricted to the board alone.

Findings may also be presented at conferences, in journal articles, and via digital media. All information provided will be treated confidentially and personally identifiable details will be stored separately from the data. We will remove any information that enables the identification of individuals involved. Non-attributed extracts may be quoted in reports, publications and presentations arising from the research.

### **What are the benefits of taking part?**

By participating in this research project, you will help to create a better understanding of the leadership in Stephenson Law and hopefully this will enable an improvement in the construction of effective and inclusive leadership practices.

### **Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?**

This study has obtained the ethical approval of the Faculty of Business and Law's Research Ethics Committee at UWE (*application number to be inserted here*), Bristol and as such adheres to the University's Code of Good Research Conduct in the collection, protection, and handling of the information you will provide as part of the investigation. We guarantee confidentiality of information and will not reveal anything of a personal or compromising nature about your organisation, yourself, or any of our research participants.

This will be achieved by securely storing all computer files related to the study. In addition, you will be given a unique identification code that will be used to record and store the data, so that there is no identifying detail at all about you in the study. With this code we will be able to make your comments anonymous in the analysis and presentation of the information you have provided to us, whilst enabling us to track down your responses should you wish to withdraw from the study.

After data has been anonymised, all files that can be used to identify the participants will be destroyed and after three years from the collection of data all anonymised and de-identified data will also be destroyed.

### **How do I withdraw from the study?**

Participants can withdraw their contributions at any time within 4 weeks of the research being conducted. You will not be required to give any explanation for your withdrawal. If you choose to withdraw, your data will be omitted from the analysis. We would like to emphasise that participation in this research is voluntary and all information provided will be treated as confidential. Should you wish to withdraw please email [peter.stephenson@live.uwe.ac.uk](mailto:peter.stephenson@live.uwe.ac.uk) or [laura.french@stephenson.law](mailto:laura.french@stephenson.law)

**Are there any risks involved?**

We do not anticipate any risks to you in participating in this research project but if you have any concerns please feel free to contact me via email at [peter.stephenson@live.uwe.ac.uk](mailto:peter.stephenson@live.uwe.ac.uk)

**How do I contact a member of the research team?**

You can contact me with any questions or issues at:

Peter Stephenson [peter.stephenson@live.uwe.ac.uk](mailto:peter.stephenson@live.uwe.ac.uk) Tel: 07495 983430

You can also contact my supervisors Richard Bolden [Richard.bolden@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Richard.bolden@uwe.ac.uk) and Harriet Shortt [Harriet.Shortt@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Harriet.Shortt@uwe.ac.uk) if you have any concerns or queries.

If you have any concerns or queries about the conduct of the research and want to talk to someone outside of the research team, you can contact UWE Bristol's Research Ethics Committees ([research.ethics@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:research.ethics@uwe.ac.uk)) or research governance manager ([Ros.Rouse@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Ros.Rouse@uwe.ac.uk)).

Thank you for your participation; we really appreciate your time, thought and support.