Knowledge transfer as transformative dialogue: a pedagogical view on learning and meta-knowledge transfer in a leadership development program

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to analyze the links between leaders' creation of knowledge in the setting of a leadership development program and the transfer of knowledge to their own organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a case study of a leadership development program conducted during 2020–2022. The program was focused on how to lead and manage learning and knowledge processes in organizations, and offered a mix of theoretical perspectives and practical collaborative sessions. Data were collected through interviews and the participants' written reflections on their learning experiences. Total number of interviews was 13.

Findings – Overall the participants showed many examples of how they applied theories and practical tools that they had learned during the program in their own organizations. The participants experienced different types of challenges regarding knowledge transfer, but also potential meta-knowledge transfer through dialogue.

Practical implications – Pedagogical organizing of leadership development point to a need for supplementary dialogue between the leader of the development program and both the participating leader and manager.

Originality/value – This study shows that meta-knowledge transfer is not a simple matter of moving codified knowledge from the development program to new settings. Knowledge about others' knowledge requires and stimulates subject-to-subject relations between people through which new knowledge potential is created. These findings confirm and enhance previous studies that indicate the need for social support for soft-skill knowledge transfer.

Keywords Learning to lead, Collective learning, Knowledge creation, Knowledge transfer, Meta-knowledge transfer, Absorptive capacity, Leadership development program, Pedagogical challenges, Transformative dialogue

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Knowledge transfer is a significant challenge in all organizational development and change processes. It is a key element in learning from experiences, and in making information and knowledge available throughout organizations. Research shows that knowledge transfer involves much more social complexity than simply information processing in organizations. For example, Bygdås (2014) argues that knowledge is created through people's dynamic

social learning processes and not transferred or moved from one setting to another. He claims that knowledge transfer is not a mere "copy and paste" event and that knowledge in an organization needs to be anchored in social and collective learning processes in practice. Similarly, Sprinkle and Urick (2018) claim that only explicit knowledge can be transferred through training and development programs. Other forms of knowledge, such as tacit knowledge and practical wisdom (including an understanding of the organization's value system), require learning through experience in the specific organizational practice. Cultural and contextual barriers in social practice often impede attempts to utilize new knowledge to improve everyday work performance (Asrar-ul-Haq and Anwar, 2016; Lopes and Santos, 2021). To overcome these barriers, the organization needs a so-called *absorptive capacity* to facilitate and maintain new knowledge (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990).

Knowledge transfer is also a pedagogical challenge to facilitate leaders' learning and transfer through leadership development programs, which are often expected to help leaders to lead and communicate learning and knowledge processes (Atwood *et al.*, 2010). However, the effectiveness of such programs is still debated (Soderhjelm *et al.*, 2021). Other research also describes the transfer challenge, albeit using various similar names such as *training transfer* (Gilpin-Jackson and Bushe, 2007), *learning transfer* (Johnstal, 2013) or *transfer of knowledge* (Soderhjelm *et al.*, 2021). With regard to leaders' responsibility to manage and communicate learning and knowledge processes, and since leadership development programs often highlight such contents, this pedagogical transfer challenge is more crucial than ever to consider.

Some researchers argue that leadership programs lack clear evidence regarding their positive transfer effects (Grint, 2007; Kellerman, 2012). However, other studies (e.g. Ladyshewsky and Flavell, 2011) show positive outcomes on academic leadership for program coordinators, with lasting transfer effects on participants' abilities to perform the role. Another recent example is Tafvelin *et al.*'s (2021) study of transfer of leadership training, which shows the usefulness of the program for leaders' daily work and their learning opportunities. The authors argue that the transfer of soft and interpersonal leadership skills requires social support for leaders in their everyday work. Many other studies find that training transfer, including learning, transfer and maintenance of knowledge and skills, requires continuing support and feedback from superordinates and peers, the autonomy and opportunities to perform new knowledge, and an organizational climate that supports learning and follow-up (Soderhjelm *et al.*, 2021; Packard and Jones, 2015; Holtzhausen and Botha, 2021; Davies and Heysmand, 2019). Leadership development is thus not only a change of leaders' individual knowledge and skills, but it also entails complex contextual interventions in the organizational culture (Gilpin-Jackson and Bushe, 2007).

This paper's aim is to contribute analysis of the links between leaders' creation of knowledge in the setting of a leadership development program and the transfer of knowledge to their own organizations. Since the program's purpose is to help leaders lead knowledge and learning processes in organizations, it is expected that meta-learning (learning about learning) and creation of meta-knowledge (knowledge about knowledge) will occur. While meta-learning and meta-knowledge are crucial in organizational development and innovative efforts (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990), studies of meta-knowledge transfer are rare – particularly regarding soft leadership skills. However, the transfer of meta-knowledge has attracted most attention in studies of information systems and digital communication (Leonardi, 2014). The focus in this paper is, therefore, on the following research question: What potentials and challenges for knowledge and meta-knowledge transfer do the participants in the leadership program perceive?

Theoretical points of departure
The leadership development program featured in this study is a pedagogical intervention to facilitate learning and knowledge transfer. A central pedagogical point of departure, then, is

that knowledge is created through individual and collective learning processes. *Individual* learning is a process of action, experience, reflection and understanding through which people create knowledge (Kolb, 2015), while *collective* learning is a process of collaborative action, dialogue, joint reflection and shared understanding whereby people create collective knowledge and competence (Dixon, 1994; Ohlsson, 2014). Both individual and collective learning, therefore, require subjective and intersubjective activities, and include people's active interpretations and meaning making. Furthermore, knowledge creation in organizations is an ongoing process of cultural and social interaction (Nonaka, 2004) situated in social practices and communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Social perspectives on learning and knowledge creation reveal the complex relationships between learning individuals, collective learning, and the social and cultural settings in specific contexts (Billett, 2006). Kolb (2015) describes a distinction between personal and social knowledge, where individuals' personal concrete experiences are potentially tangible for others through a socially formed conceptual language. Similarly, although from another theoretical angle, Wenger (2004) describes learning as an interplay between social competence and personal experience. Individual and collective learning in organizations are therefore always embedded in a specific culturally and socially formed context. This context forms what is accepted as knowledge and skill, and people learn through varying modes of participation and belonging. Moreover, this clearly links to the ever-present aspects of power and conflicting interests related to learning and knowledge in organizations (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2001; Field, 2017; Flood and Romm, 2018).

This theoretical starting point, with basic roots in social constructivism and pragmatism, also has some crucial epistemological implications. First and foremost, knowledge appears in different forms (Kolb, 2015; Kim, 2004), and a major epistemological distinction is between knowledge of a practical kind, a skilled action, and a theoretical, conceptual understanding. Following Kim (2004), this is a distinction between operational and conceptual knowledge, which are described as *know-how* and *know-why*, respectively. A related epistemological distinction is between tacit and explicit knowledge as different forms of knowledge. *Tacit* knowledge is the individual's concrete, subjective experiences, thoughts and feelings that are not shared with others (Rowley, 2000). It is also part of an organization's underlying and often habitual ways of knowing, which are in many respects taken for granted. *Explicit* knowledge refers to the codified, communicated, and documented aspects of knowledge that can be shared with others and collectively transformed into joint understandings, overt interests and intended actions. Collective learning in teams and organizations both requires and creates explicit knowledge, and individuals' tacit knowledge emerges as explicit knowledge through these types of collective learning processes (Kim, 2004; Brix, 2017). These complex and ongoing learning processes also encompass and generate a different kind of knowledge, namely *practical wisdom*, which is often referred to as the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Grint, 2007). Practical wisdom includes values and beliefs that help the individual to handle unexpected problematic situations and ethical dilemmas (Rowley and Gibbs, 2008). This kind of knowledge, therefore, also contains practical and ethical aspects of knowing, which potentially guide actions congruent to the organization's value system and moral standards. The organizational *meta-knowledge* refers to knowledge about available or stored knowledge, for instance knowledge about who knows what, or where this knowledge can be found within the organization (Leonardi, 2014). Meta-knowledge includes awareness of what kind of knowledge that is produced in the organization, and how this knowledge is created. This links meta-knowledge to the organizational *meta-learning* through which the organization learns about its own learning loop processes (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Tosey *et al.*, 2011). Reflective collective learning processes in the organization potentially facilitate meta-learning and thereby meta-knowledge (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Ohlsson, 2014).

This view of learning and epistemological conceptualizations provides the analytical tools for this study of a leadership development program. The basic pedagogical purpose of training and development programs for leaders is that they should enable knowledge, at least in some respects, to be decontextualized and transferred to new organizational settings. The idea of knowledge transfer, therefore, needs epistemological clarification regarding different aspects of knowledge. Taking various types of knowledge into account, Carlile (2004) elaborates a framework for analysis of knowledge transfer with regard to development and innovation in organizations. He distinguishes between three types of boundaries at different levels: the *syntactic* level, the *semantic* level, and the *pragmatic* level. Managing knowledge across these different boundaries requires three different types of knowledge-managing process. The process to move knowledge across the *syntactic* boundary needs forms of codified and objectified knowledge that can be used as boundary objects. Knowledge transfer at this level is mainly described in terms of processing of information. At the *semantic* level, the boundary consists of subjective interpretations between people, which raise demands on managing processes of translating knowledge. These translating processes include the identification of different meanings and interests, as well as attempts to negotiate and create shared understanding. Finally, knowledge-managing processes on the *pragmatic* level of boundaries require transforming knowledge and interests, which means that actors have to learn new knowledge, see the interests of others, and create new shared common interests together. These processes of translating and transforming include practical and political efforts, as well as power relations between actors in the organization. Thus, pedagogical interventions to facilitate learning and transfer of knowledge need to consider the complexity that characterizes people's learning and knowledge in organizations.

Methodology

This paper presents empirical results from a research project conducted during 2020–2022. A researcher observed a leadership development program, L-Lab, which was organized and led by two experienced management consultants. The program was a step-by-step process with eight regular meetings (totaling 13 days) over the course of a year (2020–2021). Four participants joined all the meetings and all the activities in the program. Some of the meetings were also open to other professional consultants. The main aims of the program were to teach how to lead and manage learning and knowledge processes at workplaces and in organizations, and to facilitate the creation of theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as pedagogical tools for enhancing learning through collaboration. Different methods of leadership were discussed at the meetings, and after the meetings the participants were expected to apply and transfer what they had learned during the program to their home organizations. The program offered a mix of theoretical perspectives on learning and knowledge creation in organizational contexts, as well as practical collaborative training sessions. The first meeting was an introduction to the theme of leading learning processes. Other meetings included views on learning in practice, emphasizing for instance the importance of narratives, systems and power, and action learning. The program also comprised several design workshops, where the participants worked together and exchanged experiences and perspectives. Since the program's basic pedagogical idea was to facilitate collective learning processes, all the meetings included practical collaborations followed by reflection and dialogue sessions. The researcher and one of the leading consultants planned the research project together, and the researcher joined a meeting in the beginning of the program (November 2020) in order to introduce the background for the project.

In order to answer the central research-question the basic rationale and strategy for data collection and analysis was to give the researcher access to the participants own learning experiences and their reflections on transfer potentials at several occasions during the project

period. The data were collected mainly through interviews and the participants' written reflections on their learning experiences during the program. Additionally, three group conversations were carried out – the first as an introduction to the research plan, and the following two as feedback seminars. The individual interviews with each one of the four participants were conducted in several steps. Interview 1 was done in March 2021, and interview 2 was done in May 2021 (Table 1). In a third step in November 2021, each participant was interviewed together with their line manager from their home organization. For just one of the participants (interviewee 1), there was a third individual interview (Table 1). The total number of interviews was 13. The interviews were structured into two basic themes, with questions about learning experiences in the program and their opportunities to transfer knowledge to their home organization. The interviews with participants and their managers included questions about organizational and managerial conditions for knowledge transfer. The interviews lasted from 40 min up to 1 h and 30 min. Due to the pandemic, all the interviews, the research introduction and the first feedback meeting (May 2021) were conducted online. The second feedback meeting (February 2022) was done in person. In May 2021, the participants wrote and submitted a personal "learning log" of 3–4 pages, in which they described their experiences of what they had learned during the program.

The data were analyzed thematically in order to identify different qualities regarding participants' learning experiences and transfer potentials. In the first step, the analysis was concentrated on participants' responses to the main interview questions about learning experiences, the interaction with co-participants and consultants, and different transfer challenges. Thematically different descriptions emerged from the participants' verbalized experiences. In the second step of analysis, theoretically formed themes were used to conceptualize the central findings.

The four participants were all middle-aged women, and all were HR specialists with responsibility for leading knowledge and change processes. They were all informed about the principles of ethical research prior to their participation, and all of them confirmed in writing their interest to participate. All the interviews were carried out by the researcher, and the data were handled with confidentiality. According to the ethical considerations and in order to create a relaxed atmosphere at meetings and interviews, the researcher and the participants agreed that none of the interviews or meetings should be audio recorded. Instead, all the activities were documented through the researcher's field notes and retrospectively written summaries. To ensure validity, these notes were double-checked with each participant after their interviews.

Findings
In this section, the results are presented. First, the participants' experiences of knowledge creation and knowledge transfer potentials, followed by descriptions of their transfer challenges.

Time	Activity	IP 1	IP 2	IP 3	IP 4
November 2020	Introduction to the research project and seminar (via digital link)	x	x	x	x
March 2021	Interview 1 (via digital link)	x	x	x	x
May 2021	Participant learning log	x	x	x	x
May 2021	Interview 2 (via digital link)	x	x	x	x
May 2021	Research feedback seminar (via digital link)	x	x	x	x
November 2021	Interview 3 (via digital link)	x			
November 2021	Group interview with IP and manager (via digital link)		x	x	x
February 2022	Research feedback seminar	x		x	x
March 2022	Group interview with IP and manager (via digital link)	x			
Source(s): The author's work					

Table 1.
Data collection in the
research project

Knowledge as transferable tools, understanding, and wisdom
The participants described the dialogue sessions and collaborative trainings with experienced consultants as important. They felt that these collaborative sessions offered many new viewpoints on how to handle challenging and problematic situations. Some of the participants said the program provided new tools for process-leading activities and for handling group processes. One of them (IP 4) said the training sessions and design workshops had given her many ideas and examples of how to anchor a development project, as well as teaching her the importance of preparing and the virtue of being the central dialogue driver and not the central expert herself. Another participant (IP 1) said the different techniques for evaluation and follow-up studies they had learned were easy to transfer to her organization. Due to the pandemic, online meetings were used much more frequently than originally planned. While many participants described their positive experiences of the digital meetings and that they had learned new things, some of them experienced negative effects from the lack of face-to-face contact. Overall, however, the participants showed many examples of how they applied the tools they had learned during the program in their own organizations.

Another type of knowledge was created by using the meetings and lectures, although the participants described their experiences in somewhat different ways. They referred to the theoretical themes presented in the program, and some of them claimed that these created a new understanding, for instance about learning processes and knowledge, organizational narratives, and power relations and resistance in organizations. IP 4 said that the program had helped her understand some problems in her own organization and why some development projects had failed, although she was not sure how to transfer this understanding to her own workplace. IP 3 perceived limited practical relevance of the theories to her own workplace. She said that, while theories and theoretical concepts gave her new words for something she already knew, she was more comfortable with the practical training sessions and workshops, which in her view contributed to several new transfer opportunities.

The other participants also emphasized the importance of practical tools and concrete examples of applied knowledge, which was an expected outcome in relation to the overall aim of the program. Practical applications, theoretical and conceptual analyses of knowledge, as well as competence and process-leading skills were all included in the basic program agenda. Knowledge codified as tools for communication, evaluation and workshops appeared particularly possible to transfer to new organizational settings – albeit with minor adjustments. However, a more implicit aspect of knowledge came to the fore in the interviews and learning logs, where IP 4 claimed that the outcomes of some sessions in the program surprised her. She said she had learned to appreciate other people's understandings and how different views emanated from underlying knowledge and interests in an organization. She told enthusiastically about how the participants had described their impressions of each other, and how she initially became upset when she was described in a way she did not recognize. She concluded that this was a lesson in how to see other perspectives, how to see herself from another person's point of view, and about the ethical virtue of listening to others. It also helped her see the strength of a team of colleagues in her own organization, and the importance of trying to always voice tacit knowledge or viewpoints.

IP 3 described similar experiences in her learning log, writing about an important session where they talked about resistance, decision-making, and problematic power relations in organizations. These collective reflections on different perspectives, interests and understandings in organizations changed IP 3's beliefs about organizational development. She also described the practical implications as the importance of listening to other people and trying hard to understand other people's ways of thinking. She claimed these experiences had changed her ways of handling group processes and resistance in her own organization.

These examples appeared to be ethically based knowledge oriented towards an intersubjective and mutually confirming practical wisdom. For some of the participants, it was not only a new understanding or conceptualization of knowledge, but a performative knowledge framed in ethical values, and as such potentially transferable as an enhanced practical wisdom.

Knowledge transfer challenges
The participants described some difficulties in transferring what they had learned to their own organizations. These difficulties were experienced by both the participants and their managers. Three different but in some respects interrelated types of challenge were identified, and they are here labeled as "personal threshold", "lack of managerial follow-up activities", and "undervalued knowledge".

All four participants described their leadership position as a role with a high level of autonomy and scope for action. They saw many opportunities to use their learned knowledge about facilitating and leading collective learning processes in practice. However, some of them also pointed to constraints in their own organizations. For example, IP 3 described a particular challenge she faced as an individualized responsibility to take the initiative, although she didn't always have the courage to do it. She described this challenge as a pressure to overcome her own personal threshold. Similarly, IP 4 wrote in her learning log about the importance of psychological safety in the organization when it came to individual courage to present new development initiatives or take risks. These examples were partially individualized ways of organizing activities, where the main responsibility for development initiatives had been transformed into an entirely individual issue, although the latter example illustrated the need for safety in the organization. It seemed as if the individual had to take initiatives or no knowledge transfer would occur.

Another challenge identified was a lack of routines for dialogue – particularly in the form of managerial follow-up activities. In the interview with IP 3 and her manager, the latter said she did not really know what IP 3 had done or learned in the development program as they had not talked about it. She explained that they generally talked about competence development and the importance of it, but that they had not talked about the program. Later, she revealed that they had no formal routines for deeper follow-up activities. IP 3 added that there was a general lack of dissemination of knowledge and experiences in the organization. She and her boss concluded that, although they really wanted to spread knowledge in the organization and needed an ongoing dialogue, they usually did not talk to each other so much about new knowledge or new learning experiences. They also highlighted a lack of routines for extensive collective work.

The third type of challenge identified in the empirical material was that new knowledge was undervalued in the participants' home organizations. IP 4 described this as a kind of organizational cultural challenge for her. She felt that her process-oriented knowledge about how to manage development processes was not appreciated compared to her organization's notions of expert knowledge based on pure facts. She also felt that the management preferred to hire external consultants – even though she and her colleagues had adequate competence. She explained that, in her organization, there were two parallel cultures: one expert-based and efficiency oriented, and the other trust-based and relational oriented. She said her knowledge about processes was undervalued in the first culture and therefore difficult to transfer to her organization. In a later interview, her new department manager confirmed this description of parallel cultures. Although some improvements had been made in recent years, she depicted the organization as "traditional", where human resources knowledge was not disseminated to the "expert-culture" and top management.

Potential meta-knowledge transfer
The aforementioned challenges appear as obstacles to knowledge transfer – particularly the transfer of meta-knowledge. If the participants were not allowed or did not have the

opportunity to present their new knowledge about learning and knowledge processes, transfer was difficult. However, the findings also showed some potential for meta-knowledge transfer where new knowledge was linked to existing knowledge through collective learning processes. Two examples from the interviews with the participants and their managers showed how dialogue about new knowledge and the possibility of utilizing it in the organization could be a potential transfer of meta-knowledge. In the first example, a spontaneous dialogue and potential knowledge-sharing occurred when IP 3 and her manager spoke about restricted knowledge dissemination in their organization. IP 3 was skeptical about her opportunities to use what she had learned in the program, and her manager agreed that the organization didn't facilitate communication and knowledge transfer. She also admitted that they didn't know so much about each other's knowledge and that they had not talked about IP 3's participation in the program. During the interview, they started to talk about opportunities to learn more about each other's knowledge in the organization. IP 3 explained that she had learned how to manage knowledge processes within teams, but that her organization preferred to hire external consultants for such work. Her manager suggested new development strategies where they possibly could replace external consultants with their own colleagues, in order to spread and practice internal knowledge more frequently. Both emphasized the importance of listening and being clear about what opportunities were realistic with regard to contextual restrictions. Together, they created dialogically joint meta-knowledge and tried to identify potential for transferring it into the organization.

The second example was when IP 2 and her manager spoke about their mutually trustful professional relationship, through which they worked together on managerial strategies. IP 2 said she had good opportunities to transfer what she had learned to her own workplace as a leader. She also underlined the importance of collaboration, joint reflections on different perspectives, and shared understanding as a basis for organizational change. Her boss agreed and referred to their ongoing dialogue whereby they constantly evaluated previous decisions and strategies. IP 2 claimed that new learning perspectives and knowledge were beneficial and provided new ideas for their leadership processes. Together, IP 2 and her boss maintained an atmosphere of safety and trust, which included joint problem-solving and critical reflection, but they sometimes struggled with very different points of view or conflicting interests. In their ongoing dialogue, they created meta-knowledge through negotiations and evaluations of knowledge-based alternatives for action.

Discussion

The participants in the leadership development program described several positive outcomes and also some enduring challenges regarding knowledge transfer. They claimed they had learned new tools for managing knowledge processes, and underlined the importance of concrete exercises during workshops and seminars. In their role as leaders, they had opportunities to transfer these tools to their own organizations and use them more or less immediately. Although some contextual adjustments were necessary, these tools appeared as knowledge in the form of practical skills and operational know-how (Kim, 2004), and a new theoretical understanding of know-why. These results confirm previous studies of transfer of explicit knowledge through development programs (Sprinkle and Urick, 2018; Tafvelin *et al.*, 2021). A further quality in their knowledge creation was that the participants also claimed that they had learned collectively about learning and knowledge processes. This was expressed through their increasing ability to see their own learning processes and outcomes in the form of subjective understanding and knowledge, which also related to their ability to see the knowledge and perspectives of others. A reasonable interpretation of these findings is that the program contributed to the participants' collective learning processes and mutual conceptualizations of meta-learning and meta-knowledge (Ohlsson, 2014). They became

aware of both their own and the others knowledge of how to lead processes. These dialogic meta-reflective processes include practical wisdom as important leadership ethics and soft skills, a kind of knowledge that normally, according to previous research, is difficult to transfer (Rowley and Gibbs, 2008). In these respects, increased social support and encouragement from colleagues and managers appear important for knowledge transfer (Gilpin-Jackson and Bushe, 2007; Tafvelin *et al.*, 2021).

Nevertheless, the results also reveal and confirm transfer challenges and difficulties related to different organizational absorptive capacities (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990). Some findings suggest that the leader needed more personal courage to implement learned practical leadership skills, which in turn may have led to transfer challenges in the form of personal thresholds. Although all the participants described relatively high levels of autonomy in their role as leaders, and thus good opportunities to transfer and use learned know-how, they still needed supportive settings for practicing. If leaders are allowed to join courses and development programs, but no one is interested in their new knowledge, then knowledge transfer will be constrained. A lack of dialogue and follow-up conversations between managers and colleagues, as well as ignorance and undervaluing of the new knowledge, tend to impede collective learning and knowledge sharing. These results confirm studies that show learning barriers or restraining conditions for knowledge creation in organizations (Asrar-ul-Haq and Anwar, 2016; Lopes and Santos, 2021).

However, regarding the links between knowledge creation in the leadership program and knowledge transfer potential, the findings indicate an important relationship between learned dialogic wisdom and the organization's absorptive capacity to create meta-knowledge. Some findings show that the participants and their managers, through dialogue processes, were transferring meta-knowledge to their own organizations, including potential future strategies to manage development processes. They were, therefore, interpreting and understanding knowledge intersubjectively. According to Carlile (2004), these processes are more *translating* processes than *transferring* processes. Translating provides collective identification of knowledge in the organization, different interpretations and presumably conflicting interests. Moreover, meta-knowledge transfer also includes *transforming* processes. It seems to be a mutual creation of shared understanding, which means a collective synergetic learning process with new, transformed meaning as a potential outcome (Ohlsson, 2014). Additionally, this pragmatic view of knowledge transfer includes ethical aspects, which open up opportunities to make different knowledge interests and power relations in the organization explicit (Field, 2017). Although conflicting interests are structurally parts of an organization, and thereby not always possible to identify, the ethical virtue of listening to others' viewpoints and through dialogue trying to understand them means that different interests can be recognized and admitted. This does not imply that all conflicts in an organization can be resolved through dialogue or meta-knowledge transformation, but these pragmatic meta-knowledge transforming processes appear to be promising pedagogical alternatives.

These findings are in some respects intriguing regarding our understanding of soft-skill knowledge transfer, and meta-knowledge transfer in particular. To understand knowledge transfer potentials pedagogically, the social processes of interaction and communication must be understood as driving forces of collective learning and creation of new shared knowledge. The question of leaders transferring knowledge about how to lead learning and knowledge processes is not a simple matter of moving codified knowledge from the development program to new settings, but rather relies on ongoing processes of translating and transforming in the organization (Carlile, 2004). Thereby, knowledge about others' knowledge in the organization requires and stimulates subject-to-subject relations between people, through which dialogue processes and shared understandings potentially emerge (Dixon, 1994; Ohlsson, 2014). This is a co-creation process of knowledge in a new setting and context.

Implications

The identified processes of meta-knowledge transfer certainly have theoretical implications for the understanding of learning, knowledge, and transfer processes for leaders to lead knowledge in organizations. First, the transfer processes require management and staff who are receptive to mutual knowledge creation through transforming processes. Therefore, meta-knowledge transfer needs more than social support, the organization's absorptive capacity must also include conditions for mutually shared participation in co-creation processes. A second implication of this study challenge our understanding of the links between collective learning processes in organizations, including the more institutionalized *organizational learning* (Kim, 2004; Dixon, 1994), and the idea of *knowledge management*, including meta-knowledge creation and transfer (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990). Managing meta-knowledge processes in the organization requires ongoing participation in collective creation of new understanding and knowledge, which in turn is a driving force in the organizational learning process (Brix, 2017). Forthcoming empirical studies should further clarify these complex issues.

Moreover, the practical implications regarding pedagogical organizing of leadership development point to a need for supplementary dialogue between the leader of the development program and both the participating leader and manager.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, it is a relatively small case study, and the findings and tentative conclusions need further research and empirical support to strengthen their validity. Secondly, the aim of the development program, and all the participants' similar role as HR process leaders, in some respects delimited broader implications of the case study. Nevertheless, their central positions as process leaders certainly provide significant information about learning and knowledge transfer potentials, which benefit to this study. Thirdly, the fact that the interviews were not recorded would ordinarily be a big validity problem. However, this was mitigated here by the resulting opportunities to collect data on the dialogic process from the participants and their managers. The relaxed and open conversations (partially exemplified above) were a kind of mutual inventory problem-solving, and maybe would not have occurred in the presence of a tape recorder.

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