

Leadership in Polycrisis: Space, Time and the Mysteries of Practice.

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July 2025

Abstract

This thesis explores the challenges that leaders and leadership face in a context of polycrisis. It concludes that leadership under such conditions cannot be understood as episodic crisis response or stabilising intervention, but as a fragile, relational, digitally mediated, and power-laden practice unfolding across disrupted space-time. Polycrisis is theorised not merely as context, but as a constitutive condition that reshapes embodiment, visibility, temporality, and language itself.

The study is based on a sample of 60 organisational actors, including senior leaders and personal assistants (PAs), across public and private sectors between 2021 and 2024. The research employed a multimethod design combining interpretive and digital ethnography, autoethnography, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, survey, journaling, and poetic inquiry, where ‘writing differently’ becomes a methodological and ethical stance. It advances “methodology-as-process”, as it shifts from investigating a bounded problem to living within a research mystery, treating self, context and others as living clues.

As leaders appear suspended between hyper-connected abstraction and the enduring need for relational care, theoretically, the thesis extends Leadership-as-Practice and crisis leadership scholarship by integrating complexity through the grammar of polycrisis. The study identifies the phenomenon of a “digitally augmented leader,” who experiences enhanced cognitive capacity through digital tools while also facing increased dependency, vulnerability, and a narrowing of interpretive perspectives.

Empirically, the research reveals how leadership becomes a boundary-making linguistic category that organises visibility and marginality. This exposes a persistent gap between distributed leadership practice and singular leadership recognition, challenging the field to reconsider the language and imaginaries that anchor leadership theory.

A further original contribution is the establishment of Poetry-in-Crisis, where poetry is theorised not as metaphor, but as a liminal, reflexive and embodied leadership practice. This work will be of value to leadership scholars, organisational researchers, and practitioners navigating complexity and sustained uncertainty, as well as doctoral researchers seeking rigorous yet creative approaches to studying leadership in situ.

Keywords: Polycrisis, Leadership-as-Practice, Crisis Management, Crisis Leadership, Poetry-as-Practice-in-Crisis, Digitally Augmented Leadership, Writing Differently, Mystery-based Research

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Preface

I came into this project during the Covid-19 pandemic and not long after completing my MSc research (awarded the Excellence in Research Award from the University of York) on the impact of gender imbalance on innovation and sustainability in UK Construction.

Furthermore, my professional background, spanning nearly two decades of leading innovation teams and delivering digital transformation to mission-critical contexts such as the Ministry of Justice, local governments, and national infrastructure projects, has shaped the lens through which I approached this work. Much of my career was situated in crisis management, focused on digital mitigation strategies. Yet, when the Covid-19 pandemic struck, it became painfully evident that neither I nor many of my clients were prepared for the magnitude of the crises we were all facing. This realisation deepened further in 2024 when I served as a UN Women UK delegate to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW68), where I witnessed first-hand accounts of global and local crises affecting women due to intersecting socio-economic, political, and environmental devastations. These crises were not accidental or isolated, but deeply systemic. As such, I approached this project not only as a researcher but as a leader and an activist of social change.

This felt like a defining moment, a realisation that we are living through a new leadership paradigm: one filled with the unknown and unexpected, where traditional leadership manuals no longer apply. Digital acceleration was in full throttle as Generative AI entered organisational consciousness. Furthermore, following the Paris Agreement sustainability targets and pressures were intensifying, and social and cultural shifts such as #MeToo and #BLM were reshaping both the social and organisational landscapes. Leaders found themselves navigating multiple contexts in a world marked by uncertainty, ambiguity, and volatility.

This thesis is concerned with the emergent nature of leadership practice as it is formed, disrupted, and reformed in the dynamic space and time of polycrisis. While a large proportion of leadership literature presents leadership practice formed in controlled and stable conditions, this research explores what happens in times of instability and volatility.

The leading question that commenced this project was inspired by Montuori (2013): What to do in multiple contexts full of volatility and ambiguity when uncertainty is the new normal? This question became a portal into the mystery space of modern crises that organisations and

leaders now navigate. At the heart of this inquiry lies the intersection of polycrisis and complexity theory, brought into focus through the lens of Leadership-As-Practice as it emerges in situ.

Therefore, the following thesis is the result of a four-year ethnographic research project based in a global engineering consultancy firm, engaging with over 60 leaders across multiple industries through formal and informal conversations, an online questionnaire, and a focus group (The Immersive Research Lab). The 2021-2024 period, during and after Covid-19, offered a unique window into the evolution of leadership practice in times of multiple, intersecting crises. This thesis is rooted in interpretive, first-person ethnographic accounts that reflect this lived experience.

The research process itself was complex and multifaceted, akin to the grammar of a detective looking for clues to solve a mystery. A diversity of methods emerged dynamically throughout the journey, mapping a rich tapestry of data (“data mess”) that mirrored the complexity of the leadership landscapes I encountered.

The thesis begins by outlining the research context and the emergence of the research mystery. The literature review (Chapters 2 and 3) examines, in granular detail, the conceptual gaps and challenges in current understandings of crisis, leadership, and leadership practice. It introduces and integrates two key theoretical frameworks: Leadership-As-Practice and polycrisis. The methodology chapter (Chapter 4) outlines the dynamic and unfolding process of conducting mystery-based ethnographic research. The results (Chapters 5-7) are presented through three distinct lenses: the visible stories of the leaders, the invisible perspectives of the PAs (Personal Assistants), and the intersubjective, reflexive accounts of the poetic self. The conclusions and discussion section (Chapter 8) highlights the thesis’s contributions to crisis leadership and management theory, to the leadership practice, and to the methodology, while also positioning the research within emerging and future directions.

Finally, this is human work. In an era where artificial intelligence dominates public and private discourse and where value is often placed on outcomes over processes, this thesis stands as a celebration of the practice itself. It honours the hard, ambiguous, and unpredictable journey of research, one full of twists and turns, where meaning is often discovered in the margins. While this thesis concludes with results and contributions, the

most vital element has been the unfolding journey itself: the process of noticing, responding to, and following the clues that shaped the stories waiting to be told.

I invite you, the reader, to enter this mystery with me. Read not just for answers, but for questions. For connections. For stories that might speak to your own leadership practice, your own crises, your own humanity. Resist the temptation to rush toward resolution. Trust the process. And perhaps, in doing so, you too will find yourself living into the answers.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank Liz Matykiewicz, who not only encouraged me to begin this research journey but also helped loosen the rigid structures of a PhD programme, enabling me to enrol as one of the first distance-learning, full-time students. Thank you, Liz, for all your support and for cheering me along the way.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Federica Angeli, for your practical and technical guidance throughout this research process, and for always meeting me with warmth, positivity, and a smile.

Heartfelt thanks to Jim Johnson and Volker Buscher, who provided me with resources and a home for this ethnographic research, allowing me to test and develop the practice alongside the study.

To all the participants who generously gave their time and insight. This work would not have been possible without you. Thank you for bringing soul into the research data.

To Stephen Linstead, the best lead supervisor I could have asked for. Thank you for teaching me about the process and the true craft of ethnographic research. Under your encouragement and guidance, I grew from a researcher to an organisational detective, to a storyteller, and emerged a poet. How did you do it? I will never know. Such, I suppose, is the mark of a true scholar, artist, and remarkable teacher.

Finally, I wish to thank, and dedicate this work to, my rock, my inspiration, my Queen. I could not have done this without your love, your support, and your teaching me to trust both my creative instincts and the process itself.

Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis is a celebration of a human endeavour and a presentation of original work, of which I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at the University of York or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Chapter 1: The Introduction

Starting where you are

On 14 August 2021, I was driving across France when I stopped at a service station somewhere between Paris and Calais for much-needed refuelling of both caffeine and petrol. During the summer of 2021, most European countries required a five-day quarantine upon entry due to the Covid-19 pandemic. France, however, was among the few that required only proof of full vaccination and a doctor-certified negative Covid-19 test (taken within 48 hours). While these complex and unprecedented times were challenging for many, the significance of this moment in both space and time in my own life was about to unfold in an unexpected way.

It was the first time since the start of the pandemic that I had been able to leave the UK and cross a border into another country, culture, and language. Over the preceding eighteen months, life had contracted to the four walls of my home and the confines of virtual meetings, contained within the 13.6-inch screen of my laptop. Living in this bubble had reawakened in me a desire to think and live more expansively and to redefine the boundaries of my lived experience. With this renewed perspective, I began to notice more, to see familiar structures and systems with a new clarity, curiosity, and critical awareness. I became increasingly conscious of the multiple contexts, both virtual and physical, that I inhabited, as well as of the ever-changing self and others attempting to make sense of these uncertain and ambiguous times.

Through this lens, crossing the border felt genuinely like a first crossing. I was filled with excitement at the prospect of breathing “new air” into my physical, intellectual, and spiritual lungs. Little did I expect, however, that my life was about to become even more bewildering. As I sipped a cappuccino purchased from the Bonjour Café adjacent to the petrol station, I glanced at my phone and began scrolling through my emails. Among bank statements and promotional offers for loungewear, one message caught my attention, an email from the University of York. It was not an email I expected, or at least not in the form in which it appeared.

The opening of it marked another moment of significance, one that would inevitably shape my reality for the next four years and draw me more deeply into questions and mysteries that had already begun to beckon. Despite the lack of precedent, I had been granted acceptance to become the University's first full-time distance-learning PhD student, an unlikely scenario that I had hesitantly initiated months earlier, encouraged by my former MSc supervisor. In that moment, I found myself being pulled into a mystery that was about to unravel in unexpected ways.

This moment did not arrive in isolation. It was entangled with questions that had been gathering momentum months earlier, during the completion of my MSc dissertation on deconstructing leadership models in the UK construction industry (Appendix 12). That research, grounded in critical analysis of power relations and gendered constructs, unsettled me deeply. Rather than offering closure, it opened up further questions, questions that followed me beyond the dissertation itself. They surfaced in conversations with leaders across different industries, such as insurance, engineering, education, many of whom responded to the research with a quiet but emphatic recognition: "me too." In the midst of the pandemic and its cascading crises, many were also questioning the assumptions and models underpinning their leadership practice.

These voices, including my own, stayed with me. They were not disruptive in a frightening sense, but persistently calling for attention, reflection, and response. As Goodall (2000) writes about his own research experience, "I think you don't choose to do it as much as it chooses you" (p. 9). At the time, I did not understand why this invitation had found me, or why it had arrived when it did. I was in the midst of a demanding professional life, leading innovation initiatives across multiple industries (i.e. construction, security, energy and transport), with a secure role and a clear career trajectory. To accept the invitation into doctoral research meant pausing or perhaps even relinquishing the familiar and the comfortable.

Yet the pull was difficult to resist. Saying yes felt less like a decision and more like a surrender to a question space that had already claimed me. This space existed somewhere between 'being and becoming' (Bergson, 1999; Grosz, 2005), where certainty gave way to movement and curiosity.

Autoethnographic and narrative scholars remind us that research often begins not with a problem to be solved, but with a moment that disrupts the ordinary and calls for meaning-making (Harding and Kostera 2021, Goodall, 2000). Lofland et al. (2006) note that researchers frequently find themselves located “where they are,” embedded within the very social and organisational contexts they seek to understand (p. 7). From this perspective, the research does not stand apart from the researcher’s life; it emerges through it. What I encountered, therefore, was not a bounded research gap, but a living, evolving mystery, one situated within practice, relationships, and experience, and extending across disciplinary boundaries (see Ch. 4).

For Goodall (1991), mystery invites connection: it situates the researcher as a participant in a shared and unfolding narrative of life, where meaning is co-constructed and relational (p. xiii). In this way, the researcher becomes both storyteller and detective, engaging in what Merton and Barber (2004) describe as the “art of being curious at the opportune but unexpected moment” (p. 210).

Indeed, this research story began, not in a boardroom or on the university campus, but on the side of a motorway, moving toward a border crossing, between countries, between professional practice and academic theory, between certainty and uncertainty. It began in a liminal space, and it continued to unfold within liminal times. This thesis is shaped by those in-between moments, where leadership practice is not only studied but lived, questioned, and reimagined in the dynamic and complex context of polycrisis.

Engaging reflexively from the beginning

From the outset, it became clear that this research would not be something I conducted from a distance, but something I would need to live. The project unfolded less as a linear investigation and more as an ongoing engagement with a mystery that was dynamic, relational, and unpredictable. Long before it was formally articulated in the research design, my professional positioning across multiple industries had already placed me inside the ethnographic field. I was not entering the field; I was already entangled within it (see Ch. 4).

Based on my earlier research experience, I anticipated that this inquiry would not yield a single storyline, but many. The mystery revealed itself through multiple plots and a plurality of voices. Some of these voices had already made themselves known through leaders

reaching out to share stories of fractured identities and disrupted practices as they navigated uncertainty, ambiguity, and paradox. Other voices would emerge more deliberately, through interviews, questionnaires, and a focus group (Immersive Research Lab). Still others arrived unexpectedly as serendipitous encounters, both digital and embodied, that could not have been planned but became no less significant to the inquiry (see Ch. 4).

Goodall (1991), drawing on Bakhtin, writes of polyphonic voices, the many influences that shape the voice of the self, the context, and others. For Goodall, voice is not merely a stylistic choice but an ethical and epistemological one, “an issue of democracy, content, and knowing” (p. xvii). This understanding resonated deeply with my experience in the field, where meaning was never singular and knowing was always relational.

Reflexivity, therefore, was not a methodological add-on but a starting point. From the beginning, I engaged in a reflexive practice through journaling (initially as a way of capturing experience), which later expanded into narrative and poetic forms of writing (see Ch. 4, 7, and 8). These practices became spaces for sensemaking and questioning. Guided by Patton’s blueprint for qualitative inquiry, I returned repeatedly to a set of reflexive questions: *What do I know? How do I know what I know? What has shaped my perspective? With what voice do I speak? What do I do with what I have found?* (Patton, 2014, cited in Marshall & Rossman, 2015, p. 108).

At first, my knowing was primarily experiential, rooted in anecdote, intuition, and lived practice, before it was shaped by engagement with the literature. In this instance, the ontological knowing preceded epistemological framing. As the research progressed, theoretical encounters (Ch. 2 and 3) refracted and reconfigured my perspective before I returned to the field (Ch. 4). Knowing was never fixed. It remained fluid, provisional, and always in motion. It felt less like knowing and more like knot-knowing; a process of encountering entangled strands, sitting with uncertainty, and slowly working to loosen what could be loosened, while accepting that some knots might remain.

This multiplicity of the reflexive self and of others became visible through the individual and collective stories presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. These chapters bring together diverse experiences of leadership practice in polycrisis, as narrated by leaders, personal assistants, and by my own autoethnographic and poetic voice as researcher, organisational detective, and leader. What emerged was not a single account of leadership, but a constellation of

perspectives unfolding across multiple temporalities and contextual spaces, intersecting and influencing one another.

In this sense, the research unfolded not within one coherent world, but across many. As Uexküll suggests, we do not inhabit a singular reality but multiple *umwelts*- overlapping, partially attuned worlds shaped by perception, relation, and movement (Uexküll, 1934; Morin, 1992; Thrift, 2008). Living, observing, and interacting within these worlds felt less like standing still and more like participating in a dance, a continuous movement between self, context, and others.

This expression of process or of motion philosophy, echoing the philosophies of Bergson and later Deleuze and Guattari, highlights relation, association, and becoming over stability or closure. It was within this dance, and this movement, that a final question began to press itself forward: What voice, and what language, could possibly hold space for this complexity? And how might writing itself become a way of staying with the motion, rather than arresting it?

The precision of language that deceives us

The question of language, of how to represent complexity, emergence, mystery within multiple stories, was never far from my mind throughout this research journey (see Ch. 4). I was not only navigating multiple worlds, but also moving between multiple languages: technical, academic, anecdotal, poetic. Each language carried its own assumptions, rhythms, and ways of seeing, and each attempted to give form to the worlds from which different stories were emerging.

Rooted in interpretive perspectives, this largely qualitative inquiry stretches across multiple disciplines and social discourses, seeking to understand how people interpret, experience, and make sense of social phenomena from within their own lived realities (Pope et al., 2002). This required learning how to listen differently, how to gather and interpret material differently, and ultimately, how to “write differently” (Kostera, 2022; Gilmore et al. 2019, also see Ch. 4). Reflexivity and creativity were not methodological embellishments; they became essential practices for staying faithful to the plurality of worlds, stories, and voices encountered along the way.

Throughout the project, I lived with a persistent tension, the pull of the third-person academic voice, with its promise of coherence and authority, and the sense that such a voice would inevitably collapse the mystery into a single paradigm, a single story, framed through scientific subjectivity. Yet the knowing that emerged alongside the empirical material gathered through diverse sources and modalities resisted such temptation. It pointed instead toward the need for a multi-paradigmatic, or perhaps even beyond-paradigmatic, approach, one that could hold what Law (2004) describes as “a wide range of transportable realities” (p. 9).

It was here that Thrift’s call to move from “matters of fact” to “matters of concern” resonated deeply (Thrift, 2008, p. 154). In this research, the matter of concern was the radical acceleration and disruption of leadership practice in polycrisis. To study something so dynamic, so continually in flux, meant responding methodologically to movement, often through creative and adaptive methods. Yet writing about that movement introduced another layer of complexity. How could something constantly shifting be represented without fixing it in place?

What followed was an ongoing evolution of voice and position as I moved deeper into the mystery. This evolution was multidisciplinary (Ch. 2 and 3), multimodal (Ch. 4), and multilingual, oscillating between the concrete and the creative. It is visible across the thesis itself, from the predominantly third-person academic analysis of Chapters 2 and 3, through the increasingly interpretive chapters (4, 5, and 6), and into the poetic and artistic expressions of Chapters 7 and 8. Writing became less about reporting findings and more about entering into conversation with the personal, the experimental, and the relational (Gilmore et al., 2019; Gilmore, 2024; Kostera, 2022; see Ch. 4).

This process, however, was neither smooth nor painless. Kostera (2022) describes “writing differently” as a quest, a search for meaning and beauty rather than metrics and mastery. That description captures my experience well. I often found myself in tension with the expectations of classical scientific method and the institutional demands for clarity, rigour, and linear progression, typically expressed through an omnipresent third-person voice. At times, it felt like a battle between fitting into an established academic form and responding honestly to a mystery that was rebellious and untamed.

There were moments when it seemed that everyone else was producing seamless, polished work, while I struggled to find a voice that could do justice to the stories and material emerging before me. In those moments, I found some comfort in Merton's (1948) observation that scientific writing often conceals the messiness of the research process. As he notes, it is frequently through encountering the unexpected, "an unanticipated, anomalous and strategic datum", that new theories emerge or existing ones are extended (p. 506).

Gabriel et al. (2014) build on this by arguing that discovery is often born of serendipity, of the ability to recognise opportunity within disruption, even when this means bending or transgressing established scientific procedures (see also Feyerabend, 1975). De Rond (2014) similarly suggests that serendipitous capability allows researchers to "see bridges where others saw holes" and to recombine events through meaningful, rather than strictly causal, connections (p. 18).

Seen through this lens, the breakdowns, breakthroughs, and breakaways (see Ch.4) that initially felt chaotic or disorienting became openings. They offered possibilities for engaging with new ways of accessing, analysing, and representing empirical material, leading not only to new knowledge, but to new ways of knowing (see Ch. 4 and 8).

This thesis embraces and celebrates the 'messy' act of navigating liminal (theoretical and empirical) spaces and capturing the stories and voices from the margins, as demonstrated when giving voice to PAs in Chapter 6. Furthermore, by openly acknowledging the arbitrary nature of the language, it expanded its limitations by inviting the lyrical and the poetic into the research story.

The problem with a single story

In her widely cited TED Talk, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks of the danger of the single story of allowing one narrative to become 'the' narrative. "The problem with a single story," she says, "is not that it is untrue, but that it is incomplete" (Adichie, 2009). Growing up in postcolonial Nigeria, Adichie experienced firsthand how stereotypes and misrepresentation can shape entire cultures, how people can come to live inside someone else's story, often one that has been scientifically validated and institutionally reinforced.

Ethnography itself emerged from such postcolonial encounters. Early anthropological studies of colonised cultures were deeply entangled with power, knowledge, and claims to objectivity, exemplified by the scientific subjectivity modelled by Malinowski (Kuper, 1996; Townley, 2019). The Writing Culture debate of the late twentieth century marked a significant shift, challenging the notion of detached observation and calling for recognition of the ethnographer's emotions, positionality, and reflexivity as integral to the research process (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

Inspired by Geertz's interpretive ethnography, Writing Culture reframed ethnography as a relational and narrative practice, questioning who speaks, who writes, and under what conditions (Clifford, 1986). Participants were no longer positioned as silent objects observed from above, but as co-present voices in the production of meaning. These debates expanded understandings of language, truth, and representation, paving the way for experimental and multimodal forms of inquiry.

Building on this tradition, Goodall (2000) introduces New Ethnography as "creative narratives shaped out of the writer's personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences" (p. 9). O'Reilly (2005) similarly describes ethnography as iterative and inductive, involving multiple methods and voices, and positioning the researcher as both subject and object of inquiry.

What unites these perspectives is an engagement with the crisis of representation, the recognition that no form of representation, textual or visual, can ever fully capture lived experience. Representation always fails in some way, as it betrays both its object and its author. As an ethnographer, I became increasingly aware of the ethical responsibility this entails. I did not want to present one story as the story, a risk inherent in linear, question-and-answer research designs. There was also no guarantee that employing multiple methods would yield a complete or final picture. Like polycrisis itself, the phenomena under study were dynamic, contradictory, and resistant to closure. Polycrisis disrupts linear notions of cause and effect, removing the comfort of observation from above. At the same time, the crisis of representation pulls the researcher back into the field in an embodied way, no longer writing about the mystery, but writing from within it.

Thrift's (2008) non-representational theory responds to this challenge by valuing movement, practice, and expression at the margins of the known. Rather than seeking to stabilise

meaning, it encourages experimental and evocative forms that engage playfully and ethically with the subject of study. Thrift's "ethics of intelligence" call for openness, humility, and creativity, an attentiveness to uncertainty, error, and the world's capacity to surprise us (Thrift, 2008, p. 170).

Living in and writing from within the mystery was not only surprising but has left a lasting imprint on me beyond this research project. As Goodall (1991) reminds us, true ethnographic research is transformative not only for what it reveals, but for who it changes: "Mystery changes all of that because mystery changes you" (p. xi).

The question of mysteries waiting to be lived

This introduction has traced the origins of the mystery that brought us, the reader and writer, together. It has gestured toward the stories that emerged through the entanglement of context (polycrisis), self (researcher, detective, leader, poet), and others (leaders and participants encountered in the field). More than a framing device, it is an invitation to loosen the grip of formulaic academic expectations and to enter the mystery with curiosity, openness, and wonder (Thrift, 2008; Kostera, 2022).

The journey began with curiosity, with following clues that led to questions. Questions about how leaders are and how they act. Questions about the shifting temporal currents that shape what crisis means across multiple organisational worlds (umwelts) and interconnected crises, what has come to be described as polycrisis.

Leadership, as both practice and discipline, stands at a crossroads intensified by these conditions. It is marked by contradiction, paradox, and collision rather than coherence. Montuori (2013) captures this unease in his own question: What do we do in contexts of uncertainty and ambiguity? As traditional hierarchies soften and boundaries dissolve, complexity and polycrisis draw us toward transdisciplinary and polycontextual ways of knowing, approaches that resist fitting neatly into inherited management frameworks.

As the chapters that follow explore, leadership in polycrisis is not a fixed identity or set of competencies, but an unfolding practice shaped through relationships, power, politics, and time. It shows up differently in different spaces, moments, and contexts.

How does this emergent way of being and doing leadership meet the wild complexity of our times? From this question emerge three interwoven mysteries:

- **Mystery One:** How do multiple contexts shape leadership identity? Is identity stable or fluid in times of crisis, and how does this shape practice?
- **Mystery Two:** How are emerging leadership theories challenged by polycrisis and by operating across contexts moving at different speeds and intensities? How effective are they?
- **Mystery Three:** How do leaders respond and adapt within new configurations of time and space? What new practices, connections, and possibilities are emerging in response to organisational polycrisis?

At this point, the mystery had already taken shape, not as a problem to be solved, but as a set of questions that refused to stay still. They had emerged through movement, encounter, and lived experience, and they now asked to be placed in conversation with others who had been thinking, writing, and struggling with similar tensions.

What follows is not a literature review in the traditional sense of mapping a field from above. Rather, it is an act of turning toward the voices, concepts, and theories that helped me make sense of what I was already living. The literature became a way of slowing down, of listening differently, and of locating my experience within broader conversations about leadership, crisis, complexity, and change.

In entering this dialogue, I do not seek closure or definitive answers. Instead, I approach the literature as a companion in the inquiry, one that sharpens questions, complicates assumptions, and opens new lines of sight. The chapter that follows traces how technological acceleration, socio-cultural shifts, and sustainability pressures intersect to produce conditions of polycrisis, and how leadership theory has attempted to respond to it over the past decades.

This turn toward theory, therefore, marks not a departure from the story but a deepening of it.

Chapter 2: Uncertainty is the new certainty

Contextualising Leadership in a High-Speed, Polycrisis World

In Spring 2025, the BBC News headline caught my attention: “*uncertainty is the new certainty for UK*”, referring to the global political and economic disruption triggered by the Trump administration in the US (Mason 2025). This headline struck a chord not only because it was true for the UK (where I reside) but also because it captured the sentiment of my ethnographic work conducted over the past few years. The Covid-drawn conclusions, informed by the hyper-connectivity and the global nature of organisations and supply chains, were clear: no organisation is an island and no leader is immune from increasingly volatile, external impacts.

This insight is grounded in the period during which this research project was conducted (2021–2025), a time marked by a succession of major global crises that affected leaders and organisations almost everywhere. These included the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by the start of the Ukraine war which triggered the cost of living and energy crisis, multiple environmental disasters, the 2023 war in Gaza, the civil war in Sudan, the rise of artificial intelligence, the global democratic recession triggered by the rise of far-right movements. Trump election, crossing seven out of nine planetary boundaries, and global carbon emissions reaching record levels in 2025. Not surprisingly, an old military acronym VUCA (as first theorised by Bennis and Nanus, 1985), describing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity has entered the organisational vocabulary.

While VUCA has captured the imagination of celebrity management consultants who developed frameworks and training programmes as a way of ‘vaccinating’ leaders and organisations from the effects of the ‘VUCA virus’, there is nevertheless merit in the rising concerns and interest in navigating multiple crises (Bennett and Lemoine 2014; Symonds 2023). This research project is concerned with the impact these crises have on organisations and leadership, how they inform and shape leaders and their practice, and what else emerges when business-as-usual conditions and the status quo are disrupted. To begin to answer these questions and to gain a better contextual understanding of this research project, I reached out to literature from this and the previous century, which not only predicted but theorised some of the underlying causes of the VUCA conditions the world is experiencing today.

Central to this context is the condition of what has been described by Wajcman and Dodd (2017, p.2) as the “high-speed society”- the dichotomous reality of a generation living between progress and catastrophe. Indeed, we live in the era of high-speed internet and fail-fast culture, with the ability to process vast amounts of data at the end of a simple prompt. Speed seems synonymous with efficiency and progress. At the same time, we face fast-approaching and record-breaking heating of the planet caused by overconsumption and the burning of fossil fuels.

Much of the discussion about the high-speed society tends to be positioned on a linear, deterministic trajectory, depicting digitisation and climate emergency as the key drivers of acceleration (Stiegler 1998, 2013; Wajcman and Dodd 2017, p.2; Rosa 2016; Urry 2014). This chapter explores the impact these key drivers have on societies’ experience and perception of progress and time, as well as on each other. Once the contextual and philosophical backdrop is set, the chapter examines how this emerging context shifts paradigms and impacts academic theory in crisis management and leadership. Finally, it reviews emerging leadership theories that form a theoretical basis for addressing the research mystery of leadership in polycrisis.

Accelerated change

Wajcman and Dodd give a historical context to the current claims “of unprecedented acceleration” by recognising the work of Simmel and Benjamin as the original theorists of the “acceleration society” (2017, p.1). These thinkers, argue Wajcman and Dodd (2017), give much-needed context to contemporary debates on the acceleration and speed of change represented in the Western literature.

Simmel (2004) in *The Philosophy of Money* identifies two reasons for the acceleration of time and change, specifically in capitalist society. The first reason, argues Simmel, has to do with disrupting the perception of economic stability. Simmel believes that such disruption produces a “constant state of disorder and psychic shocks” (2004, p.499). It is in this state of disorder, argues Simmel, that we seek stability through accelerated change. The second reason relates to the increase in the speed of economic life itself. This is particularly experienced during periods of high inflation, where it is in everybody’s interests to transact at speed (ibid.).

The 9/11 attacks in the USA and the Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as examples of some of the most disruptive, “psychic shock” moments of the twenty-first century. Both events triggered an accelerated change in adopting new, global security measures against terrorist threats and the spreading of the virus, which were quickly accepted as the ‘new normal’. Furthermore, both events resulted in a disruption of economic stability. As a response to the aviation standstill in the aftermath of 9/11, President George W. Bush addressed the nation by telling people to “Get on board. Do your business around the country. Fly and enjoy America's great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed.” (The White House, 2001).

Similarly, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK government introduced the 2020 Eat Out To Help Out scheme also to encourage trading. In both cases, the measurement of time was directly related to economic activity. As Simmel reflects, the disruption of economic stability changes the perception of time. Essentially this is “no time at all, but rather an unidimensional now” (“*Philosophie der Kunst*,” cited in Frisby, “Preface to the Third Edition,” in Simmel 2004, p. xxv).

Benjamin also frames time in the context of economic activity, seeing the “industrial civilization as a runaway society heading toward an abyss” (Benjamin in Wajcman and Dodd 2017, p.6). He recognises technological change as the main frame of reference where “progress” has profound consequences leading to “wreckage upon wreckage” (Benjamin 1935). Furthermore, he sees linearity and the chronological concept of time as the biggest hazard of technological development. By introducing reproducibility at scale, he argues that technology causes fragmentation in our experience and perception (ibid). Benjamin conceptualises time as ‘now-time’ in the context of an awareness of that “which has not yet become history, that which yet can become history” (Benjamin in Frieze 2001). He challenges the linear sequence between the past and the present and the constructed continuity of history. While Benjamin focuses on the chronology of the past, others are drawn to conceptualising the chronology of the future (ibid.).

The future is now

This often overused phrase in advertising of the latest digital developments (more recently in Generative AI) represents the perception of time in the context of digital technology.

Although Benjamin starts to draw links between the acceleration of time and technology, it is Rosa (2003, 2016) who makes more explicit statements on the theory of acceleration.

Rosa (2016) argues that the idea of “futurology” speeds up or even dissolves our experience of now by adopting the future-thinking lens. It offers an escape from seeing what is in the present and tending to arising issues. Rosa (2016) further identifies “dynamic stabilisation” (akin to Simmel’s thinking), in the midst of constant and accelerating change, as a form of ‘coping mechanism’. This defining feature of modern societies requires “(material) growth, (technological) augmentation, and high rates of (cultural) innovation as a way of preserving the socioeconomic and political status quo”. Consequently, this leads to progressive “logics of escalation” in terms of generating an efficient production at speed and scale, and acceleration in social change.

However, Rosa (2016) recognises that not all spheres of social life are equally “speedable”, thus introducing the problem of “de-synchronization”. Rosa argues that our cultural and social spheres have not caught up with the speed of technological development, increasingly creating a world of dissonance and paradox. For example, Algorithms and Large Language Models that operate within major social networks and AI platforms reside in this paradoxical gap of de-synchronisation where the very technologies that enable social movements and enact a broader change (i.e. BLM and MeToo) at speed and scale, are also encoded with racism, sexism and ableism (Wajcman and Young 2023; Buolamwini 2023).

Indeed, Rosa further argues that de-synchronisation ultimately leads to a multiple (connected) crises, concluding that “the four most pressing crises of the late-modern age—the ecological crisis, the financial crisis, the crisis of democracy, and the psycho-crisis—are results of desynchronisation” (Rosa 2016, p.1).

Digital delirium

Virilio's (1986) work is also concerned with the relationship between speed and technology and their impact on society. Inspired by the idea of Dromos- the ancient Spartan racecourse, Virilio's study of speed- 'dromology', asks questions about experiences and perceptions of time and space in high-speed societies (1986). He argues that the mechanically induced speed renders us unconscious. Virilio believes that technologies of movement (automotive, audio, and visual), produce a form of subliminal comfort, operating beneath conscious awareness. These systems generate a kind of visual, and therefore bodily, illusion that gradually erodes conscious perception. This subliminal comfort accelerates consciousness itself, intensifying the speed and immediacy of thought and reflection. Such acceleration can feel pleasurable as long as it remains within the limited boundaries of individual awareness. However, those limits are extremely narrow, and when speed is pushed beyond them, as in certain forms of invasion of privacy, the individual becomes conditioned rather than autonomous (Virilio and Lotringer 1983, p.74). Indeed, Virilio speaks of techno-conditioning that offers an initial comfort and illusion of progress at the cost of narrowing our vision and diminishing our consciousness. He mourns the loss of beauty and aesthetics for the sake of gaining efficiency and productivity (2009).

Virilio warns of what Kroker and Kroker (1997) call a 'digital delirium', which like an atomic bomb destroys the principle of reality. Virilio also makes connections between the technological acceleration of speed and the rise of global problems through the lens of military advancements. As a major critic of war, Virilio fears the invisible impacts of technology on the distraction of humanity (1983). "Logistics is the beginning of the economy of war, which will then become simply economy, to the point of replacing political economy." (1983, p.20). Closing the gap between 'time and space' through global logistics of the free market renders the time of political democracy obsolete giving way to the new era of speed which Virilio calls 'dromocracy' (1986).

Virilio's observations on the impact of technology on our experience and perception of reality seem more timely than ever with the current challenges around deepfakes and synthetic information production as well as the extensive use of generative A.I. in the military. Virilio's use of the word 'hallucination' seems uncanny in today's usage of the same word to describe a phenomenon in Large Language Models of producing an output that is nonsensical

or fabricated but made to look as true. The speed and scale at which the ‘digital delirium’ engulfs our social, economic and political spheres is both intoxicating and crippling.

In 2023, more than 350 executives, researchers and engineers working on A.I. signed an open letter stating that: “Mitigating the risk of extinction from A.I. should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks, such as pandemics and nuclear war” (Roose 2023). In the light of today’s headlines, Virilio’s work could be seen as one of a prophet or a futurist and offers a philosophical lens for a deeper exploration of the social and organisational complexities of today.

Digital transformation of the mind

Inspired by Virilio’s work, Bernard Stiegler is also concerned with speed and time.

In “Technics and Time”, Stiegler (1998) remarks on the “lightning speed” (but not necessarily enlightening) of technical inventions that outpace cultural evolution. This acceleration results in loss of “attention”, which can be reflected in both literal attention disorders and also the rise of addiction (Stiegler 2013 p.27). He speaks of the “addictogenic society”, that constantly reacts to technological innovations while these “drive-based tendencies are systematically exploited while its sublimatory tendencies are systematically short-circuited” (ibid.). Stiegler (2013) speaks of ‘digital pharmacology’ as a way of framing the phenomenon of the techno-cultural evolution where societies and individuals self-administer and self-soothe from the effects of increasing disconnect and desynchronisation with whatever the latest ‘digital pill’ is made available. As with any addictive and potent pill, such technologies guarantee short-term satisfaction, while the long-term result is “exteriorization without return — that is, without re-interiorization”. (Stiegler 2012, p.10).

While Stiegler admits that technologies are not inherently harmful, what is harmful, however, is how they are being adopted by societies that further adapt to fit the technological changes risking long-term decay of psychological and social structures (Stiegler 2019, p.9). As Heidenreich and Weber-Stein (2022) observe, “Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that the question of the digital transformation of the mind cannot be regarded independently of the question of the digital reconfiguration of social relations.” (p.60).

Later in life, Stiegler became increasingly concerned with the effects of the polycrisis, thus adopting a much more practical stance to the problems he saw emerging in both academic and non-academic contexts. As a devoted Marxist, he sees Capitalism as the force of acceleration that drives technological, social and psychological automation which produces “symbolic and affective misery” (Zero Books, 2020). While capitalism is concerned with speed that produces growth leading to crisis, sustainable development requires equal speed at reducing unsustainable consumption (degrowth) thus both exist on the opposite side of the speed continuum.

For Stiegler, acceleration is the question of disruption that asks for new ways of reconceptualising scientific inquiry and new methods of research (i.e., action research). He challenges individuals and institutions to learn how to use, speak, and practice speed as a necessary skill amid this emergency. He also makes a connection between management, automation, and computation making a distinction between computational synthesis of tools such as Gen AI and human reasoning. Stiegler argues that while computational synthesis can be useful in managing volumes of complex data, it is human reasoning that should be the ultimate step in effective decision-making and thus should not be automated or outsourced to digital tools (Zero Books, 2020).

Stiegler’s work offers another lens for managing complexities in emerging polycrisis. Indeed he frames polycrisis as entropy (decline into disorder) in all its forms (thermodynamic, biological and informational) and uses the grammar of thermodynamics to make sense of it (INTERNATION, n.d.). He believes in our ability to reverse the environmental and social decline by experimenting with economic and technological models that focus on negentropic localities (as inspired by Schrödinger’s vision of order) and maintaining sustainable sufficiency (ibid).

The Great Acceleration into the polycrisis

Conversely, Urry (2014) argues that “The Great Acceleration” brings the new epoch of the Anthropocene where the ecological crisis is the main threat to humanity. Anthropocene was

first introduced by Paul Crutzen in 2000 to describe the impact humans had on Earth's chronology (Lewis and Maslin 2015).

However, Moore (2016) argues that the Anthropocene should be renamed Capitalocene as he attributes the consequences of this planetary acceleration of devastation to capitalist's insatiable thirst for growth. "We are living through a transition in planetary life with a potential to "transform Earth rapidly and irreversibly into a state of unknown in human experience" (Baronsky et al. 2012, p. 52 in Moore, 2016).

For Moore and Baronsky the capitalist-driven, 'up and to the right' acceleration, charts irreversible and unknown territories for humans and the planet.

Urry frames this as the Great Acceleration in terms of "the exponential increase in the burning of coal, oil, and gas since the mid-twentieth century." He argues that burning fossil fuels "literally enables the world to go round faster and faster", and that the energy required for this Great Acceleration may well be running out. The International Energy Agency (IEA) reported a "full-blown energy crisis" in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Onyekuru et al. 2023).

At the same time, the wide adoption of Gen AI tools has significantly increased energy consumption. The latest research highlights that "the new wave of AI systems are much more carbon intensive than what we had even two or five years ago", where generating just one image consumes as much energy as charging a mobile phone (Heikkilä 2023). Indeed, the latest Bloomberg (2024) report estimates that data centres used by Gen AI Big Tech consume more energy than most European countries, most of which comes from the burning of fossil fuels (see Figure 1).

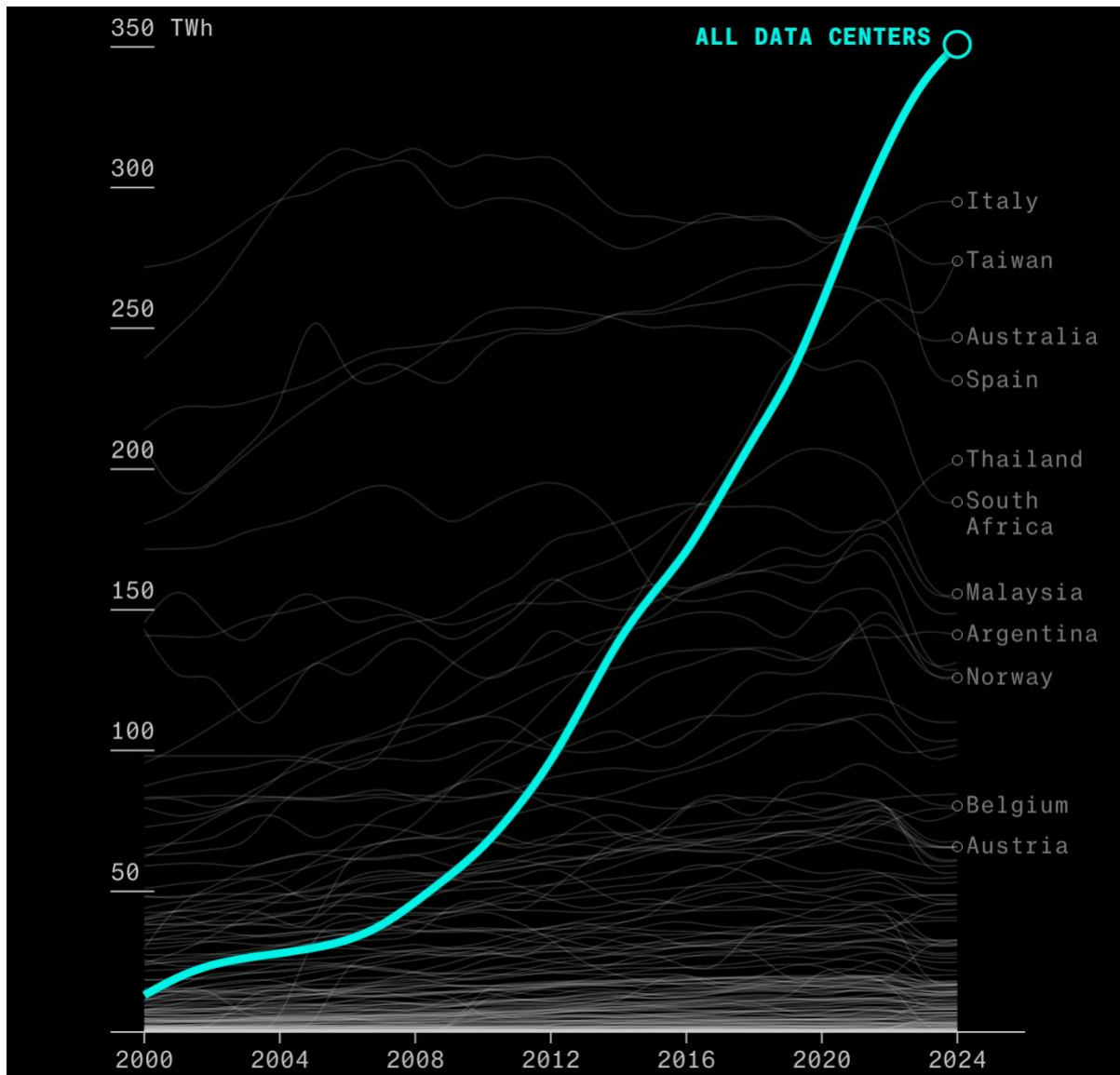


Figure 1 Bloomberg analysis of BloombergNEF and DC Byte data (2024)

Note: Data centre energy consumption through Q1 2024. National energy consumption levels are actual through 2022 and projected for 2023 and 2024.

Berners-Lee and Clark highlight the dependence of modern societies on fossil fuels by demonstrating how “the carbon cycle fits perfectly with the idea that society’s use of energy is driven by a powerful positive feedback mechanism” (2013, p.13). It is these feedback mechanisms that further accelerate our power-hungry technologies and technology-dependent societies. (Urry, 2014, p.49)

Furthermore, Urry 2014 observes how in the past societies collapsed at the peak of their greatness and goes on to speculate that the Great Acceleration of Western society could

indeed lead to the “Great Disappearance” (Urry, 2016, p.52). The Living Planet Report 2018 shows population sizes of wildlife decreased by 60% globally between 1970 and 2014 (KPi Piotrowska, 2018).

Urry (2014) also draws on the relationship with time by focusing on future-planning to reduce the climate crisis and/or planning for resilience against a climate catastrophe. Indeed, the Paris Agreement created a future-centred time framework of the 2030 agenda to accelerate sustainable development and decrease the global temperature to pre-industrial levels. These efforts are trying to essentially reverse or stop the ‘time’ by reversing or reducing the industrial activities of planetary degradation. Rockstrom and collaborators argue that transgressing one or more of the nine planetary boundaries will trigger a non-linear, abrupt, disruption of the planetary balance that sustains life (2009, p.51). This extends beyond the capitalist understanding of the economic balance being the only or the ultimate condition for stability. Indeed, the seventeen SDG goals outline the twenty-first century parameters for “peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future” (UN, 2015).

Increasingly the word ‘acceleration’ seems to be accompanied by the word ‘crisis’ either in the context of deepening or averting its inevitability. What the above literature suggests, is that while the acceleration happens on the linear trajectory the consequences of it enter a non-linear, non-chronological and deeply relational state. This can have a disruptive and destabilising effect on multiple contexts of human and non-human experience.

Acceleration also introduces uncertainty, and complexity as different contexts begin to converge and interact at different times and at different speeds. This in turn can cause de-synchronisation and misalignment between social, cultural, economic, environmental and technological spheres. This asynchronous acceleration enters new realms of complexity and ambiguity within and between different disciplines. To understand this complexity, we are now going to turn to the work of Morin, Kern and Montuori before exploring their impact on organisational and leadership theories.

Complexity and polycrisis

In 1999 Morin and Kern first introduced the idea of polycrisis in their “Manifesto for the New Millennium” (Morin and Kern 1999). Morin and Kern observed that the challenges with which we enter the twenty-first century lie not in a single threat but in a “complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrollable processes, and the general crisis of the planet” (1999, p. 74). Morin in his earlier work argued against oversimplification and reductionism of some of the mainstream theories of the twentieth century that sought to understand and explain the world in a neatly defined and boundaried way. He argued against holism which he saw as “one-dimensional and simplifying vision of the whole (...) that “reduces all other system-related ideas to the idea of totality whereas it should be a question of confluence.” He goes on to say that holism “arises from the paradigm of simplification (or reduction of the complex to a master-concept or master-category).” (Morin, 1992).

By observing different scientific disciplines through the examples of atomic, biological, and social systems Morin believes that “a system is not only a composition of unity out of diversity, but also a composition of internal diversity out of unity.” (Morin, 1992)

It is this realisation that led Morin and Kern (1999) to identify the relational connections and dynamic feedback loops in the crisis of the late twentieth century and with it our limitations in approaching them as separate entities that can be controlled. Morin and Kern’s ideas gained traction as multiple socio-political and environmental crises began to unravel at scale and speed (Swilling 2013, 2020).

Indeed, in 2018 then-President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker described the simultaneous migration, financial, and Brexit crises afflicting Europe as a polycrisis (Juncker, 2018; Zeitlin et al., 2019), bringing Morin and Kern’s concept of complex convergence of threats into the non-academic audiences.

Most recently, the idea was widely adopted by journalists, policymakers and business elites during the 2023 World Economic Forum in Davos as a response to mounting challenges that spill over into all spheres of global economic and social systems (Serhan, 2023).

Lawrence et al. (2024) define ‘global polycrisis’ “as the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems in ways that significantly degrade humanity’s prospects” (p.2). They argue that the currently experienced polycrisis is worsening and requires new, integrated and multi-disciplinary approach by embracing complexity. Lawrence et al. (2024) propose a framework that focuses on crisis across multiple systems identifying their deep interconnectedness and relational and dynamic nature. They observe that “what may appear to be separate crises in different systems in fact exacerbate and reshape one another to form a conjoined polycrisis that must be understood and addressed as a whole. In the language of complexity scientists, a polycrisis is an emergent phenomenon.” (Lawrence et al., 2022, p. 2).

This approach in turn requires moving within and between different disciplines and different contexts by mapping out their interdependencies, relationships and feedback loops, that otherwise might be invisible to traditional, siloed ways of perceiving and understanding reality. Much like (Stiegler 2019, 2022) Morin and others (Ceruti 1994, Bocchi and Ceruti 2002, 2004) call for a paradigm shift of how we approach and understand our scientific and anthropo-social theories by uncovering previously unseen, dynamic connections and relationships. Failing to do so, warns Morin, will thrust us back “into the same old vices of reduction, homogenisations and abstraction that system theory claimed to cure.” (1992, p.382)

As Goodwin et al. (2001) further observe, complexity theory is emerging as a discipline that acknowledges and even embraces nature’s creative capacity. This shift is remarkable because it encourages a fundamentally different way of understanding the world, one that sees complex, dynamic systems as highly sensitive to their starting conditions and capable of producing unexpected, emergent outcomes. As a result, argues Goodwin et al. (2001), we must learn to engage with these systems cautiously and respectfully, since the quality of human life depends on them, from microscopic ecosystems to the entire biosphere. Although we can influence such systems, they remain beyond our full control (ibid.).

Much like Stiegler who questions the Newtonian, mechanistic way of scientific perception and inquiry, Goodwin et al. (2001) recognise the beauty and creativity of complexity within and around us. This way of recognising the interconnectedness of systems and disciplines increasingly resonates with some leadership scholars. For instance, Montuori (2013) and others challenge what leadership is and what it means to be a leader amid complexity, which we will further explore in the following section.

Transdisciplinary entanglement

Montuori (2013) looks to complexity theory through the lens of transdisciplinarity as a way of exploring “what to do in a context full of uncertainty and ambiguity” in an organisational setting (p. 224). “My passion for transdisciplinarity emerges out of a felt need to go beyond some of the limitations of more traditional disciplinary academic approaches, and certain established ways of thinking” explains Montuori (2013, p.212). He sees transdisciplinarity as a vehicle to bridge duality and classical binaries of reductionism and oversimplification much needed in understanding and navigating the challenges leaders and organisations face. Just as Morin and others identify the complex entanglement of multiple systems leading to polycrisis, Montuori (2013) calls for transdisciplinarity in addressing problems across multiple organisational contexts.

Furthermore, he sees creativity, complexity, and transdisciplinarity as complementary and central to shaping a more integrated theory and practice (Montuori 1989). He calls for “thinking that relinks that which is disjointed and compartmentalized, that respects diversity as it recognizes unity, and that tries to discern interdependencies”, in a radical and multidimensional way (Montuori, 2013 p.216). For Montuori this is more than just another tool for academic inquiry but rather a way to “embody different ways of being, thinking, relating, and acting in the world (ibid. p.214)”. He argues against our understanding of leadership as ‘closed systems’ that focuses on how individual leaders should act or be (p.218). He believes that seeing leaders as a closed system by analysing individual “personality traits, decision-making style, or cognitive processes. “separates them from the dynamic systems within which they operate (p.219). For Montuori, leaders should be analysed and seen as ‘open systems’ and a part of complex and dynamic interactions and connections.

Taylor (2012, 2015, 2022) in turn, approaches transdisciplinarity within leadership from the perspective of art, with craft being the expression of consistent learning practice. He draws analogies and lessons from the theatre stage in observing how connections between actors and audience are made and cultivated. Taylor sees “connection as something that is a short-term, felt phenomenon going forward” (2022, p.20) which requires crafting and sustaining through learning and practice. As Stanford University Professor Emeritus James G. March once said, “Leadership involves plumbing as well as poetry” - a sentiment that combines the

importance of the craft of everyday practice with the creativity of forming and sustaining existing and new (human and non-human) connections (Augier, 2004, p.173).

Taylor also warns against closed-system leadership as he argues, it leads to creating power asymmetries. He believes that “Power differences don’t simply make connection asymmetrical, they often prevent connection from happening or greatly weaken the connection that does happen.” (Taylor 2022, p.18). Both Montuori and Taylor question the idea of totality and singularity of a leader and call for a more open and creative approach to leadership that spans across many disciplines while forging new and dynamic connections within self and others. Both begin to introduce the idea of viewing leadership as a more collective and embodied practice.

Conclusion

The above literature review journeyed through some of the philosophical and theoretical plains to outline and make sense of the technological, socio-cultural, and sustainability pressures societies face. Over the recent years, these disruptions have only intensified in scale and speed, challenging ‘business as usual’ approaches and calling organisations and leaders into a new way of “thinking, relating and acting” amid uncertainty and change (Montuori 2013 p.214; Kotarski 2023; Bedi et al. 2021).

Businesses have found themselves navigating multiple contexts which call for bringing “contextual thinking from the fringes to the centre of management theory and research” (Stahl et al. 2023). The scholars argue that some of the most prominent contexts not only shape our societies and organisations but also the way we perceive and experience reality (Virilio 1986, 2009; Stiegler 1989, 2013; 2019, 2022, Heidenreich and Weber-Stein 2022; 2022; Rosa 2016).

These contexts were identified as digitisation, sustainable development and socio-cultural space. While these spheres operate within the “logic of escalation” they are not equally ‘speedable’ and operate in de-synchronised way challenging the idea of time, thus disrupting linearity, control and management (Rosa et al., 2017).

Some philosophers argue that our cultural and social spheres are lagging the speed of technological development, increasingly creating a world of dissonance and paradox and chaos (Rosa, Virilio, Stiegler). This in turn leads to multiple crises (polycrisis) unfolding in an entropic and disruptive way (Morin and Kern 1999; Stiegler 2019, 2022).

As leaders are expected to operate in dichotomous, paradoxical and often contradictory, polycontextual realities, Montuori (2013) challenges leadership theory with the question: “What to do in a context full of uncertainty and ambiguity?” The polycrisis and complexity theory introduce the dissolving of traditional hierarchies and boundaries calling for a transdisciplinary and polycontextual approach. How is the leadership and crisis management literature responding to this? What kind of practice does it inform? To answer these questions, we now turn to the crisis management and crisis leadership literature.

Chapter 3: Leadership in Crisis

Introduction

Crisis leadership has gained renewed interest among leadership scholars since the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Dirani et al. 2020, Grint 2020, Uhl-Bien 2021, Wilson 2020, Wilson & Newstead 2022, Wu et al. 2021, Riggio and Newstead 2023). Historically the literature centred around crisis management (Bundy et al., 2017; James et al., 2011; Pearson & Clair, 1998), however recently the focus has shifted towards crisis leadership, increasingly recognising the distinction between the two areas in theory and practice. While James et al., (2011) recognise the role of leadership in crisis management, the literature on crisis leadership is still underdeveloped and fragmented (Wu et al. 2021). Indeed Riggio and Newstead (2023) observe that the conceptualisation of leadership theories tends to be set against “the normal and stable conditions” (p.202). Yet the recent pandemic, geopolitical crisis and environmental disasters have shown to have an extensive impact on organisations and leaders bringing crisis leadership into the center of leadership conversations. After all, it is in crisis when leadership matters the most, reflect Riggio and Newstead (2023).

Evolution of crisis definition

Early definitions of crisis by Hermann (1963) and Weick (1988) frame it in the context of a singular, low-probability event that poses a high threat to the ‘normal’ operation of the organisation. It appears quickly, infrequently and unexpectedly (Hermann 1963, Weick 1988). Indeed, as the understanding and experience of crises evolved over decades, so did its definition. Riggio and Newstead (2023) offer a helpful guide to this evolution in scholarship in the below table (Table 1).

Table 1 Evolving definitions of crises

Era	Definition
1960s	"An organizational crisis (1) threatens high-priority values of the organization, (2) presents a restricted amount of time in which a response can be made, and (3) is unexpected or unanticipated by the organization" (Hermann 1963, p. 64).
1970s	Crisis is "a situation in which goals are at stake that are of high importance to the system (=high valence) when the probability that these (necessary) goals will be achieved is (too) small" (Mulder et al. 1971, p. 21).
1980s	"Crises are characterized by low probability/high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of an organization" (Weick 1988, p. 305).
1990s	Crises are "high magnitude, require immediate attention, an element of surprise, the need for taking action, and are outside the organization's [complete] control. An incident or event must pose a threat to the organization's reputation and viability to be considered a crisis" (Pearson & Mitroff 1993, p. 49). "An organizational crisis is a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly" (Pearson & Clair 1998, p. 60).
2000s	A crisis is "[a]ny emotionally charged situation that, once it becomes public, invites negative stakeholder reaction and thereby has the potential to threaten the financial wellbeing, reputation, or survival of the firm or some portion thereof" (James & Wooten 2005, p. 142).
2010s	A crisis is "a rare, significant, and public situation that creates highly undesirable outcomes for the firm and its stakeholders. . .and requires immediate corrective action by firm leaders" (James et al. 2011, p. 461, citing James & Wooten 2010, p. 17). "We define crisis as a process of weakening or degeneration that can culminate in a disruption event to the actor's (i.e., individual, organization, and/or community) normal functioning" (Williams et al. 2017, p. 739).
2020s	Crises are "events that are perceived by leaders and organizational stakeholders as unexpected, highly salient, and potentially disruptive" (Wu et al. 2021, p. 2).

Table 1 "Evolving definition of crisis" by Riggio and Newstead (2023), p.204

While all definitions agree on the disruptive nature of crisis that impacts the normal functioning of an organisation, what is interesting is the shift between the centuries from framing crisis as improbable to unexpected. This shift could explain little attention to leadership in crisis research in the previous century and an increased interest in trying to understand it, especially in the post-Covid era. Indeed, Wu et al.'s (2021) extensive literature review recognises the fragmentation in theorising and conceptualising crisis in scholarship. Furthermore, Riggio and Newstead (2023) point out that traditional literature often positions crisis as this mysterious phenomenon that suddenly and unexpectedly appears and is quickly resolved thus, they argue, "leadership research has paid relatively little attention to crisis leadership" (p.202). Having recognised the increasing importance of leadership in crisis Wu et al. (2021) have begun their contribution to the field by identifying and updating the definition of crisis. They define crisis "as events that are perceived by leaders and organizational stakeholders as unexpected, highly salient, and potentially disruptive" (ibid. p. 2).

Types of crises

While defining what a crisis is helps in identifying when it occurs, crisis management scholars have been particularly concerned with categorising types of crises and their causes to mitigate the most effective response (Wu et al. 2021). While Marcus & Goodman (1991) classify crises by type: accidents, scandals, product safety and health incidents, Pearson & Mitroff (1993) categorise them by cause: technical/economic to human/social. James et al. (2011) on the other hand focus on the origin of the crisis and whether they were internal or external as well as intentionality (intentional or unintentional). This in turn led to further categorising them as: accidents, transgressions, faux pas and terrorism. Guided by Wooten & James' (2008) "reasonably robust typology of crises" Riggio and Newstead (2023) try to compile a list that helps to illustrate their variety (p.206). Their categorisation is as follows:

- Extortion
- Bribery
- Scandal
- Corruption
- Product tampering
- Security breach
- Technology disruption
- Class action
- Consumer activism
- Boycotts
- Labor disputes
- Natural disasters
- Terrorism
- Environmental degradation (oil spills, groundwater contamination)
- Accidents

While the list might seem like a helpful map to navigate the type of responses necessary to resolve or even avoid a specific crisis, "Pearson & Clair (1998), argue that the crisis landscape is much more ambiguous and it is often difficult to determine both the cause and the solution. This ambiguity and fluidity continue to challenge crisis management scholars who persist in reviewing and re-examining their responses as demonstrated by Wu et al.

2021. For example, Bundy et al.'s (2017) framework for crisis management begins to disrupt the confined and static idea by introducing different stages of crisis as: pre-crisis, in-crisis, and post-crisis thus focusing its dynamic nature and the engagement of multiple actors at different stages. While this linear trajectory of crisis as presented by Bundy follows a somewhat predictable path, it however begins to introduce movement and see it less as an event and more as a process.

Crisis-as-process

According to Kahn et al. (2013), "traditional models of crisis management are rooted in a classic engineering mandate: identify and fix the problems in inputs and operations that lead to ineffective outputs." (p.377). Bundy et al. (2017) also critique this approach and propose a more integrative framing of crises and crisis management by connecting it to multiple disciplines within organisational management. However, it is Williams et al. (2017) that make a "clear distinction between crisis-as-event and crisis-as-process" (Riggio and Newstead 2023, p.202). They arrive at this defined distinction by "fusing" crisis management and resilience management research streams (Williams et al. 2017). Williams et al. (2017) frame crisis-as-events, as discrete and unexpected, isolated things that "happen to" an organisation. This framing in turn, explains the traditional, mechanistic approach to crisis management that Kahn et al. (2013), Bundy et al. (2017) and others critique.

Crisis-as-process however, sees crisis as an emergent phenomenon that happens over time, not in isolation but rather relationally and often in plain sight. As Riggio and Newstead (2023) point out, "crises-as-process approach accounts for the incubation of crises, which is facilitated by erroneous assumptions, complex information and stimuli, norms of inattentiveness to signals, and a reluctance to imagine worst case scenarios" (p.204). Williams et al. (2017) observe that crisis spurs behaviours that can further impact the trajectory of a crisis, but it is Wu et al. (2021) that introduces the idea of emotionality, and that crisis for a lot of leaders is an embodied experience.

Indeed, the crisis management literature has often understood crisis as an event that is located and controlled within the boundaries of an organisation, but the process approach begins to ask questions about the complexity, what it means and how it impacts those involved over time. Moreover, can a crisis ever be fully contained and isolated as a single event with a start

and end date, or does it have a more lasting impact on individuals and organisations? As Riggio and Newstead (2023, p.202) observe, “traditional crisis management research focused on planning, prevention, and containment of crises, but the increasing frequency and complexity of crises means “no organization, even with the healthiest of budgets, could plan for all possible contingencies” (Pearson & Mitroff 1993, p. 49).” Indeed this increased frequency and complexity of crisis only show us the interconnected and relational nature of organisational systems, from transnational firms and global supply chains to global markets and ultra-connected consumers. “Organizations and nations no longer exist in isolation and there is very little insulation from crises “ argue Riggio and Newstead 2023, p.202).

It is in this context of complexity and relationality that Morin and Kern (1999) introduce the idea of polycrisis. They believe that no crisis is a singular, isolated event that happens to us, but rather we are part of a “complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem” (p. 74). While crisis management scholars have not yet adopted Morin and Kern’s framing, the process view, concludes Wu et al. (2021) “helps scholars address more novel questions concerning the dynamic leadership processes”, the role of a leader and maybe who becomes a leader in crisis? (p.17).

Leadership-in-crisis

Organisational management and leadership theories, although connected, have been addressed as distinct and separate streams in literature. A similar is true in crisis management and crisis leadership, the latter having had little development over the years (Wu et al., 2021; Riggio and Newstead, 2023). However, the post-pandemic realisation of the importance of crisis leadership has led to the release of special issues in both *Leadership* (2020) and the *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* (2022).

Leaders appear to be at the centre of crisis with the responsibility to avert/resolve it and often bear the consequences when they fail to do so. One of the recent examples is Paula Vennelles who was at the centre of the UK Post Office Horizon scandal. As a result of her role and failures as a leader she not only ceased her role as a CEO of Post Office Ltd but also was

stripped of her CBE honour and resigned from her clerical duties as an Anglican church priest. As crises become increasingly complex and public, so is the increased visibility and scrutiny of leaders.

“Given the perceived significance and urgency of crises” observe Wu et al. 2021, “leaders are often confronted with significant time pressure, risks, and uncertainty in their decision-making.” (p.3). Indeed, to make the right decisions in these critical moments leaders need to fully understand and make sense of the situation at hand.

Weick (1988) first introduces the idea of sensemaking in crisis, by recognising the role of subjectivity and individual responses of those involved in managing crisis. As Riggio and Newstead (2023) observe “Crises have objective signals and effects, but they require subjective sensemaking and sensegiving.” (p.205). The importance therefore lies not only in making sense for oneself but in giving sense to the situation, thus communicating it accurately and compellingly with others. Indeed, Wu et al. (2021) warn that failing to do so can further deepen the crisis.

In the case of the Post Office Horizon scandal, what started as a technical issue with faulty software escalated into a national crisis that uncovered the structural and systemic leadership failings at different stages of the process. What was consistent, however, was the ill-conceived and inaccurate sensemaking and sensegiving of the situation which shaped the direction of the crisis, and eventually spanned out of control causing irreparable damage.

However, sensemaking and sensegiving are just one type of competence needed for leadership in times of crisis, argue Riggio and Newstead (2023). Indeed, they suggest five essential leadership competencies as demonstrated in the diagram below (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Crisis Leadership Key Competences by Riggio and Newstead (2023, p.211)

While crisis management theories (e.g. Bundy et al. 2017) introduce three stages of crisis (pre, during and post) focusing largely on pre-crisis planning and prevention Riggio and Newstead (2023) argue that it is impossible to prepare for the whole process. Instead, they propose five competencies necessary for leaders to address the whole lifecycle. These are: sensemaking, decision-making, coordinating teamwork, facilitating learning and communicating.

While this event-based framework can be useful for leaders in navigating the unexpected, it can also give a false impression of the problem-solution nature of the crisis, that crisis management theories centre around. As the Covid Pandemic or more recently the Post Office

Horizon scandal demonstrate the crisis space is far more dynamic and more complex to navigate. Indeed, investigations into the handling of the Horizon scandal show that the leadership rigorously engaged in all five competencies proposed by Riggio and Newstead (2023). They made sense of the situation (be it, incorrectly or hastily) and decided the fault lay with the individual postmasters. They further decided to pursue coordinated investigations across post offices in question and engage with external consultants. The independent and internal reports were issued, facilitating further learning and the outcomes were communicated both internally and externally (UK government). The fact remains that each of those steps was encased in deeper cultural (fear and intimidation across leadership), social (racial/gender profiling of postmasters) and systemic (deny, delay, depose) contexts that were further politically charged and extended beyond the Post Office organisational boundaries. This example demonstrates just some of the limitations of Riggio and Newstead (2023) Crisis Leadership Key Competencies approach and shows that it could even lead to a deepening of crisis if larger contexts (i.e. social, political, cultural, systemic) are ignored.

The ‘dark side’ of organisation

The Post Office scandal example demonstrates the complexity and multilayered nature of a crisis that spills outside of the organisational boundaries and impacts wider contexts and people. However, it also reveals the hidden, shadowlands in the organisational fabric- its dark side. Indeed, it was the chilling reality of an abuse of power and politics cloaked in mystery, hidden from plain sight, that inspired the ITV series “Mr Bates vs the Post Office. The program reveals the intricate web of lies, deceit, and injustice spun by those in power.

Vaughan (1999, p.298) theorises “the dark side” of an organisation, which is concerned with the underbelly of the organisational process and power that leads to “routine nonconformity, mistakes, misconduct and disasters. She argues that these are not some rare and abnormal events, “but systematic products of complex structures and processes.” (ibid.) Indeed, she frames organisations through the lens of complexity and relationality, where she argues that nothing is accidental. Vaughan (1999) dives deep into the role of power and politics by identifying the impact of “micropolitics of knowledge” (what is communicated and what is hidden) and “power as process” (i.e. operationalising intimidation and bullying) in crisis. These appear to be important subjects that the majority of crisis management literature omits.

Yet the Post Office example is so potent with power and politics, showing the dynamics between the powerful and powerless and the disastrous consequences of this dark relationship (i.e. the imprisonment of the innocent postmasters). Moreover, Vaughan also recognises the role of technologies entangled with power and politics that further “mystify” processes and realities (1999, p.277-295).

With the current legal system that presumes “that the computer is always right” the danger of weaponizing technology and data in political and power plays can have devastating consequences. This has been recently demonstrated in the investigation of the faulty software in the Post Office Scandal by the British Computer Society, which calls for “an end to the legal presumption that computer systems data are always correct, with no burden on the prosecution to prove it” (BCS, 2021).

As the organisational dark side becomes increasingly digitised and thus less visible, it is paramount for novel and abductive forms of academic enquiry to bring the dark side into the light. Indeed as Linstead et al. (2014, p.175) observe, it is impossible to fully comprehend the dark side of global business “without an appropriate theorization, not only of causality, but also of the dynamic relationality of established and emerging forms of political economy that form its context, substance and history.” Vaughan (1999) and Linstead et al. (2014) speak to the contextual and multi-directional (both in time and space) complexity within often ambiguous and unpredictable systems that transcend organisational boundaries into social, technological and political spheres. These are not separate entities but interacting (consciously and unconsciously) players that not only impact but shape one another.

By peeling off the superficial layer of causality and solutions, as conceptualised by the majority of crisis literature, Vaughan (1999) and Linstead et al. (2014) open the door to the much darker chapter of organisational realities. Whether we talk about the crisis, misconduct, mistakes or disasters, these can be characterised by entering a state of uncertainty and ambiguity. This uncertainty and ambiguity, as explored in the next section, can be felt on the individual and collective level, leading to the emergence of complex scenarios in uncharted territories.

The unknown unknowns

Ansell and Boin (2019, p.1081) argue that “uncertainty is inherent to crisis” and that many leaders lack “the cognitive or organizational means to tame” it (p.1080). As Knight Frank (1921) observed: “With uncertainty present, doing things, the actual execution of the activity, becomes in a real sense a secondary part of life; the primary problem or function is deciding what to do and how to do it.” Indeed, uncertainty disrupts what is known and is taken for granted and challenges leaders to ask deeper questions about the status quo.

While Ansell and Boin (2019) suggest leaders should ‘tame’ the uncertainty, Teece et al. (2016) argue that uncertainty is a key part of the innovation process and that “The innovation economy...is saturated in unquantifiable uncertainty.” (Teece et al. 2016, p15). Indeed, leaders face increased complexity and an insatiable demand for innovation, which inevitably brings uncertainty into the centre of organisational management (ibid.). Ansell and Boin (2019) observe that the role of leaders is to regulate uncertainty. Conversely, Teece et al. (2016) see it as a key feature of a business environment. They point out that “uncertainty is about unknown unknowns” and suggest that “when inflexion points emerge, uncertainty is enhanced, and change is necessary for firms to remain competitive. “(2016, p.13-14).

However, they argue that “the degree of uncertainty has increased dramatically as the global economy has become more advanced and more integrated, allowing the transmission of shocks and the opening of opportunities to businesses anywhere and everywhere. “(Teece et al. 2016, p.15). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the problem for leaders is not necessarily with the uncertainty per se, but with the acceleration and volume of uncertain events that destabilise and shock the organisational system.

Ansell and Boin (2019) observe that when faced with mounting urgency and lack of clarity, the temptation often is to fall back on old, proven tricks and practices based on “rational planning and political negotiation”, which rarely seem effective (p.1083). Instead, they believe that a deep crisis requires a very different approach that calls for pragmatism. The rational models of decision making, observe Ansell and Boin (2019) claim that uncertainty is remedied by data, and that the more information leaders have, the more clarity and certainty they obtain. While gathering information is important, pragmatists argue that what matters is how information is contextualised and interpreted- the act of sensemaking and sensegiving.

Montefusco and Angeli (2024) invite leaders to view sensemaking and sensegiving not merely as competences one has (as suggested by Riggio and Newstead 2023), but through the lens of complexity. They argue that leaders should practice complex reasoning abductively and “linger in liminal spaces” (ibid. p.21).

Although this might seem counterintuitive to many, the times of ambiguity and uncertainty require pause and an intelligent restraint to make sense of emergent complexity in crisis.

Montefusco and Angeli (2024) offer a way of navigating “the unknown unknowns” space by proposing “six threshold building blocks” that are fundamental in “teaching and learning of complex reasoning in complex adaptive systems (CAS) (Clarke 1999). These are: multiple interacting agents (interdependencies between multiple agents which can be unpredictable and emergent), nonlinear behaviour (multidimensional and multidirectional), feedback loops (constant flux and causality), autopoiesis (self- emergence of behaviours and patterns), path dependency (impacted by the initial conditions), system delays (taking time to process) (ibid. p.8). Through the lens of CAS, uncertainty and ambiguity are not something to avoid or regulate (Griffin and Grote 2020) but a portal through which one can access (with openness and humility) new perspectives and enlightenment.

As Joseph Cambell (1999) famously remarks in *The Hero’s Journey* “The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek”. Furthermore, the literature suggests that the dark side of organisation does not reside in the dark cave but at its threshold, and one can only enter into the light by lingering in a liminal space of uncertainty and ambiguity where the learning and transformation unfold.

This perspective challenges not only crisis management but the mainstream leadership theory and practice. Indeed, in January 2025 Reuters reported a record number of global CEOs leaving their posts “pushed by intense scrutiny from investors and pressure to keep up with change” (Binnie, 2025). Based on a report from a leadership advisory firm Russell Reynolds Associates, “202 CEOs left their posts in 2024, surpassing the six-year average of 186 and a 13% increase over the previous year” (Binnie, 2025). Is the burden of a lone hero navigating complexities, uncertainties and acceleration of change too much to bear for a modern leader? Or does modern leadership need to reform?

The trap of the hero

Wu et al. (2021) are also concerned with advancing the learning and development of more robust and adequate practice in crisis leadership (p.1). Their study uses bibliometric techniques to synthesise theoretical insights from the leadership and crisis management field spanning many decades. Their analysis identifies the main streams dominating crisis leadership literature (Figure 3).

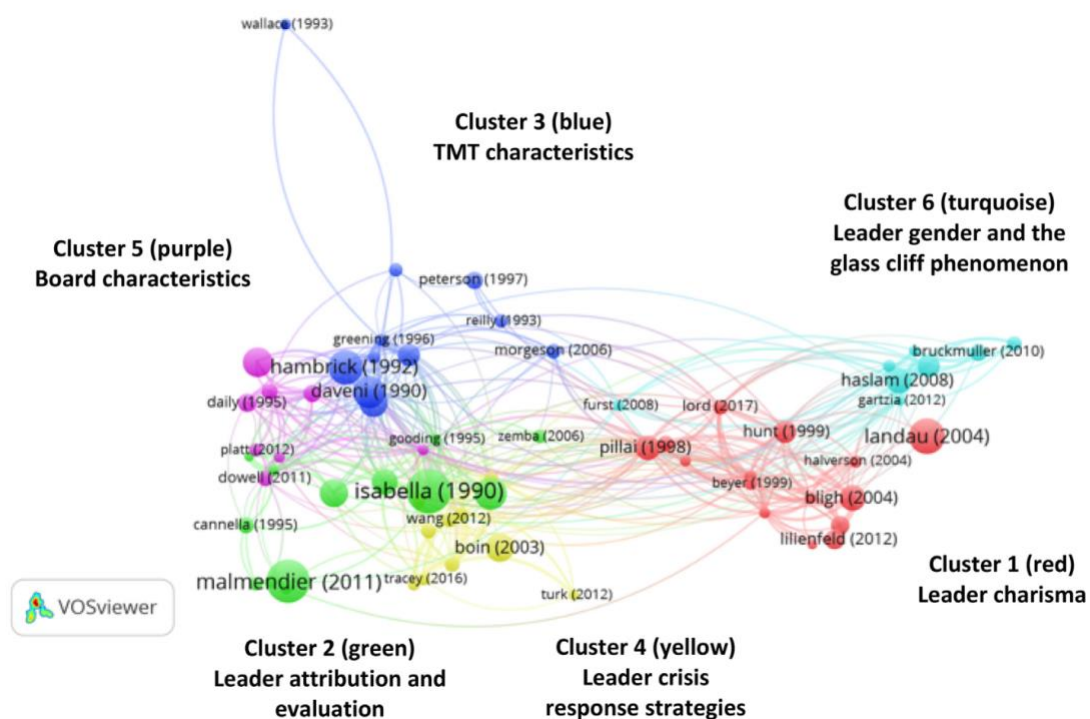


Figure 3 Bibliometric analysis of primary articles clusters on crisis leadership by Wu et al. (2021, p.8)

While the post-pandemic literature is not shown in their analysis (due to the timing of the research), at first glance, it is apparent how little development there has been in crisis leadership in the last two decades.

Wu et al. (2021) have identified six, thematic clusters, with charismatic and transformational leadership theory being the largest. Indeed, their findings suggest that the crisis leadership literature is centred around the ‘perfect’ crisis leadership characteristics and charisma.

Wu et al.’s (2021) analysis recognises “that a certain level of charismatic leadership is needed during a crisis to produce desired perceptions of leader effectiveness among followers.” (p.11). However, it also argues that the leadership literature has moved on from the ‘hero’-style leadership rhetoric as it has proved to be no longer effective (Raelin, 2011).

Interestingly, Riggio et al. also identify charismatic leadership theory as a leading crisis theory in their 2023 research, which might not necessarily indicate the theory’s efficacy but rather the little development in the field.

They do, however, point to more recent developments in the complexity leadership theory and the work of Uhl-Bien. Uhl-Bien (2017) shifts the crisis narrative from event-based to emergent, process-based rhetoric that argues for a polycontextual and interconnected framing of crisis. Uhl-Bien (2017) singles out not charisma but adaptability and collaboration as the main leadership approaches needed in a crisis. The complexity leadership theory dissolves the leadership hierarchy and brings followers and other stakeholders into the centre of the conversation.

As Riggi et al. (2023) reflect, “complexity leadership theory illustrates that in complex crises, leaders rely on the adaptive, emergent coordination of many stakeholders, meaning the role of a leader is less about providing direction and more about providing adaptive space for stakeholders to generate novel responses collectively.” (p.210).

Inspired by the work of Bourdieu and Foucault, Linstead et al. (2014) also question the idea of singularity of leadership as a fixed form and argue against the idea of perfecting the leader to improve the leadership results. Instead, they propose “to create a better appreciation of the emotional and political context of leadership in action’ stretching from the individual denial of violence to the organizational ‘structure of innocence’ that hides and condones such violence. “(Linstead et al. 2014, p.179). This approach also asks the question of where the

power and politics truly reside in times of crisis. Is it in the hands of the leaders or in roles and structures that they merely reflect?

In his book “Adults in the Room”, the Greek economist Yanis Varoufakis (2018) offers an insight into this question as he recalls his interactions with the German financial minister Wolfgang Schauble, during the Greek financial crisis. In an attempt to renegotiate a better future for (then) bankrupt Greece (that would later impact the economic stability of the rest of the EU), Varoufakis engaged in conversations with the leading figure of European finance Wolfgang Schauble. Varoufakis (2018) describes Schauble as “the embodiment of the political project of buttressing a monetary union in which he himself did not believe”. This real-life paradox of the most powerful (at the time) leader in the EU being powerless and paralysed by the role he held exposes limitations to the narrow leadership framing that often focuses on the person behind the title, how they act, their competencies, charisma or even gender (Learmonth and Morrell 2021).

However, as Linstead et al. (2014), Uhl-Bien et al. (2011) and others observe, there appears to be a gap between who leaders are (as constructed by the literature, the power structures and as perceived by the followers) and what leaders do, or can do (bounded by the complexity of relationality). Indeed, Learmonth and Morrell (2021) critique the language and rhetoric of leadership describing it as “fuzzy, flexible and borderless” (Learmonth 2022, p.1349).

As leaders enter crises, this gap gets more “fuzzy”, expansive and increasingly complex. It is filled with darkness and light, power and politics, uncertainty and ambiguity, spanning multiple theories, disciplines and paradigms. The next section will explore some of the theories that begin to address this gap more openly and innovatively.

Towards the Leadership Symphony

The 2018 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends report reveals a rise in social orientation shaping modern organisations (Abbatiello et al. 2018, p.2). This ‘new’ trend, as observed by Abbatiello et al. (2018), requires senior leaders to engage in an “unprecedented level of cross-

functional vision, connectivity, and collaboration” (p.7). Abbatiello et al. (2018) call for the “symphonic C-suite,” where the executives relinquish their ‘solo parts’ and instead “play together as a team, while also leading their own functional teams, all in harmony.” (p.7)

While conceptualising leadership through the lens of artistic expression is not new (Grint, 2000; Taylor, 2012; Ropo et al., 2013), it can offer a helpful contribution to understanding the relationship between multiple contexts, actors, and the complexities of leading in polycrisis.

While Grint (2000) argues that leadership might be better understood as an art form through the lens of philosophical arts, fine arts, martial arts and performing arts, Ropo et al. (2013), use textual, pictorial and musical illustrations to investigate the leadership space. Both critique the traditional, scientific and analytical approach towards leadership theory by taking more interpretive and subjective stance.

Ropo et al. is concerned with the question of “How do places and spaces construct and perform leadership?” and, along with Taylor (2012) Sinclair (2007), and others, argue that “leadership is truly an embodied phenomenon.” (2013, p.390-391). The space in which leadership is performed is indeed subjectively experienced. This perspective raises further questions of what that experience looks like in a context full of uncertainty and ambiguity when leading through multiple crises.

Grint (2022) begins to address some of this uncertainty through the lens of Ritter and Webber’s (1973) framing of “wicked problems”. He frames wicked problems as problems we don’t know how to fix. In such context, Grint (2022) argues, the experience of the leadership space is multilayered, and requires not one, but a multitude of leadership styles. By giving the example of the Covid-19 pandemic, Grint challenges Abbitello’s (2018) “symphony C-suite” analogy by suggesting that in unprecedented times we need “commanders (...) managers (...) and leaders” (2022, p.1528). He further argues that the overlapping nature of wicked problems requires overlapping leadership styles, he further critiques the pursuit of collaborative forms of leadership as insufficient.

While Grint (2022) begins to recognise the complexity in the context of crises, his conceptualisation of the “overlapping” leadership styles lacks depth and detail, reverting

towards the traditional (and critiqued by the literature) understanding of leadership (p.1529). The questions of how these overlapping impacts the leadership, and what happens to the individuals and the collective in such a space are left unanswered.

Conversely, Stacey (2001; Stacey et al. 2001) argues that the unpredictable and unstable contexts lead to unpredictable responses from individuals and collective. His theory of Complex Responsive Processes (CRP) reframes organizations as patterns of local communication in which sensations, emotions, thoughts, memories, and relationships continuously interact to produce meaning. Thus, reality, both individual and collective, is understood as being dynamically formed in the “living present,” where continuity and novelty co-emerge through self-organizing processes. By challenging traditional systems thinking, and notions of managerial control (as proposed by Grint and others), Stacey argues that genuine innovation depends on embracing uncertainty and fostering rich interaction rather than relying on rigid plans or abstract models. Aligning with Ropo et al.’s (2013) departure from the leader-centric understanding of leadership, Stacey points towards the complexity of the collective and dynamic body of interactions, information creation, exchange and sensemaking thus pointing towards leadership as a collective and an embodied phenomenon.

The idea of ‘collective leadership’ has been featured in literature under a range of different names and different ideas capturing its essence (Parker, 1984; Raelin, 2018; Denis, Lamothe & Langley, 2001). Alexy (2020) offers an overview of the different models of collective leadership in her Metatheoretic Framework (Figure 4).

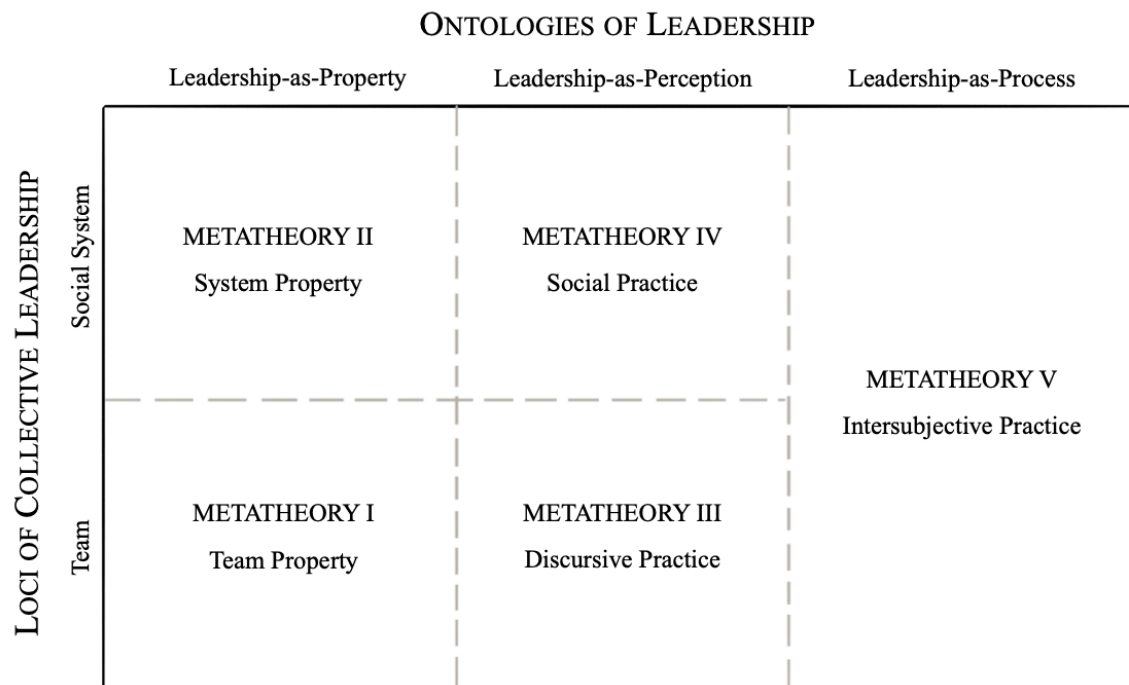


Figure 4 Metatheoretic Framework for Collective Leadership Studies by Alexy 2020 (p.35)

Alexy (2020) identifies five collective leadership metatheories which offer ontological, epistemological and methodological clarity to the deeper understanding of Collective Leadership.

According to Alexy's (2020) first Metatheory, the collective leadership occurs within the team when one or many members take a leading role dependent upon the task and context. This category is best represented by leadership that can be shared, distributed or leaderful depending on the level of empowerment expressed by individuals (Raelin 2023; Raelin 2016).

The second Metatheory sees leadership through a systems perspective. This view of collective leadership is seen as a dynamic system that adapts to internal and external pressures and impacts. This category is best represented by adaptive, entrepreneurial, or administrative leadership models relevant in dynamic and changing organisational contexts (Raelin 2023, Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007).

The third Metatheory deals with the conversational nature of leadership. It is formed in situ through discursive interactions between group members. It is focused more on the sensemaking and sensegiving aspects of leadership (Alexy 2020, page 17). This category is best represented by discursive and relational leadership models (Raelin 2023, Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012)

The fourth Metatheory is best represented by Critical Leadership studies that focus on power asymmetries within what Alexy calls the “Big D” discourses (ibid.) The “Big D” discourses are systemic and cultural norms that often remain unconscious and unquestioned (Learmonth 2022; Collinson 2017; Knights 2021). Some go as far as questioning the form and theory and the ‘institution’ of leadership, seeing it as “empty” and “hegemonic” and in need of reconceptualisation (Learmonth 2022, p.1349; Learmonth and Morrell 2021).

The final Metatheory deals with Collective Leadership as an “intersubjective practice through which people-in relation-to-each-other transform their flow of practice towards new meanings and directions” (Alexy 2020, page 24). This category is best represented by the Leadership-As-Practice model and is rooted in practice theory (Crevani, 2018, Raelin 2016, 2023). This model centres around the relation to, and with, the self, context and ‘other’. What emerges in the poesies of everyday moments in organisational consciousness that otherwise goes unnoticed or might be disregarded by the traditional leadership theories (Nicolini, 2012, p.2).

Alexy’s (2020) reconstruction of Collective Leadership studies presents leadership as more than a pre-ordained function, characterised by a certain charisma of an isolated entity, but rather a dynamic interplay of social discourses that emerge through an interaction with the collective. It speaks to the complex nature of leadership as something emergent and contextualised rather than fixed in time and organisational space. One of the theories in particular stands out as an interesting, and promising prospect in reconceptualising crisis leadership through the collective lens paradigm. Due to its concern with the process and practice of simply not just ‘being’ but ‘doing’ leadership, Leadership-As-Practice (L-A-P) will be explored in the following section.

Leadership-As-Practice

L-A-P focuses on the individual and collective practice inspired and shaped by interactions with others, and in different contexts (Raelin 2016; 2023). It is representing an alternative to the mainstream personality and charisma approach, which is heavily featured in the crisis management and crisis leadership literature (Riggio and Newstead 2023; Wu et al. 2021). This departure from the individualistic paradigm of leadership to a collective emergence is also reflected in the language and described as “leaderful practice” and a “leadership movement” (Raelin 2011, p.195).

As Raelin (2011) observes, L-A-P “focuses on the everyday practice of leadership including its moral, emotional, and relational aspects, rather than its rational, objective, and technical ones” (ibid.; Carroll et al., 2008). Since the emotionality aspects of dealing with a crisis have been largely omitted in the literature (as observed by Wu et al. 2021), L-A-P offers an interesting lens through which deeper, and more intimate human observations of leadership in crisis can be made. Indeed, Crevani (2018) argues that leadership is a multidimensional phenomenon that occurs in time and space. This reality, observes Crevani, is characterised by multiplicity and relationality, in which negotiations and contestations are inevitably part of such processes of weaving and re-weaving.” (2018, p.90)”

As already explored, the collective rather than the siloed approach might be needed to tackle some of the complexities of crisis management. This ‘new’ approach to leadership that challenges the individualistic, hero-like trait-based theories adds to the “story of leadership” by shifting discourse from self to self in contexts with others engaged in a ‘dance’ that transforms the situations and those involved (Raelin 2023, p.2). It can emerge during social and organisational changes when the business-as-usual practice is disrupted thus creating a space for change in a situated and embodied way (Raelin 2023).

Raelin observes that “leadership occurs in practice as people engage with and are moulded by others and by their material arrangements.” (2023, p.2; Crevani, 2018). This creates an opportunity for capturing the impact of digital technologies on leaders through the lens of Virillio, Stiegler and Urry. As L-A-P is particularly concerned with the process of change and how it impacts the practice’s direction of flow, the conversations around acceleration and temporality seem particularly pertinent. How the participants interact with that flow and

respond to “emergent entanglements that tend to extend or transform meaning over time. “ (2016; p.3; Crevani, 2018).

Nicolini (2012), whose work is largely concerned with conceptualisation and understanding of practice, argues that practice is not a mere category of activity but the ontological ground of social life. Applied to leadership, this means understanding leadership as situated, material, relational, embodied, recursive activity, a set of practices that leaders do, rather than traits they have. Through Nicolini’s practice lens, then, leadership is enacted and not possessed and exists in what people do collectively not in isolated individuals. It can be seen in patterns, and it involves recurrent interactions with material and social arrangements. It’s contextual and culturally embedded in organisational practices through ongoing interactions and negotiated meanings.

Furthermore, from Nicolini’s perspective, power is not something leaders possess but rather simultaneously reproduce and reshape in a dynamic and active way. While Nicolini’s conceptualisation of practice within L-A-P provides a valuable analytical lens, it (like L-A-P itself) remains largely grounded in the ‘normal’ conditions of Western, organisational life.

However, Sliwa and Case (2024) critique the fixed set of ideal values and expectations underpinning the current conceptualisation of L-A-P. As Sliwa and Case observe, L-A-P places its value on “conversation, consensus, and negotiation of shared understandings and meanings” without questioning contexts where these might not be the case (ibid. p.163). They further argue that “whilst acknowledging the “democratic roots” (Woods, 2016) of L-A-P, they draw attention to the potential of the L-A-P lens for “recognizing and studying what is” (Woods, 2016: 73), regardless of the context and its prevalent values.” (Sliwa and Case, 2024, p.165).

As explored in the earlier section, Vaughan and Linstead et al. theorise, the “dark side” of an organisation and leadership that uncovers the underbelly of the organisational process of politics and power that lead to “routine nonconformity, mistakes, misconduct and disasters.

What if the “practice” in “leadership practice” is not cantered around “noble means” and “noble ends”? (ibid., p 165; Vaughan 1999; Linstead et al. 2014). What if the collective leadership space is already corrupt, thus shaping the leadership practice accordingly?

Sliwa and Case (2024) challenge L-A-P by proposing it should expand its discussion to non-democratic and manipulative contexts of the leadership practice. As indicated by Vaughan (1999) Linstead et al.(2014) and others, the times of crises can reveal new (or previously hidden) layers and dynamics in leadership practice which in turn can offer new contexts for exploring the unexplored parts of L-A-P as it emerges in situ.

While Leadership practice might be emergent, it is not random, as its direction can be consciously reoriented through the exercise of power within the flow of practice (Sliwa and Case, 2024, Collinson, 2018). As participants possess agency and reflexive awareness of their embeddedness in leadership practice, they too can intentionally influence and manipulate leadership processes and outcomes. Power, therefore, appears to be an inherent feature of leadership, yet it has been insufficiently theorised within L-A-P approaches, which have tended to privilege practice over structure and power relations, as argued by Collinson (2018).

Indeed, the participants in leadership practice might not have equal capacity to understand, influence, or redirect the flow of practice; rather, power is unevenly and contextually distributed, and some actors may purposefully limit others' influence (Sliwa and Case, 2024; Vaughan 1999; Linstead et al. 2014). Although leadership practice involves hybrid, relational agency between human and non-human actors, this agency might be unequal, as actors differ significantly in self-consciousness and agentic power (Raelin 2023; Crevani 2018; Collinson, 2018). Importantly, these inequalities also exist among human participants and are shaped by factors such as organisational hierarchy, gender, race, ability, and social location (as explored in the next section). Therefore, a more robust understanding of leadership requires unpacking the flow of practice to explicitly account for how power, agency, and inequality shape the space and the direction of leadership.

And so once again the mystery calls out with its original questions: How does this emergent way of 'being' and 'doing' leadership meet the "what is" of the wild complexity of our times? How are the emerging leadership theories (L-A-P) challenged by the polycrisis and by operating within multiple contexts at different rates of speed and acceleration? How effective are they? How do leaders respond and adapt in this new 'time and space'? What else is

emerging in the leadership ‘time and space’? What new connections are made? What practice can be taken forward in responding effectively to organisational polycrisis?

In conclusion, the earlier critique of an overly-engineered crisis management perspective or the hero-centric, individualistic view of a leader invites an alternative approach to crisis leadership. While L-A-P offers an alternative theoretical framing that could challenge the stale crisis leadership position, it is yet to be explored and tested in shifting and unstable contexts. However, to begin to understand the impact of leadership practice in crisis, it is also important to explore the impact the crisis has on leaders and actors, thus returning once again to Wu’s analysis for clues.

Crisis and gender

Another interesting observation from Wu’s analysis is Cluster 6, which features more ‘recent’ crisis leadership literature. The gender perspective in crisis leadership is an interesting one as it focuses on the effects of crisis on (female) leaders. This gender perspective explores wider, societal constructs that surface and are expressed through a phenomenon called the Glass Cliff. The Glass Cliff was first theorised by Ryan and Haslam (2005) in their empirical study of FTSE 100 companies. They identified a pattern of women being put in leadership positions, particularly during crises without giving adequate resources or support. Inevitably, they fail and are pushed off the ‘glass cliff’ and replaced by male leaders who not only are granted extra resources but are much more favourably assessed (Bruckmuller & Branscombe, 2010; Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007).

As Wu et al.’s (2021) analysis shows, crisis situations often demand more “non-typical leader attributes” such as empathy, which are considered more feminine traits (p.13). While empathy and connection have been shown as important in crisis management, the focus on individuals’ traits based on gender stereotypes can be seen as one-dimensional and reductionist. To further strengthen the argument against the oversimplification of gender and trait-based theories, two recent examples of crisis leadership come to mind. One, of the Post Office CEO Paula Venells who was described as “arrogant”, “incompetent” and “dishonest” in her quest for self-preservation at all costs during the Post Office scandal (Sweeney 2024). The other, of Jacinda Ardern, whose response to the mosque shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand made her known as “a leader with love on full display” (Nagesh 2019). Two female

leaders displayed two very different responses to dealing with crises, which simply could not be attributed only to their gender.

While the Glass Cliff phenomenon is well observed and documented in identifying how female leaders are appointed during the crisis and harshly scrutinised in the process, the larger story here seems more complex, extending beyond an individual leader, a single gender or an organisation. What if this story is not just more complex than our idea of crisis and even older than the definitions of crisis as demonstrated in the leadership and management literature? What if the clues have been written not in the crisis literature but in our bodies all along?

Tend and befriend

Crisis tends to be emotionally charged and an embodied experience that often spills outside of the organisational boundaries and into the lives, and homes of those involved (James & Wooten 2005, James et al. 2011; Wu et al. 2021; Riggio 2023).

Indeed, Wu et al. (2021) identify leaders' emotional management as a gap in crisis leadership and management literature. "This overlooked area is surprising," observe Wu et al. (2021) "because crises have a heavy emotional toll on both leaders and other organizational stakeholders, and thus, it is important for leaders to gain knowledge regarding how they may effectively and strategically manage negative emotions (i.e. anger, anxiety, fear) that arise during crises." (p.16). It is undeniable that times of crisis are characterised by an increased amount of concentrated stress that leaders and stakeholders experience. Moreover, "public attention means that leaders' actions in crises are closely watched and scrutinised and that the real and perceived effects of a crisis can be widely felt", argue Riggio and Newstead (2023, p.203).

Thus, important clues might be found in the psychology and evolutionary biology literature, especially the work of Professor Shelly Taylor, who for over three decades sought to understand human responses in times of crisis and threat.

It is important to note that the original studies of human survival and response to threat and crisis were largely based on animal research (Taylor et al. 2000). These tendencies of ‘borrowing’ and adopting as human behaviour resulted in theorising fight or flight (or freeze) responses to the threat which are characterised by fear, aggression, or withdrawal from the situation (physical or metaphorical). The biological response of fight or flight depends on two interacting stress systems SAM (the sympathetic adrenomedullary system) and HPA (the hypothalamic pituitary adrenocortical system). While these interactions offer a protective, short-term response that generates energy, fear, anger and anxiety (needed to fight or run) it comes at a long-term cost (McEwen 1998).

The theory of allostatic load first conceptualised by McEwen (1998) states that repeated and prolonged engagement of stress systems can erode the resilience of biological stress regulatory systems, resulting in an increased likelihood of chronic disorders such as depression, coronary heart disease, hypertension, Type II diabetes, and some cancers. McEwen’s theory reveals the long-term impact of stress on the biological and cognitive functions of individuals.

However, Taylor’s research dives deeper into responses to threats and their prolonged exposure (i.e. in crisis) through engaging in contextualised, human studies that for the first time included females (Taylor et al. 2000; Taylor 2004; 2006; 2009). It is important to note that until 2000 females were considered too inconsistent and unpredictable (due to variable, hormonal ecosystem) and thus not included in most cognitive and neuroscientific studies (Mosconi 2020).

While in certain contexts fight or flight response is applicable, the theory focuses on the male individuals and ignores the social nature of human beings, point Taylor et al. (2000). Indeed, if fight or flight was the only response to stress it would threaten the survival of our species as it would require leaving vulnerable children or elderly behind whilst protecting oneself from the imminent risk by fighting, fleeing or freezing in fear. Arguably, largely oversimplified and at times misinterpreted evolutionary studies based on animals have contextualised human interactions in terms of survival of the fittest. For example, Darwin’s observation of the natural world that not only survives but evolves through collaboration and ‘fitting-in’ with the ‘other’ was later misinterpreted and misquoted by Herbert Spencer to

form the ‘survival of the fittest’ that champions individualism, supremacy and competitiveness.

But as Taylor (2009) argues, the opposite ensures the survival and evolutionary development of our species. “There are many reasons to believe” observes Taylor, “that humans have used social relationships not only as a basic accommodation to the exigencies of life but also as a primary resource for dealing with stressful circumstances.” (ibid. p.4). The theorisation of this notion has been developed through the “tend and befriend” view (Taylor, 2002; Taylor et al., 2000). The “tend and befriend” theory does not negate the fight or flight response but rather adds another dimension to human experience in crisis situations. Taylor et al. (2000) observe that due to the sex differences in hormonal profile men tend to respond with “fight or flight” to stress while women lean towards the “tend and befriend” reaction.

While a sex difference plays some part so does social conditioning in making it more acceptable for women to seek help and support from others in times of crisis (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). While the more social responses to stress appear to be more characteristic of women than men, it is important to stress that Taylor’s research does not imply sex-based exclusivity as “men’s social responses to stress are (also) well documented.” (Taylor 2006,). Indeed, Taylor’s research argues for recognising of our social relationships rather than social constructs in addressing some of the biggest challenges we face today. Our natural need for contact and connection with others ensures not only safety from threat but also an effective mechanism for critical problem-framing and problem-solving. Social responses create and strengthen social networks and the experience of social support (Taylor et al. 2000). Moreover, social contacts and social support through ‘tending and befriending’ are psychologically beneficial as they significantly reduce depression and anxiety during times of stress (Taylor et al. 2000; Taylor 2006; Taylor 2009).

Moreover, Taylor’s theory not only speaks to social contact but also to social context. Taylor has discovered that fight or flight stress responses are heightened in environments that are hostile and lack psychological safety Taylor et al. 2000; Taylor 2006; Taylor 2009).

Conversely, supportive and comforting environments de-escalate biological responses to stress (ibid.). Furthermore, Taylor observes that tending and befriending also promote human growth. “Through affiliation with others in times of stress and the ability to draw on mental representations of relationships, people acquire the resources to explore and grow both

emotionally and intellectually in environments that ensure social connection.” (Taylor 2006, p.28). Indeed, it would appear that ‘tending and befriending’ in crisis can promote a growth mindset and innovative problem-framing and problem-solving.

Considering already identified gaps regarding embodiment and human emotionality, Taylor’s discovery has significant implications for advancing these studies. Indeed, it offers a lens for exploring the impact the historic, trait-based, charismatic, crisis leadership theories have on potentially isolating leaders from connecting with others and seeking help and counsel.

Conversely, by departing from these theories and moving towards more relational approaches to threats and challenges might form a path for a more expansive theoretical basis for crisis leadership in the future. Indeed, by further connecting with emerging theories such as L-A-P, which lean towards more collective experiences of leadership, could serve as a basis for further development of crisis leadership through tending-and-befriending-as-practice.

Conclusions

Despite renewed scholarly attention, crisis leadership research remains constrained by ontological and epistemological assumptions that limit its capacity to engage with the complexity, temporality, and power dynamics of contemporary crises (Bundy et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2021; Riggio & Newstead, 2023). Calls for more nuanced theorising of leadership across crisis stages and contexts have been repeatedly articulated (Wu et al., 2021). And yet much of the literature continues to reproduce linear, episodic, and instrumental logics that treat crisis as an exceptional interruption and leadership as a stabilising intervention. This review argues that such assumptions are increasingly untenable in the context of complex, multiple and connected crises.

Although crises have been framed as potential catalysts for learning and transformation (James et al., 2011), prevailing models remain anchored in simplified cause-and-effect rationalities that obscure emergence, complexities, and relational entanglement.

Reconceptualising crisis as polycrisis (Morin and Kern 1999) disrupts the foundational premise that crises are discrete, temporally bounded events. Instead, through the lens of polycrisis, it appears as a condition of ongoing instability, characterised by recursive

interactions across organisational, technological, political, and affective domains (Montefusco & Angeli, 2024; Grint, 2020; Uhl-Bien et al., 2011; Morin 1992, Morin and Kern, 1999). This reconceptualisation demands a corresponding rethinking of leadership, not as episodic decision-making under pressure, but as a continuous, contested, embodied and situated practice.

Furthermore, crisis leadership research has systematically marginalised power, politics, and organisational “dark side” (Vaughan 1999). The work of Vaughan (1999) and Linstead et al. (2014) demonstrates that crises often emerge not from breakdowns in leadership but from its routine enactment within systems that normalise deviance, nonconformity, and misconduct. From this perspective, leadership does not merely respond to crisis; it may actively constitute the conditions of possibility for crisis. The persistence of functionalist and normatively optimistic leadership models thus represents not just a theoretical oversight but a significant limitation that constrains the methods of enquiry, as well as what can be seen, questioned, and theorised.

The clues in this epistemological journey led towards the alternative philosophical, psychological, and neuroscientific perspectives, which further destabilise dominant assumptions about rationality and agency in crisis leadership. While philosophers such as Morin, Virilio, Stiegler and Rosa extensively speak of the chaos, paradox, and systemic fragility embedded in “the logic of escalation” and “the digital delirium”, neuroscientific accounts of stress and threat (Taylor et al. 2006) challenge heroic ideals of decisiveness and control. Practices of “tending and befriending” can further reframe leadership as affective, relational, and embodied, highlighting the limits of individual agency under conditions of threat. However, without an explicit representation of power, such relational framings risk reproducing idealised notions of democratic collectivity that overlooks coercion, exclusion, and asymmetry.

Yet again, the mystery refused to be defined by these limitations, pointing towards the emergent phenomenon of our engagement with digitisation. Digital technologies do not merely mediate crisis leadership; they actively reconfigure temporality, sensemaking, and agency. Drawing on the work of Stiegler (2019; 2013) and Virilio (1986), this review suggests that digital acceleration can lead to the erosion of reflective leadership practice by privileging speed, automation, and scale. Crisis leadership theory has yet to grapple with how algorithmic governance, automated decision systems, and digitally mediated communication

reshape what leadership is and what it does under conditions of crisis, thus opening the scope for further empirical enquiry.

Within this contested landscape, Leadership-as-Practice (L-A-P) offers an important but incomplete theoretical intervention. Building on the work of Raelin (2023, 2016), Crevani et al. (2010), Nicolini (2012) and others, L-A-P shifts attention from individual attributes to leadership as a situated, material, and relational practice enacted through recurrent interactions. This ontological move is significant, particularly in challenging heroic and individualistic accounts of crisis leadership. However, as Sliwa and Case (2024) argue, L-A-P remains normatively anchored in assumptions of dialogue, consensus, and shared meaning-making that reflect specific democratic and Western organisational contexts.

Such assumptions become deeply problematic in crisis conditions, where leadership practice may unfold within manipulative, coercive, or corrupt organisational spaces. As crises expose the “dark side” of leadership, they also reveal the limits of L-A-P’s current conceptual boundaries. If leadership practice is already shaped by unequal power relations, strategic manipulation, or moral ambiguity, then the analytic focus on practice alone is insufficient. Power does not merely flow through practice; it structures who can participate, whose meanings prevail, and which trajectories become possible (Collinson, 2018).

Moreover, while L-A-P conceptualises leadership as emergent, this emergence might not always be neutral. Indeed agency within leadership practice might be unevenly distributed across human and non-human actors, shaped by hierarchy, social identity, and access to resources (Learmonth and Morrell 2021; Learmonth 2022). Participants may possess reflexive awareness of practice and strategically intervene to sustain or redirect it, often in ways that reinforce power asymmetry (Sliwa & Case, 2024; Linstead et al. 2014; Vaughan 1999). Polycrisis contexts intensify these dynamics, rendering power, exclusion, and constraint more visible yet still under-theorised.

This review, therefore, argues that polycrisis offers not merely an empirical setting for applying L-A-P, but a critical context for transforming it. Indeed, any further theorising should account for how leadership practice is shaped, distorted, and sometimes weaponised under conditions of instability.

In conclusion, moving beyond heroic and normative models of crisis leadership requires a fundamental shift in how leadership itself is theorised and the methods used to further the

enquiry. The emerging focus on the practice of relational and embodied becoming rather than being (Bergson, 1999; Grosz, 2005; Crevani et al. 2010; Raelin 2023) in multiple time frames and contextual spaces (across multiple disciplines) opens an important conceptual landscape. Furthermore, crisis leadership theory must confront not only how leadership practices respond to polycrisis, but how they participate in its production, reproduction, and transformation. It is within this tension between emergence and constraint, practice and power, tending-and-befriending and control that a part of this mystery is situated.

Consistent with a practice-based and processual ontology, the methodological approach (explored in the next section) privileges attentiveness to lived experience, unfolding interactions, and the often-invisible dynamics of power, affect, and meaning-making as they occur in situ. Ethnography enables sustained immersion in organisational life, while autoethnography centres the researcher's embodied and emotional entanglement with crisis and leadership practice. Together, these approaches align with the detective stance (as proposed by Goodall, 1991), one that follows clues rather than hypotheses, remains open to epistemic surprise and serendipity, and allows methods to emerge in response to what the field reveals rather than imposing coherence prematurely. The following section, *The Process*, therefore, invites the reader into the story of inquiry itself, asking not for compliance with established methodological certainties, but for curiosity, trust, and a willingness to engage with the “unknown unknowns” that characterise both crisis and leadership practice.

Chapter 4: The Process

“I’m an organisational detective. This is a story about how I read the clues to a culture while observing and participating in it. Everything here is important”. (Goodall 1991, page 85)

Introduction

According to Silverman (2013, 2018), the purpose of research methodology is to offer guidance, strategy and rationale behind the identification and analysis of studied phenomena represented in a research question. This process often involves entering a well-rehearsed sequence in PhD research that consists of Burrell and Morgan's (1979) paradigm matrix, qualitative and/or quantitative methodology of data collection and an established form of analysis to generate robust and bias-free conclusions (Creswell and Creswell 2017). This sequence provides a form of a safety net for the researcher, the reader and the scholarship to ensure all parties adhere to decades of established norms and practices that generate the expected ‘quality’ of work. The researcher usually enters this form of an academic contract early in their research journey with little room to divorce from it later in the process.

But what if the researcher takes the role of a detective looking for clues to solve not a static research problem but a dynamic mystery? What if the mystery is far more complex than an initial question or even a set of questions? What if it spans multiple paradigms and does not fit within a single philosophical position? Would a detective commit to a set of methods at the beginning of their investigation and follow those, regardless of the arising clues, to solve the mystery? Or would they look for the clues and search for methods that would explain them?

Or would it be something else entirely? Would they have the courage to enter not just the mystery but the story of solving and writing the mystery as it unfolds?

But more importantly, would you, the reader, have the curiosity to trust the process of the discovery that goes outside of the known and established methodologies? Would you surrender what you know and open up to the unknown unknowns?

If the answer is yes, then welcome to this chapter, which I have called The Process where everything is important.

Entering the mystery

“The most beautiful thing we can experience is mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.” (Einstein 1954)

The literature review left me with questions about the conceptualisation of crisis and leadership, and how historically their theoretical foundations were based on the assumptions of both existing as singular, atomised entities that can be conceived, constructed and contained in a theory or a framework. That somehow crisis can be isolated and managed and that the leaders, (particularly those anointed with charisma) can adopt a set of strategies to ‘tame’ it.

Having commenced this research during one of the biggest crises of the 21st century- the Covid-19 pandemic, I instinctively knew far more complex realities were at play and that the traditional methods (those that led to forming the theories in question) would not suffice.

At the same time, I began to explore the new and emergent ways of understanding crisis both through the philosophical and theoretical lens, which I wanted to test against the emergent movement of leaderful practice (Raelin 2011). I was particularly intrigued by the “affective ecologies” of leadership; the visible and invisible interactions between the self and others that coevolve together in the midst of multiple contexts and crises - the polycrisis (Hustak and Myers, 2012). It soon became clear that I was not investigating a fixed gap but rather entering a dynamic ‘space’, a mystery that lives amongst multiple scientific disciplines, that would take me out into the research field.

As described by Marcus and Fisher (1986) the mystery-focused research adopts a method of “defamiliarization by disrupting conventional knowledge and taken-for-granted assumptions and instead placing familiar subjects in unfamiliar contexts” (p.137). This process takes on a path that is based on identifying new “relationships and connections that had not previously been suspected, relationships that change actions and perspectives” (Weick, 1988, p. 524).

Entering the true mystery thus requires paradigmatic pluralism and multiple methods that might emerge during the process of investigation (Wilmott, 1993).

In fact, Denzin and Lincoln use the metaphor of "bricolage" as a way to demonstrate how novel research might require "new tools or techniques", crossing either or both theoretical and methodological boundaries to emerge new perspectives, findings and theories (2005, page 4). This strategy requires open mindedness and becoming comfortable with the discomfort of finding oneself in unfamiliar and uncharted territories, that do not subscribe to a single viewpoint. Although such open-mindedness allows freedom for more creative approaches and alternative routes to interpretation and analysis it should not be mistaken for stepping outside the theoretical boundaries. On the contrary, the departure from a single viewpoint requires familiarity with an "extensive repertoire of theories and vocabularies used reflexively" (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007, p.1273).

But most importantly, the mystery is to be lived and experienced and not just scientifically probed. The mystery takes the researcher outside of the comforts of established ontological and epistemological constructs (Goodall 1991). Based on his own ethnographic experience Goodall (1991; 1994, 2000) believes that an organisational researcher should take the role of a 'detective' looking for clues in the research mystery. As he puts it, mystery is "a genre for writing the complexities of lived experience within the framework of immersion and participation rather than "problem" and "solution". It is a way of constructing descriptive rhetorics and reveals the multiple interpretations of context, self and Other as an unfolding drama in which (...) the organisational detective- is an intersubjective participant" (Goodall 1991, p.XV).

Guided by Goodall's innovative approach to living the mystery of trying to capture and understand an emergent phenomenon of leadership-in-practice-in-polycrisis I entered the process of discovery as an organisational detective. Curious and open to what clues I might find and how they would shape not only the research story but also the process of scientific inquiry and its analysis.

But before stepping into the field, once again I returned to the literature to seek guidance from the philosophers, whose questions would set an ontological grounding beneath my feet.

Indeed, as Cunliffe and Hibbert (2016) observe: “an understanding of philosophy is crucial in highlighting the pluralism of practice as we both experience and study it.” (p.50).

Philosophical Direction

As established by Vaughan (1999), Linstead et al. (2014), Montefusco and Angeli (2024) and others, crisis is a complex and emergent phenomenon that does not fit neatly within the boundaries of the positivist paradigm. Contrary to earlier definitions, it is not a discrete event or situation that can be easily identified, measured, and resolved (Hermann 1963; Pearson and Mitroff 1993; Wooten and James 2008). Rather, it is a complex process unfolding across multiple time frames, paradigms, and disciplines, often taking on a life of its own (Morin 1992; Morin and Kern 1999).

Furthermore, while the traditional understanding of leadership implies an appointed (or anointed) individual exercising influence and power over a collective toward a predetermined purpose, Leadership-as-Practice (L-A-P) is concerned with in-betweenness and with the interactions between self and others. It attends to how these interactions are formed (or crafted), cultivated, and performed within leadership space, or, as Schatzki (2001) describes it, “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understandings” (p. 2).

Thus, in investigating crisis leadership as practice, I needed to move beyond the familiar form of Burrell and Morgan’s “boundary work” and instead engage in a ‘conversation’ with the empirical material by following the clues of this research mystery (Hassard and Cox, 2013, p. 1708). These initial clues led me into a rich philosophical landscape, which in turn shaped the design and direction of the empirical inquiry.

Having already identified the importance of temporality and acceleration through the work of Simmel, Virilio, Rosa, Stiegler and others, I turned to Heidegger to explore the relationship between the self and time before examining the relationship between the self and practice.

In “Being and Time”, Heidegger (1962) slows time down in order to examine the immediacy of being in the ‘now’. His understanding of time relates only to living beings, not to

inanimate objects (i.e. technology), and he conceptualises ‘being’ in the context of everyday, mundane, and non-deliberate ways of existing. He further argues that we cannot be decoupled from context; context does not reside in any particular entity, yet it forms part of an inseparable totality.

Translating Heidegger’s work into the context of L-A-P, Cunliffe and Hibbert (2016) understand leadership as ways of being with and among others that, in turn, shape and inform collective behaviours. As Sandberg and Dall’Alba (2009) observe, “practice and its members are co-constituted; neither can exist without the other” (p. 1355). ‘Being’, therefore, is directly connected to ‘doing’, shifting the focus from leadership as self (title, power, privilege) to leadership as practice. While Heidegger is concerned with the ontology of being, Ricoeur (1992) adopts a more interpretive approach, asking what happens between the self and the world.

For Ricoeur, the ‘self’ is an “unending work of interpretation” in relation to others, enacted through intersubjectivity (Ricoeur 1992, p. 179). Husserl, who first introduced the concept, understood intersubjectivity as formed through acts of empathy and as a reflective practice of putting oneself in another’s position (Kern 2018). From this perspective, the ‘practice’ dimension of L-A-P is inseparable from the ongoing formation and re-formation of the self as leader through the empathic experience of others.

What, then, is meant by practice from an ontological and epistemological perspective? Gherardi (2009) argues that, in order to speak meaningfully about practice in leadership, we must first ask what kind of practice is being observed. Is it a routine, largely unconscious set of actions, akin to what Heidegger describes? Or is it an intentional, embodied, conscious, and “crafted” act (Sinclair, 2007; Taylor, 2015)? Gherardi (2006; 2009) emphasises the importance of making such distinctions, as they shape what we are able to see and recognise in the construction of social and organisational realities.

She offers a useful epistemological framing of practice as practical, situated, unstable, and political (Gherardi, 2006; 2009). While examining leadership as practical, situated, and political provides a valuable starting point, this project is particularly concerned with the unstable dimension of practice. What happens during a crisis, or amid multiple, overlapping crises (polycrisis)? How do leaders respond? What forms of leadership practice emerge, both consciously and unconsciously, under such conditions?

Segal (2010) proposes that observing the breakdown of leadership in crisis offers a window into the emergent practice of L-A-P. He argues that times of crisis invite self-reflection, self-doubt, and a questioning of business as usual. It is through this “unravelling” that the “conditions in which the philosophical question of leadership becomes important (...) when we lose all sense of leadership” (Segal 2010, p. 384). How does this sense of loss (of self, of control, and power), together with bewilderment and self-reflection, reshape what it means to be and act as a leader? How does this state develop over time, particularly in conditions of high acceleration and non-linearity, and what does it emerge into? Segal (2010) suggests that breakdowns can become moments of learning, but only if leaders engage in embodied, critical, and “reflexive attunement.”

Having examined the ontology and epistemology of being and practice, alongside the emergence and complexity of polycrisis, I was drawn toward an interpretive and phenomenological position. This exploration surfaced deeper questions about ways of ‘being’ and ‘doing’, and about the temporal nature of polycrisis itself. As leaders are increasingly expected to operate within dichotomous, paradoxical, and often contradictory realities, Montuori (2013) challenges leadership theory with the question: “What to do in a context full of uncertainty and ambiguity?” Polycrisis and complexity theory point to the dissolution of traditional hierarchies and boundaries, calling for transdisciplinary and polycontextual approaches. L-A-P and Leadership-as-Craft theories emphasise how leadership is shaped within interactions and how it emerges across situations and contexts.

Yet how does the emerging leadership theory of L-A-P respond to such complexity?

Mystery one: How do multiple contexts impact leadership identity? Is identity stable or changing in crisis? How does this affect leadership practice?

Mystery two: How are emerging leadership theories (L-A-P) challenged by polycrisis and by operating within multiple contexts moving at different speeds and levels of acceleration? How effective are they?

Mystery three: How do leaders respond and adapt within this new ‘time and space’? What else is emerging in this leadership ‘time and space’? What new connections are formed? What practices can be carried forward in responding effectively to organisational polycrisis?

Rather than treating these mysteries as problems to be solved quickly or reduced to neat conclusions, they became questions to inhabit. The philosophical direction outlined above does not aim to produce immediate answers; instead, it invites a way of dwelling with the questions themselves. The next section therefore turns to what it means to ‘live the research questions’, to resist premature closure and to remain with the unfolding experience of leadership in polycrisis as it reveals itself over time.

Living the questions.

Rainer Maria Rilke in “Letters to a Young Poet” advises young officer cadets to seek truth and meaning in trying to understand and experience the poetics of the world as it unfolds around him. Rilke writes:

“Be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don’t search for the answers, which could not be given to you now because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.” (Rilke, 2023)

Many scholars stress the importance of producing an innovative research question that in turn “will open up new research problems, might resolve long-standing controversies, could provide an integration of different approaches, and might even turn conventional wisdom and assumptions upside down by challenging old beliefs” (Campbell et al., 1982, p.21). There are several ways of developing the research question, like defining the topic and the domain of the research, what objects should be studied and the type of question that should be generated (Creswell and Creswell 2017).

While setting the initial research direction is important, traditional academic methodologies focus almost entirely on both crafting the ‘perfect question’ and identifying robust ways to answer it. But Silverman cautions against rushing to answer one’s research question in an

attempt to ‘overdesign’ by making too many assumptions before stepping into the research field (Silverman and Marvasti 2008; Silverman 2019).

This problem-solution continuum, while attractive to some, can be a trap that leads away from the mystery of the poetics of research moments and towards the mastery of the academic form (Linstead 2022). While the problem implies something to be solved and not lived, Goodall (1991) frames the problem as a mystery as he believes it invites the researcher deeper into the living, research story.

Indeed, I found the words of Rilke to deeply resonate and form a part of my process of discovery; to ask and to live the questions patiently and mindfully trusting that eventually, I will live into the answers. ‘Living the questions’ was paved by co-evolution between the practice and theory, breakdowns, breakthroughs, and breakaways. It was a practice of discipline and patience towards all that is unresolved by befriending the questions, (especially the challenging ones that might arise along the way), and “turning the mystery of writing into the writing of mystery” (Goodall, 1994, p.478). The process of following and writing the mystery was elusive and tender, sometimes hidden from plain sight, while other times staring right at me as if to mock my ‘scientific’ blindness. This work was subtle and delicate, therefore requiring sensibility and attunement. Inspired by Rilke’s revelation once again I reached out to poetry for more clues to shape my research practice.

The poesies of the moment

Linstead observes that “researchers tend to become very good at making discoveries that further illuminate already familiar fields, the bright places, but often struggle to break out of their comfortable habits of thought and perception to recognize that the bright places are not always the right places” (2022, p.121-122). Instead, he calls for seeking inside and outside of oneself for the “poetics at work” or as coined by Stewart (2005), the “cultural poesis” (p.1015). Stewart makes invisibility of the ordinary moment visible, “not an exercise in representation or a critique of representation; rather it is a cabinet of curiosities designed to incite curiosity “(2005, p.1029). She sees the importance of paying attention to the ‘ordinary’ as it unlocks new ways of seeing and sensemaking required for capturing the emergence of people and things at work. It is a form of a poetic inquiry that, as Guiney Yallop et al.

observe, it “invites me into the in-between space between creative and critical scholarship. Such a space is reflexive and critical, aware of the nexus that is both self and other, both personal and public” (2014, p.3).

While entering the mystery was exciting at first, I soon became daunted by the reality and difficulty of the task. How does one capture and make sense of complexity in flux? How does one describe emergence caught in the act? According to Denzin (2014) “the poet makes the world visible in new and different ways, in ways that ordinary social science writing does not allow” (2014, p.86). Guiney Yallop (2010) warn about academic life, “if one is not careful, (it) can put one to sleep; it can kill (or dull) the spirit by constantly pulling it away from itself.”

‘My’ mystery was having the opposite effect. Its complex, ambiguous and untethered nature was keeping me up at night. I reached out to poetry to help me make sense of complexity and to help me to deal with ambiguity. Both were making me feel uncomfortable and the temptation was to hastily resolve the tension. The “Introduction to Poetry” (Table 2 below) by Morgan helped in elevating some of that tension by mapping out my research enquiry to ensure I was not shortcutting or missing clues. It helped me to understand that “meaning was unstable” and to engage in an interpretive dance between the context, self and other. The second column in particular, served as a ‘checklist’ in cultivating reflexivity throughout my research process.

TABLE 1

The poem is	Which develops ability to
Multidimensional	• Detect different modes of meaning • Deal with ambiguity and uncertainty
Not offering closure	• Handle nonresolution
Not based in a logical deductive mode	• Make associative connections
Showing the ordinary as extraordinary	• Question givens • Raise awareness of complexity
Almost infinitely interpretable	• Consider other views • Recognize that “meaning” is unstable • Examine and revise current insights and perceptions
Operating at different levels of accessibility	• Detect weak as well as strong signals • Seek less obvious linkages
Full of coexistent complements and contradictions	• Time judgements carefully • Be aware that binary thinking is not enough
Drawing attention to human needs and motivations	• Make decisions in a more comprehensive context • Address ethical issues
Exploring emotional complexity	• Offer wholeness of response

Table 2 "Introduction to Poetry" by Morgan (2010, p.24)

While Morgan’s work was designed as an art-based, learning work for leaders to help “conceptualize complex problems” and to “find meaning in ambiguity” (Morgan 2022). I found it to be a useful practice in my ‘detective’ and my research analysis work.

As Morgan observes, “The poet is taking you on a journey of exploration, and where you arrive in the end, and the nature of the journey, will be different for each person. There are no maps, no certainties.” (2010, p.13).

I began to pay more attention to the “poetic moments” that I encountered without a pre-emptive judgement or resolve but rather as crumbs that were leading me somewhere unknown, and even beautiful (Linstead 2022, p.111). Sometimes they would form patterns and lead to larger stories, other times they would turn into dust and disappear with the wind of change. As I engaged in this poetic, research practice I began to notice the transformation that took place not just in my research, (changing form and directions multiple times) but inside me. As I grew more confident and stronger in my research practice, the work began to

reveal itself to me not in the form of information or unquestionable data but rather a conversation, a dialogue with the research Subject.

But the biggest change I observed was my relationship with the language, with how I conceptualised and wrote in my daily journals, and eventually in this thesis. Poetry taught me to “write differently” and to be brave in how I was engaging with the research field and in how I was capturing ethnographic data (Gilmore et al. 2019, p.4). Poetry opened me up into new realms I did not know existed as it “bridged the gap between knowing and perceiving” and placed me in liminality of the unknown and yet-to-be-discovered. It is in those moments and ‘spaces’ that I saw myself departing from the “logic-driven structures of language to point to the undifferentiated arenas where emotion holds sway.” (Morgan 2010, p.55).

Writing differently

Gilmore et al. compare the traditional academic, literary form to a ‘Victorian corset’ and argue that “scientific writing suffocates” the research experience for both the writer and the reader (2019, p.3-4). In a special issue of *Management Learning*, Gilmore et al. (2019) call for “writing differently”, a practice that “is concerned with broadening, widening and deepening knowledge and understanding by giving our ideas space in which they can flourish, create new meanings, help us learn and become human.” (ibid.)

Early in the literature review, I noticed the language used particularly in the crisis management and crisis leadership literature, and its impact on the theoretical conceptualisation and the theory development. How its positivist, isolated and isolating form limits not just the development of the theory but the process of discovery. The unemotional, cause-and-effect, narratives do little for the development beyond the mechanistic, solution-problem paradigm. While some literature begins to recognise the complex nature of crisis, the leadership humanity has been largely reduced to a charismatic, heroic persona.

On the contrary, L-A-P is concerned with what is unknown and yet to be explored in the emergent leadership practice, thus naturally lending itself to exploring more creative forms of scientific enquiry. Connecting the crisis leadership theory with L-A-P, therefore, creates an opportunity to explore a theoretical gap in new forms of leading in crisis, as well as ways of

reconceptualising both theories through novel ways of conducting research and capturing what is emerging. Goodall calls for “subjective immersion rather than objective distance” where the role of a language is to convey the researcher’s interpretive accounts (Goodall, 1991, p.8).

Traditional scientific writing rests on an assumption that language can achieve a level of precision capable of delivering objectivity and accurate representation. Within this paradigm, words are treated as neutral instruments, transparent vessels through which reality can be faithfully transmitted. Precision becomes equated with truth, and clarity with certainty. Yet this confidence in language is increasingly contested. As McGilchrist (2019) argues, “the artificial precision of language betrays us” (p. 157). Language, in his view, does not mirror the world; it operates instead as a *referential code*, a system of signs that points toward reality without ever fully capturing it (McGilchrist, 2019, p. 107, Wittgenstein, 2017).

This distinction is crucial. To treat language as a mirror is to assume a one-to-one correspondence between words and the world. To understand language as referential is to acknowledge its arbitrariness, its selectivity, and its creative force. Language does not simply describe reality; it actively shapes what becomes visible, sayable, and thinkable. In this sense, language is not merely representational but constitutive as it participates in the making of the world it claims to describe.

The linguistic turn in the social sciences emerged precisely as a critique of this “mirror” perspective. Scholars began to challenge the idea that language could transparently represent social reality, arguing instead that meaning is produced through discourse, context, and power (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Goodall, 2000; Gilmore, 2024). Alvesson and Kärreman describe language as “a human artefact that affects our vision- blurring, clarifying, magnifying, and diminishing the things we see through it” (2007, p. 1267). This metaphor argues for the partiality of language: it always does something *to* reality. It sharpens certain features while obscuring others, spotlights some voices while marginalising others, and stabilises what is, in practice, fluid and contested.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the history of ethnography itself. Early anthropological studies, conducted largely within postcolonial contexts, were deeply entangled with regimes of power and knowledge. The scientific subjectivity modelled by Malinowski sought to present cultures as coherent, observable systems, rendered legible through disciplined

observation and authoritative description (Kuper, 1996; Townley, 2019). Language functioned here as a tool of control, a means of fixing the Other into categories that could be known, classified, and compared. What appeared as objective description was, in reality, a powerful act of framing, one that silenced alternative voices and erased the ethnographer's own positionality.

The Writing Culture debate of the late twentieth century marked a decisive rupture with this tradition. Clifford and Marcus (1986) challenged the illusion of detached observation and called attention to the rhetorical, political, and ethical dimensions of ethnographic writing. Inspired by Geertz's interpretive ethnography, they reframed ethnography as a relational and narrative practice, asking foundational questions: Who speaks? Who writes? From where, and for whom? (Clifford, 1986). Language was no longer treated as a neutral medium but as a site of struggle, negotiation, and meaning-making.

Participants, in this reframing, were no longer silent objects to be described from above, but co-present voices in the production of knowledge. This shift profoundly destabilised the authority of singular accounts and opened ethnography to experimental, multimodal, and reflexive forms of inquiry. Language became less about closure and more about invitation. Less about explanation and more about evocation.

Building on this lineage, Goodall's (2000) notion of The New Ethnography embraces language as a creative and ethical practice. His definition of ethnography as "creative narratives shaped out of the writer's personal experiences within a culture" (p. 9) explicitly centre around the subjective 'self', the dynamic context and the polyphony of 'other'. O'Reilly's (2005) description of ethnography as iterative and inductive further reinforces this view, positioning the researcher as simultaneously subject and object, knower and known. In both cases, language is not a conduit for certainty but a medium through which uncertainty is held and explored.

What unites these perspectives is an engagement with what has come to be known as "the crisis of representation": the recognition that no form of representation, whether textual, visual, or methodological, can fully capture lived experience (Laitin et al. 1987; Clifford 1986). Representation always fails in some way as it simplifies, freezes, or distorts what is dynamic, embodied, and relational. In doing so, it betrays both the world it seeks to represent and the author who claims to speak for it.

As an ethnographer, this awareness brought with it an ethical tension. To present one story as the story and to resolve complexity into a single, linear narrative, felt not only inadequate but irresponsible. Indeed, this risk is only heightened in research designs that privilege singular research questions and definitive answers and formats that implicitly promise closure where none may be possible.

This concern is further amplified by the very nature of polycrisis. As discussed in the Literature Review chapter, polycrisis resists linear causality and stable frames of reference. It unfolds across multiple temporalities and contexts, generating contradictions rather than coherence. In such conditions, the aspiration to linguistic precision (often expected by the scholarship) becomes particularly problematic. Attempts to stabilise meaning through precise terminology risk masking the very volatility and emergence that define the phenomenon under study. Language, when treated as exact, can become deceptive, offering the comfort of clarity while erasing ambiguity.

Thrift's (2008) non-representational theory offers one response to this dilemma by shifting attention away from representation toward movement, practice, and affect. Rather than asking how accurately language captures reality, non-representational approaches ask how knowledge is performed, enacted, and lived. They value forms of expression that remain attuned to what Thrift calls "the fugitive practices that exist on the margins of the known" (2008, p. 1). Here, language becomes experimental and provisional, something that plays with its subject rather than fixing it in place.

Thrift's "ethics of intelligence" further reframes the role of language as an ethical practice grounded in openness, humility, and responsiveness. It calls for an engagement with uncertainty, error, and surprise, not as failures to be eliminated, but as conditions of possibility for learning and transformation (Thrift, 2008, p. 170). Within this framing, the arbitrariness of language is not a weakness but a resource as it allows for plurality, creativity, and the continual reworking of meaning.

As Goodall (1991) reminds us, ethnographic research is ultimately transformative, not because it reveals definitive truths, but because it changes the researcher in the process. "Mystery changes all of that because mystery changes you" (p. xi). Therefore, to write from within mystery, rather than about it, requires relinquishing the illusion of linguistic mastery and embracing language as a tentative, relational, and deeply human act.

Caught in the middle of this linguistic debate I was aware of entering an unorthodox territory, but the clues were leading me towards more creative and embodied realms that I struggled to apprehend with traditional methods. The limits of the third-person, academic form were limiting the access to the ‘world’ that was revealing itself before me (Wittgenstein 2017). Inspired by Thrift’s ethics of intelligence, instead of focusing on what I should do, I turned to Goodall’s three “thou shall nots” of interpretive ethnography (2000, p.58). Firstly, Goodall (2000) suggests, the interpretive ethnographer shall not practice objectivity, distance and apolitical relationship with research participants, but instead shall cultivate intimacy and vulnerability throughout the research process. Secondly, interpretive ethnographer shall not dismiss their own stories, social, professional or religious background and instead bring them into their own reflexivity practice. Finally, Goodall (2000) focuses on the language itself and warns against the “omniscient third person” and instead encourages engaging in creative, evocative and “multi-voiced” writing styles (p.58-59). He challenges researchers to be more socially engaged and the ‘voice’ of their work to add value and to form “meaningful social action.”(ibid., p.59).

Buttressed by the work of Goodall (2000), Linstead (2022) Gilmore et al. (2019) and others, I started experimenting with my writing by responding to contexts and clues around me, and by switching my position from representing empirical data to being in conversation with data. The empirical material became a “dialogue partner” and reflexivity a narrative running through the research process: “who speaks? who writes? when and where? with or to whom?”- (Clifford 1986, page 13). Sometimes I would simply listen, other times I would respond and insert myself into the conversation. This process was hard and often I felt vulnerable and inadequate. Who am I to write this? Can I do this? English is my second language; do I have the skills?

The process was daunting but also liberating, not just for me but for the stories that wanted to be written through me. I endured the birthing pains that came through giving life to some of the stories. Eventually, I even began to enjoy this new mystery. The mystery of writing differently.

Mapping the mystery process

In the mystery-based research Goodall encourages researchers “to give up on the idea of control” (1994, p.556). He believes that only through the process of surrender the ethnographer can spot the “interconnectedness of moments and meanings, persons and things, the poetics of dualities, the inevitability of constraints as the necessary partners to creativity” (ibid. p.558-559). Silverman (2008; 2013) also warns against the futility of control as he believes that good and innovative research often diverges from the initial design and the research question. Instead, Goodall, proposes developing a sensibility for spotting the “absence of presence”, the negative space in between the obvious, which is full of clues and ‘physical’ properties often residing in symbols and cultural cues (1991, p.63). The task of the researcher is to find them to construct a meaningful context.

Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) on the other hand, propose that accessing and resolving an interesting mystery requires a more open, emergent and processual approach. They argue that mystery itself emerges as a combination of the researcher’s experiences, access to broad theoretical frameworks and vocabularies paired with the empirical studies in the field (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). Figure 5 demonstrates a methodology that simulates a dialogue between theory and empirical material in mystery-focused research as proposed by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007).

FIGURE 1
The Research Process: Decision Tree for Mystery-Focused Research

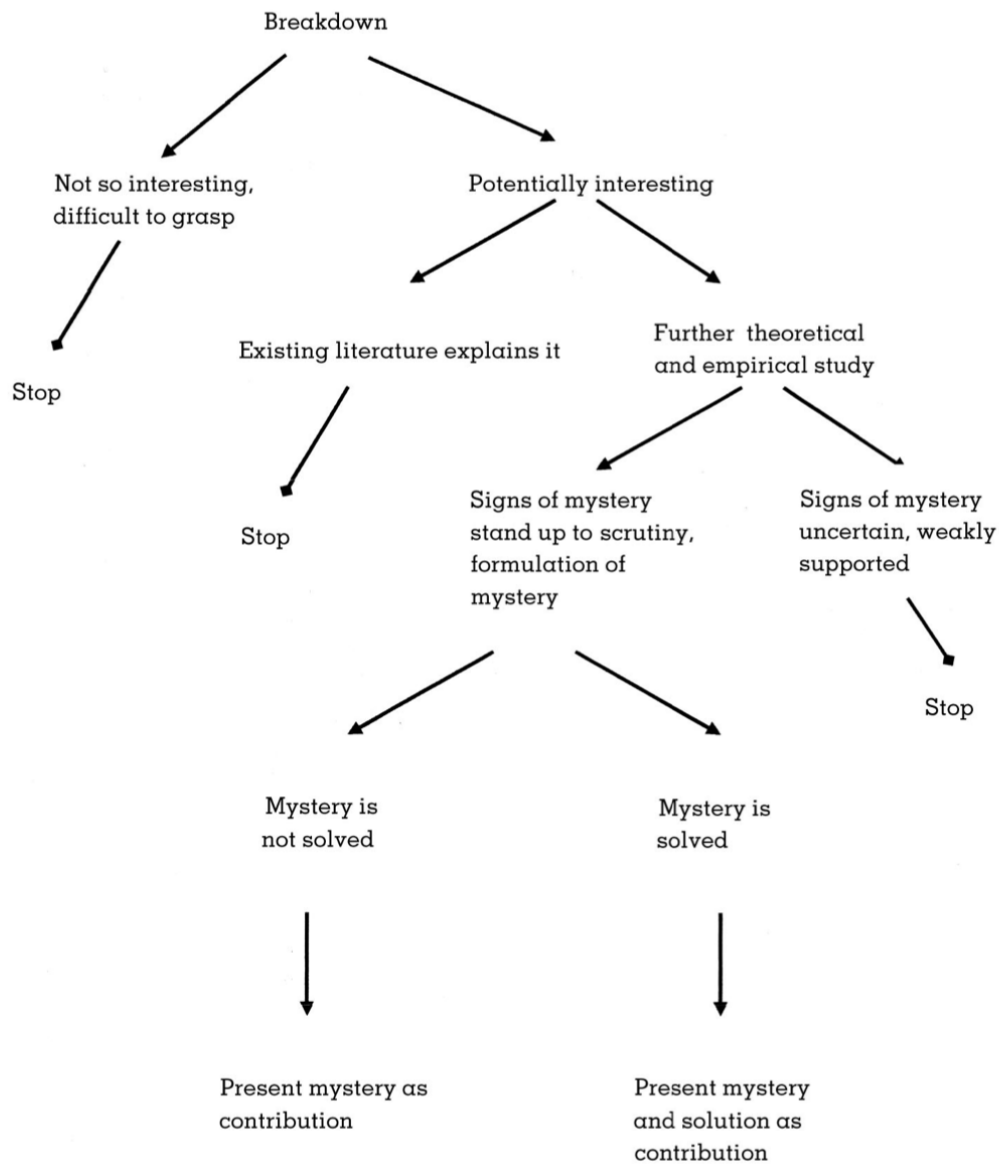


Figure 5 The Mystery research decision process (Alvesson and Karreman, 2007)

While Alvesson and Karreman's engineered approach to following the mystery could be seen as reductive and oversimplifying the complex (and unpredictable) nature of a mystery, nevertheless, it offered a helpful, initial framework. Further framing of breakdowns as a necessary part of the process leading to breakthroughs has offered a kind of psychological safety. Approaching what might otherwise appear as reaching a dead end, in mystery-focused research is a potential sign of hope and progress. This active discovery and solving of mysteries bound by reflexivity, set in a theoretical and empirical context lead to a rich and

textured research process. Furthermore, this approach not only “illuminates” the phenomenon leading to breakdown and breakthrough but also helps to “make sense of similar phenomena in other settings.” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007, p.1265). Indeed, the breakthrough and breakdown path lead to the multitude of theories which allow for accessing a multitude of perspectives whilst keeping in with the rigour of the expected, scientific method. By layering Alvesson and Kärreman’s (2007) method with Goodall (1991, 1994, 2000) and Silverman (2008), something new entirely emerged, a breakaway. The unexpected arrives as a form of an ‘aha’ moment that is either contrary to already established beliefs and directions or a connection of clues that previously seemed unconnectable.

While the breakdowns and breakthroughs were consistently appearing throughout the research process, the breakaways came later taking an unexpected turn in the research story. An example of such a breakaway was the “Poetry in Crisis” chapter which combines theory and poetics in an autoethnographic experience of leading in polycrisis.

Gabriel et al. (2014), also speaks to the methodological importance of the unexpected when conducting scientific research. By critiquing the over-engineered and “rationalist regime” that drives some of the scientific discovery and knowledge, they turn towards “accidental discoveries and chance mutations over which no direct control can be exercised” (p.334). They further argue that it is precisely through the unexpected, the anomalous, and the disruptive that new theories emerge or existing ones are extended. Indeed, the scientific discovery, through this lens, is seen as a result of serendipitous encounters.

Serendipity, as Gabriel et al. (2014), De Rond (2014), and Feyerabend (1975) suggest, is not a methodological weakness but a scholarly capability: the ability to recognise opportunity within disruption and “to see bridges where others see holes” (De Rond, 2014, p.18). The serendipitous ‘bridges’ between breakdowns, breakthroughs can lead to meaningful breakaways, argues Merton (1948), disrupting in the process the stale and ridged boundaries of scientific enquiry (Gabriel et al., 2014). Furthermore, when investigating the contexts of profound change, heightened stress, and uncertainty (i.e. polycrisis), as demonstrated in some of the leadership crises literature (Ch. 3), the management scholars often generate a strong desire for stability and predictability. Individuals and organisations alike seek reassurance in the belief that systems will function as expected, commitments will be honoured, services delivered, and institutional routines maintained. Within this context, management is

frequently positioned as the mechanism through which uncertainty is controlled or at least bounded (Gabriel et al., 2014). Through planning, rational analysis, and the application of expert knowledge, management aspires to preserve order, sustain organizational reliability, and minimize disruptive surprises. Such assumptions become particularly salient in times of polycrisis, when the promise of managerial control offers psychological and organizational comfort despite increasingly complex and interdependent disruptions. It is therefore paramount that in those contexts we exercise the awareness and sensitivity towards the anomalies or “unsought factors” (De Rond 2014, p.8). This methodological turn towards “serendipity as the identification of ‘correct pairs’ of events, where ‘correct’ means ‘meaningful’, not causal”, centres this mystery and the mysterious in science and in the scientific enquiry (ibid., p. 21).

The map is not the territory: entering the ethnographic field

Having mapped the research process, clarified my philosophical positioning, articulated the research questions, and identified appropriate modes of expression, I was, in methodological terms, prepared to take the next step. Yet, as Goodall (1991) reminds us, “the map is not the territory.” Methodological design does not equate to lived inquiry. At this point, the research required movement beyond conceptual preparation and into the ethnographic field itself, where questions are not merely posed but lived, and where understanding emerges through sustained engagement with uncertainty.

The literature review had identified a research space marked by a clear shift away from positivist assumptions and towards phenomenological and interpretive perspectives. This shift was particularly salient given the growing complexity of organisational life under conditions of polycrisis. Furthermore, the explored leadership theories against the emergence of Leadership-As-Practice (L-A-P) as a relational, processual alternative to leader-centric models required new ways of observing and studying leadership practice as it unfolds in situ. As Raelin (2023) argues, L-A-P opens leadership research to the study of interaction, temporality, materiality, and tacit knowing, thereby creating fertile ground for ethnographic and multi-modal methodologies.

Raelin's invitation for leadership scholars to act as "detectives," attentive to lived experience, artefacts, and everyday interactions, resonated strongly with the orientation of this study (2023, p.13). L-A-P research, he suggests, benefits from approaches that allow researchers to serve as co-participants, to examine leadership across multiple interacting levels, and to surface the often-invisible processes through which leadership emerges (Raelin, 2023). This orientation also aligns with Habermas's (1990) critique of the neutral observer position, which he regards as increasingly untenable in social research. Instead, Habermas advocates a participatory standpoint, a position later reinforced in organisational scholarship that recognises the researcher as inevitably implicated in the field (Scherer, 2008).

Within this epistemological framing, the research was approached as a mystery rather than a problem to be solved. This metaphor legitimised an inductive, exploratory stance in which understanding emerges through looking for clues that are partial, dispersed, serendipitous and often contradictory, revealed through studying the context, self and other (Goodall 1994). As Sahlins (1976) notes, meaning is not discovered in isolation but assembled through the ordering of persons, practices, and artefacts. Consequently, data in this study were understood not as static representations of reality but as dynamic, unfolding constructions produced through interaction between researcher and participants in the polycontextual setting (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Denzin, 2001).

Having identified these initial epistemological and ontological clues, the research moved into a sustained ethnographic engagement that unfolded over a period of three years. This involved living with the questions, remaining present to ambiguity, and allowing provisional insights to develop gradually into more articulated understandings.

Finding an ethnographic home: positioning the self in the field

Entering the ethnographic field was accompanied by significant personal and professional uncertainty. I had stepped away from a senior leadership role in innovation and digital transformation, leaving behind fourteen years of professional stability to become a doctoral researcher with no guaranteed income. This transition, however, was not experienced as a rupture from practice but as a reconfiguration of my relationship to it. The questions driving this research about leadership practice, crisis, and organising in unstable contexts could not

be explored at a distance from industry. On the contrary, they demanded proximity, immersion, and ongoing participation.

This positioning presented an important methodological tension: how to remain sufficiently embedded to access lived organisational experience while retaining analytical distance and ethical independence. Traditional ethnography often assumes a relatively bounded field site and a clearer separation between researcher and researched. In contrast, the nature of contemporary organisational life, characterised by mobility, digital mediation, and blurred boundaries between roles, required a more fluid and reflexive approach.

Drawing on my background in innovation and strategy, I developed what I called a “theory-to-practice innovation” model. This involved creating a parallel professional practice that was directly informed by emerging research insights, while allowing the research itself to remain institutionally and ethically independent. The practice functioned as a vehicle for access to multiple organisations and leadership contexts, enabling ethnographic engagement across sectors without being subjected to a single organisational agenda.

This approach resulted in my appointment to a hybrid role of a “Data Philosopher” within a global, multi-industry organisation. This position provided sustained access to leaders and organisational practices during a period of heightened uncertainty shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Securing this ethnographic home, alongside formal ethical approval (Appendix 1), marked the transition from preparatory mapping to full immersion in the field.

Autoethnography as methodological pivot: from observation to lived polycrisis

Within this broader ethnographic design, autoethnography played a critical methodological role, particularly in relation to exploring polycrisis. While traditional ethnography privileges observation of others within a cultural setting, autoethnography explicitly positions the researcher’s own embodied experience as a legitimate and necessary source of data (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Denzin, 2014). This distinction is especially important in the study of leading

in and through polycrisis, which is not only organisational and structural but also affective, temporal, and existential.

Autoethnography was mobilised in this study as both method and sensibility (Harding and Kostera, 2021). Set in the larger context of this ethnographic, multi-modal journey within the context, self and other, the autoethnographic aspects responded to the positioning and interaction of the ‘self’ within the field. Rather than presenting the researcher as a detached observer, it openly reveals the lived experience, emotional response, and reflexive interpretation as integral to knowledge production. As Pelias (2004) argues, autoethnography resists the “illusion of objectivity,” instead embracing an emotionally vulnerable and evocative voice that can bring us closer to lived realities (p.1, cited in Humphreys et al., 2015, p. 3). In crisis contexts, where uncertainty, ambiguity, and often paradoxical sensemaking breakdowns are central, such an approach allows access to dimensions of organisational life that are often sanitised or excluded from conventional accounts.

Compared to traditional ethnography, which might document how others experience crisis, autoethnography allowed me to explore how polycrisis is lived from within leadership practice, including moments of doubt, ethical tension, temporal disorientation, and responsibility. This insider perspective did not replace ethnographic observation but complemented it, providing a reflexive ‘self’ anchor through which external observations of the ‘context’ and ‘other’ could be interpreted and questioned (Goodall 1994). The creation of reflexive “vignettes” as introduced by Humphreys et al. (2015, p.7) allows insights to emerge through plausible, vivid, and authentic accounts of the self within and in the liminal spaces of the organisational life. These vignettes do not function as anecdotal embellishments but as analytically grounded accounts that allow readers to partially inhabit the field themselves (Jarzabkowski et al., 2014). In doing so, they strengthen the interpretive credibility of the analysis while preserving its experiential richness.

From autoethnography to multi-modal data collection

Crucially, the use of autoethnography enabled movement into other forms of data collection. Reflexive engagement with my own experience of polycrisis revealed patterns, tensions, and questions that informed the design of interviews, digital diaries, surveys, and the immersive

focus group, and consequential findings in Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8). In this sense, autoethnography functioned as a methodological pivot, sensitising the research to what mattered, what was difficult to articulate, and where conventional methods might fall short.

This reflexive grounding also shaped the turn towards digital ethnography, as digital technologies increasingly emerged as both mediators and actors in experiences of leadership practice in polycrisis (Ch. 5 and 6). The rise of AI during the fieldwork period further intensified this dynamic, prompting experimentation with digital tools not only for data collection but a creative and experimental tool as well as a conversational participant (Immersive Research Lab).

Autoethnography thus did not operate in isolation. Instead, it informed and was informed by interviews, digital artefacts, Immersive Research Lab, and collaborative sensemaking exercises. This iterative movement between self-reflection and collective engagement aligns with more recent developments in autoethnographic scholarship that emphasise dialogical and intersubjective approaches (Harding and Kostera, 2021). Calàs et al.'s (2021) concept of inter-ethnography, for example, shifts attention from the singular self to polyvocal, relational meaning-making, resonating strongly with L-A-P and the collective nature of leadership practice in polycrisis.

Autoethnography, reflexivity, and methodological openness

The autoethnographic orientation adopted here is also informed by work that integrates evocative narrative with critical analysis (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2021). Rather than privileging either personal story or theory, this approach places them in productive dialogue, allowing insights to emerge through their interaction. Poetic and sensuous modes of note-taking (Harding and Kostera, 2021) further supported attentiveness to affective and relational dimensions of organisational life, reinforcing the idea that experience itself constitutes evidence (Ch.7).

Furthermore, this study embraces methodological hybridity and openness. As Weinryb et al. (2021) and Bloomfield (2021) suggest, complex organisational phenomena such as polycrisis resist linear, methodologically siloed approaches. Autoethnography, in this sense, supports a mode of inquiry that remains open to emergence, surprise, and ambiguity. It enables the

researcher-detective to move without a fixed path, following clues as they arise, and allowing the research design itself to evolve in response to the field.

Finally, it is important to stress that, autoethnography was mobilised not as a self-indulgent detour but as a rigorous interpretive strategy that deepened engagement with the context and other, expanded the ethnographic field, and enabled movement into diverse and innovative forms of data collection as demonstrated later in this chapter.

Digital ethnography

The growing centrality of digital technologies in organisational life constituted a further methodological clue in this research. Digital systems increasingly shape not only how crises unfold, are amplified, or are mitigated (Virilio, 1986; Stiegler, 2013, 2019; Urry, 2014), but also how leadership is enacted, experienced, and interpreted in practice (see Chapter 4). During the empirical phase of this study, the rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence further intensified this dynamic, creating new conditions for sensemaking, decision-making, and authority in organisations. These developments called for a methodological approach capable of engaging with digital technologies not merely as contextual background or technical tools, but as active elements within organisational practice.

Digital ethnography (DE) was therefore adopted as a complementary methodological approach within the broader ethnographic design. Its inclusion was not planned in advance but emerged inductively in response to developments in the field. This responsiveness reflects the interpretive and detective-like orientation of the study, where methods evolve in dialogue with the phenomena under investigation.

Purposes of digital ethnography

Digital ethnography served two interrelated purposes in this research.

First, drawing on Murthy's (2011) conceptualisation, DE functioned as a set of data-gathering methods mediated through computer-mediated communication. In line with Silverman's (2019) call to make greater use of "naturally occurring" digital data in qualitative research,

digital platforms enabled access to a broader and more diverse range of participants than would have been possible through exclusively co-located methods. Online questionnaires, digital diaries, and virtual interviews facilitated participation across organisational, geographical, and sectoral boundaries, while also offering ethical and practical advantages, such as participant comfort, flexibility, and ease of data capture.

Second, DE was mobilised as an epistemological stance rather than solely a technical method. Influenced by Dicks et al. (2005), digital media were treated as part of a multimodal research environment that reshapes how ethnographic knowledge is produced. Digital technologies were understood not only as tools for data collection but as actors within organisational life that co-produce meaning, shape interaction, and mediate leadership practice. This orientation was particularly important in a study concerned with crisis, where speed, amplification, visibility, and temporal compression are often digitally mediated.

Recognising digital as an actor, rather than a neutral conduit, enabled the research to open up to novel forms of enquiry. This included engaging with digital technologies in dialogical ways, particularly as AI platforms such as ChatGPT entered everyday organisational conversations. Digital ethnography thus extended the ethnographic field beyond physical sites and human participants, acknowledging the entanglement of human and non-human agencies in contemporary organising.

Principles guiding the digital ethnographic approach

The application of digital ethnography in this study was guided by the principles articulated by Pink et al. (2015): **multiplicity, unorthodox practice, non-digital-centricity, openness, and reflexivity**. These principles provided a flexible framework for methodological experimentation while maintaining interpretive coherence.

Multiplicity was central to the research design. Digital technologies were simultaneously the object of investigation and the medium through which investigation occurred. Platforms such as LinkedIn were used both for observing leadership discourse and for participant recruitment and engagement, positioning digital spaces as sites of organisational meaning-making. Online interviews enabled geographically dispersed participation and reduced logistical barriers, while also creating ethically safer environments in which participants could engage from

familiar settings. In the later stages of the research, digital technologies supported immersive forms of inquiry through the use of virtual reality, spatial sound, and storytelling within the Immersive Research Lab (IRL), allowing participants to engage experientially with emerging theoretical insights.

The principle of the **unorthodox** was most explicitly explored within the IRL. Here, artificial intelligence was used to generate alternative visual and auditory representations of leadership narratives and crisis scenarios. Inspired by Lobinger's (2016) work on creative and participatory visual methods, these digital artefacts were not treated as data objects to be analysed in isolation, but as prompts for interaction, reflection, and collective sensemaking. In this context, digital technologies functioned as quasi-participants with whom human participants could engage, question, and respond. This approach challenged conventional boundaries between researcher, participant, and method, and opened up new ways of engaging with complex and emotionally charged themes.

The principle of **non-digital-centricity** ensured that digital ethnography did not become technologically deterministic. Rather than centring the analysis on technology itself, digital tools were used to surface deeper insights into everyday leadership practice, relational tensions, and lived experiences of crisis. This was particularly evident in the IRL exercise titled The Red Thread, where digital media facilitated exploration of continuity, rupture, and tension in participants' leadership journeys. Here, digital technologies acted as mediators that enabled participants to articulate human concerns around responsibility, vulnerability, and meaning, rather than as the focal point of analysis.

Openness was a defining feature of the digital ethnographic process. Digital ethnography, as Pink et al. (2015) argue, is inherently processual and open-ended, evolving alongside technological change. This was especially visible with the arrival of ChatGPT during the early stages of fieldwork, which rapidly became a topic of organisational debate, curiosity, and anxiety. Remaining open to such emergent developments allowed the research to capture digital technologies as they were being actively negotiated and made sense of by leaders in real time, rather than retrospectively theorised. This openness also reinforced the collaborative nature of DE, as participants contributed to shaping the direction and form of digitally mediated inquiry.

Finally, **reflexivity** was integral to the digital ethnographic approach. The researcher's engagement with digital technologies, participants, and emergent data formed part of an ongoing reflexive practice in which encounters with both human and non-human actors were systematically recorded and interpreted (Pink et al., 2015; Goodall, 1991; Silverman, 2019). Rather than treating reflexivity as a source of bias to be minimised, it was mobilised as an analytic resource that illuminated how meanings around leadership, crisis, time, and space were co-produced. In particular, reflexive engagement with AI and digital language raised questions about how leadership sensemaking is shaped by algorithmic mediation and large language models.

In conclusion, digital ethnography was adopted as a methodological response to the growing entanglement of digital technologies, leadership practice, and polycrisis. It enabled access to diverse voices, supported innovative and immersive forms of engagement, and expanded the ethnographic field beyond physical and human boundaries. By treating digital technologies as both method and participant, digital ethnography contributed to a richer, more nuanced understanding of Leadership-As-Practice in conditions of organisational polycrisis.

Overview timeline of the empirical process and data collection

While the research process unfolded inductively and often non-linearly, it is possible in retrospect to trace a discernible sequence of data collection activities, where each method generated clues that informed the design, focus, and refinement of the next. This overview timeline is offered to support the reader in navigating the empirical chapters that follow and to clarify how the different methods interrelate across time.

Phase 1: Establishing the ethnographic field and research position (Pre-fieldwork - Early Fieldwork)

The research began with securing an ethnographic 'home' through the development of a parallel theory-to-practice innovation role as a Data Philosopher in a global engineering consultancy firm. This step enabled prolonged immersion in organisational life while maintaining ethical and intellectual independence. Early observations, informal conversations, and reflexive field notes generated initial concepts around the shifting

leadership identity and practice, acceleration of the complex multiple contexts and the introduction of polycrisis. These early clues informed both the epistemological positioning of the study and the decision to adopt an interpretive, inductive methodology grounded in ethnography.

How this phase informed the next:

Early immersion revealed the centrality of digital technologies in the experience and perception of space and time and their potential impact on leadership practice, leading directly to the adoption of digital ethnography as one of the methodological approaches.

Phase 2: Digital Ethnography and exploratory sensemaking (Early-Mid Fieldwork)

Digital ethnography was introduced as both a method and a site of inquiry. Engagement with platforms such as LinkedIn, online communication tools, AI systems, and digital diaries enabled access to geographically and professionally diverse participants, while also positioning digital technologies as active participants in the research process. Concurrent reflexive writing captured emerging questions about time, identity, sensemaking, and leadership practice in multiple crisis contexts.

How this phase informed the next:

Insights from digital ethnography highlighted the need for a broader, more diverse empirical base and shaped the design of the initial questionnaire as a way of taking a ‘temperature check’ of leadership perceptions across contexts.

Phase 3: Questionnaire data collection (Early-Mid Fieldwork)

The online questionnaire served a dual purpose. First, it generated qualitative and descriptive quantitative data that mapped shared concerns, tensions, and language used by leaders navigating crisis, digital transformation, and complexity. Second, it functioned as a recruitment mechanism for subsequent interviews and focus groups. Rapid responses and wide dissemination provided early pattern recognition across industries and geographies.

How this phase informed the next:

Preliminary analysis of questionnaire responses informed the development of semi-structured interview questions, ensuring that interviews probed emerging themes rather than imposing predefined categories.

Phase 4: One-to-One semi-structured interviews (Mid Fieldwork)

In-depth online interviews enabled deeper exploration of leaders' lived experiences, sensemaking practices, and reflexive accounts of leadership amid crisis. Interviews often departed from organisational narratives, revealing liminal experiences, emotional labour, and temporal disorientation. Confirmatory and disconfirmatory patterns began to emerge through iterative coding and reflexive analysis.

How this phase informed the next:

Interview analysis generated key themes, metaphors, and verbatim material that directly shaped the design of the Immersive Research Lab. The need to explore the shifting understanding of leadership and leadership in practice, in space and in time, collectively and in an embodied way, emerged from the contrast between individual in-depth interviews tested against the group dynamics.

Phase 5: Immersive Research Lab (Focus Group) (Late Fieldwork)

The Immersive Research Lab functioned as a digitally mediated, embodied focus group designed to test, disturb, and deepen emerging interpretations. Using mixed reality, AI-generated personas, sound, and visual storytelling, participants engaged with distilled interview data in multisensory ways. This phase enabled collective reflexivity, knowledge co-production, and the exploration of leadership as an emergent, relational practice.

How this phase informed the next:

Observations, participant feedback, and artefacts from the Immersive Research Lab provided a final layer of qualitative data, confirming some themes while complicating others. This phase also sharpened theoretical sensitivity around embodiment, affect, and relational leadership. It also surfaced a new phenomenon of the disembodiment of the 'always visible' digitally augmented leadership identity and practice.

Phase 6: Ongoing autoethnographic, and reflexive analysis and asynchronous triangulation (Across All Phases)

Throughout the project, data analysis did not occur as a single, post-collection stage but as an ongoing, asynchronous practice. Field notes, personal diaries (vignettes), interview transcripts, questionnaire data, and focus group observations were repeatedly revisited,

coded, and triangulated across time, space, and persons. Reflexive and poetic writing functioned as both an analytic and sensemaking practice, allowing breakdowns, breakthroughs, and breakaways to shape theoretical development.

How this phase informs later chapters:

The layered and iterative nature of this analysis underpins the empirical chapters that follow, where findings are presented not as linear results but as interconnected stories, patterns, and poetic expressions emerging from the research mystery. It also revealed the more personal experiences of the researcher/leader immersed in polycrisis.

Taken together, this timeline demonstrates how each method both responded to and generated clues, creating a cumulative and dialogical research process. The following chapters draw directly on this sequence, tracing how Leadership-As-Practice in polycrisis stories emerged through the interplay of digital ethnography, interviews, immersive experimentation, and autoethnographic, reflexive analysis.

Overview Timeline of Data Collection, Methodological Flow, and Alignment with Findings Chapters

Phase & Approx. Timing	Purpose / Research Focus	Primary Methods & Activities	Data Generated	How This Phase Informed the Next	Primary Contribution to Later Chapters
Phase 1: Establishing the Ethnographic Field (Pre-fieldwork – Early Fieldwork)	Secure access to the field; position researcher as insider–outsider; attune to context	• Development of theory-to-practice innovation role • Prolonged organisational	• Observational field notes • Informal conversations • Reflexive diary entries	Early immersion revealed leadership uncertainty, crisis conditions, and the pervasive role of	Chapters 2&3 Narrowing focus of the literature review and introducing the concept of polycrisis

		immersion • Early reflexive field notes		digital technologies, prompting the turn towards digital ethnography.	Chapter 5: Contextual framing of leadership, crisis, and Digital Chapter 8 (Discussion): Reflexive positioning of the researcher
Phase 2: Digital Ethnography (DE) (Early–Mid Fieldwork)	Investigate leadership and polycrisis in digitally mediated organisational life; treat digital as actor	• Engagement with digital platforms (LinkedIn, Zoom, AI tools)• Digital diary (Penzu)• Online observation and interaction	• Digital field notes• Reflexive observations of AI and platform dynamics• Sensitising concepts	DE foregrounded themes of temporality, identity, mediation, and sensemaking, shaping the exploratory focus of the questionnaire.	Chapter 5: Digital, AI, and leadership sensemaking Chapter 7: Time, space, and mediated experience
Phase 3: Questionnaire (Mid Fieldwork)	Establish a broad ‘temperature check’ of	• Online questionnaire (Qualtrics) • Video-	• Descriptive quantitative outputs• Qualitative open-text	Identified shared tensions and dominant	Chapter 5: Dominant discourses and

	leadership perception s; recruit participant s	based recruitmen t via LinkedIn• Snowball and stratified sampling	responses• Interview and focus group recruitment pool	narratives, directly informing interview prompts and sampling strategy.	contextual pressures Chapter 7: Entry points into leadership experience
Phase 4: One-to-One Interviews (Mid–Late Fieldwork)	Explore lived experience , reflexivity, and leadership-as-practice in depth	• 25–30 semi-structured online interviews (Zoom)• Concurrent note-taking and reflexive journaling	• Interview recordings and transcripts• In-vivo coded excerpts• Observational notes	Interviews revealed embodied, emotional, and liminal aspects of leadership, motivating the design of an embodied, collective method (IRL).	Chapter 6: Leadership-as-practice through the lens of PAs, liminality, power, and relational dynamics, reframing Leadership through the lens of language Chapter 5: Crisis, identity, and temporal disruption
Phase 5: Immersive Research Lab (IRL) (Late Fieldwork)	Test and deepen emerging themes through collective,	• In-person immersive focus group• Mixed reality, AI	• Researcher notes• Participant notes, drawings, and feedback•	Confirmed , complicate d, and extended interview	Chapter 6: Collective and relational leadership practice

	embodied, and digitally mediated engagement	personas, sound and visual storytelling • Facilitated collective reflexivity	Observational insights	findings, foregrounding leadership as relational, emergent, and affective. Digital augmentation	Chapter 5: Embodiment, affect, and digital augmentation of leadership practice and perception
Phase 6: Ongoing Reflexive Analysis and Triangulation (Across all phases)	Make sense of ‘data mess’ through layered, interpretive analysis	• Reflexive writing (personal and professional diaries)• Iterative coding (Milanote) • Asynchronous triangulation	• Thematic clusters• Narrative and poetic expressions• Theoretical insights Autoethnographic story of leading in polycrisis	Enabled the synthesis of patterns across time, space, persons, and methods, shaping the final empirical narrative and theoretical contribution.	Chapters 5–7: Integrated findings Chapter 7 Autoethnographic account of “poetry-as-practice in polycrisis” Chapter 8: Theoretical contribution and methodological reflection

Table 3 Timeline of Data Collection, Methodological Flow, and Alignment with Findings Chapters

To summarise, this table reconstructs a largely non-linear, inductive research process into a coherent sequence for the reader. While phases overlapped in practice, each method generated clues that shaped subsequent activities and contributed distinctly to the empirical chapters that follow.

Empirical sampling

The conscious intentionality of recruiting diverse representation of professions as well as gender, age and ethnicity informed the design strategy. This decision was illuminated by my literature review experience, where I had realised that the majority of the crisis and leadership literature I had cited was written by men. I was curious to explore other perspectives and experiences that would have greater diversity than that presented in the literature review. Gaining access to diverse stories was achieved by applying several routes of participant recruitment across both the physical and digital, ethnographic field. These routes were identified and selected by taking the following steps:

Step 1- Find my ethnographic, research home (an multi-disciplinary organisation with a global reach).

Step 2- Reach out to industry bodies, academia and non-profits to gain further exposure.

Step 3- Engage with a professional, social media platforms (LinkedIn) to further expand the geography and diversity.

Step 4- Call to action across diversity of industries and disciplines through an online questionnaire and video posts.

Step 5- Select a sample

Using Silverman's (2008) metaphor of a dance, these steps formed more of a design choreography of accessing the empirical material and therefore rarely followed a linear trajectory. The recruitment of participants for the interviews and focus group (Immersive Research Lab) was an ongoing process that continued from my last research (as part of the MSc independent research project, see Appendix 12). The project had already gained a lot of attention from various individuals, and organisations who had expressed interest in the research subject and in the research participation. As a result, I had been invited to give talks and keynotes about the topic of my previous and current research, and I used these forums to

promote my work, and invite interested individuals, and organisations to participate in the upcoming project. The audience had an opportunity to scan a QR code with my LinkedIn details and my university email address, where they could enquire about how/when they can get involved. I have also been featured in profile articles by Kevri and Arup, and WISE (supplied with the link to my details for further enquiries). In the aftermath of the Paris Agreement, #MeToo, #BLF, and the rise of AI, the initially targeted participants for this project were leaders involved in digital/data, EDI and sustainable development initiatives. These areas seemed to have impacted organisations and leaders during and after the pandemic which could offer valuable clues to leadership amid crisis and change.

Upon receiving ethical approval from the Ethics Committee, the initial recruitment of participants had commenced. It was initially made of convenience sampling (10 leaders who had previously expressed willingness to participate), followed by the majority of snowball sampling (1K of my LinkedIn followers some of whom would share/reshare on their profiles; current contacts sharing with their network via email, Arup comms sharing on their media channels- 760K on LinkedIn) as well as stratified random sampling (the targeted sample is for leaders working in digital/data, sustainable development and EDI sectors, and direct and indirect contacts were encouraged to share the participation invite to those leaders in their own network). An invite to participate in the research was generated via a video link/post explaining the research project, what was involved and the next steps. The video ended with a QR code which led to the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix 5), Questionnaire Consent Form (Appendix 6) and the Questionnaire (Appendix 7).

The rationale for using this form of recruitment tool were accessibility and approachability. The LinkedIn algorithm favours video content (higher response rate) which in turn offers a higher likelihood for people to share and reshare the video on their social media channels (snowball sampling). Questionnaire participants had an opportunity to self-select for further research by providing their email address and stating which part (interviews/focus groups) they wished to participate.

1.Questionnaire

The purpose of the questionnaire was twofold. Firstly, to collect qualitative data; sort of a 'temperature check' of the perception of the context and its key aspects that would provide the basis for forming interview questions as well as the design of the Immersive Research Lab. The questionnaire was formed of close-ended quantitative questions posted/sent to

participants using Qualtrics (Appendix 7). An invite to participate in the questionnaire was generated via a video link/post explaining the research project, what is involved and the next steps. The ease of accessibility meant that in less than five minutes a busy leader could complete the questionnaire and share it amongst their own network. This strategy proved very effective as within just a couple of weeks the link has been directly reposted 15 times and with over 5000 impressions. This created access to a larger pool and diversity of potential participants that otherwise would have been incredibly difficult to access. The second reason for the questionnaire was to recruit for further interviews and focus groups. At the end of the questionnaire, there was an invitation for voluntary participation in interviews and/or focus groups.

2. 1-2-1 Interviews:

1-2-1 interviews were designed as semi-structured, qualitative lasting between 30-45min and conducted via Zoom platform. These online interviews were recorded upon receiving the participant's written and verbal consent. During the interview, impressions, the body language and key words and themes were additionally noted. In two instances the consent for recording was not granted and subsequently, notes were taken. All participants were sent questions prior to the interview along with a consent form and Participant Information Sheet. The sample size for this part of the project was aimed at 25-30 participants. The participants were selected through the combination of convenience sampling and self-selection from the snowball and random stratified sampling via LinkedIn and email video campaigns (as detailed above).

3. Focus groups (The Immersive Research Lab)

The purpose of this exercise was to add another layer of practical context and qualitative data as part of the triangulation process and distillation/testing of key themes using digital ethnography (interacting with digital technologies). To prevent risk of harm, no topics deemed sensitive were discussed in this setting, and special attention to ensure this was paid by the moderator. This was a purely experimental exercise, focusing on aspects of discovery, ideation and play using sound/image, and immersive technologies (Augmented Reality and AI) as ways of testing and producing knowledge from emerging theories and hypotheses. This was based on the real-time observations and impressions as experienced during the session as well as discussions that emerged. All participants were sent a consent form with a Participant Information Sheet and the focus group agenda. The first (immersive) part of the

focus group was held in the Digital Experience Lab followed by a short refreshment break before commencing the last part in a large room. This was designed as an in-person, 90min experience (see Appendix 9). Initially, 18 participants were selected for this exercise through the combination of convenience sampling and self-selection from the snowball and random stratified sampling via LinkedIn and email video campaign (as detailed above). The focus group consisted of individuals previously unknown to each other (to the best of my knowledge), so that pre-existing relationships, and certain assumptions or expectations that these involve, did not influence disclosure. The group was also selected to ensure a diverse spectrum of gender, ethnicity, geography and professional discipline backgrounds. Participants were briefed about the confidentiality clause and were given a selection of gender-neutral tag names to choose from and use for the duration of the focus group. All participants were briefed before the event about the non-disclosure of personal information and ethical boundaries. In addition to giving information in advance of a focus group, prior to starting the session the moderator discussed and negotiated a set of ground rules.

Challenges and Limitations

Although the recruitment strategy proved effective in gaining access to a diverse pool of participants for the online interviews, the logistics and access to the in-person focus group were more challenging.

The initial plan was to have two to three focus group sessions with different participants (5-10) in each. This had to be scaled down to just one session with ten participants. The number of participants was restricted by the technical capacity to effectively run the session. Further consideration was given to making sure that the group was small enough to allow everyone to participate and contribute to discussion in the 90min session, arriving at the minimum of five and maximum of ten participants.

Further challenge arose when trying to ensure geographical diversity, and that participants did not just represent London but extended into other geographies in the UK. The train services at the time, were susceptible to large scale strikes often announced with just a few days' notice. The proposed three dates from which the participants could select their attendance were thus reduced to one session.

Further cancellations resulted in just one session attended by seven participants from London, North and West Yorkshire, Norwich and Sussex. The group was made of four female and three male leaders from white and non-white ethnicities representing five different industries (see Appendix 4 for participants demographic details).

To ensure anonymity as well as technological constraints (multiple locations, dynamism of the session) meant that the recording of the session was not possible and instead notes were taken during the session. The group was very engaged and vocal which in turn proved difficult in trying to stay present, whilst running the exercises and taking notes. This, however, was mitigated by providing “doodlepads” for individual notes taken at the time. Additional reflections and feedback were sent to the participants after the session (Appendix 8).

Immersive Research Lab

The idea of designing the focus group as an Immersive Research Lab (IRL) was inspired by the research mystery as well as the literature on embodied ways of perceiving, absorbing and making sense of information used in creative research methods (Gilmore 2024; Linstead 2022; Stewart 2005; Kara 2015). Furthermore, Silverman (2008; 2019) advises on using feedback sessions with participants where the initial research data is presented and tested. He argues that this process can not only elevate the existing empirical material but also identify gaps in both participants' accounts and the data. Having gathered the initial questionnaire and interviews data I wanted to test some of the themes that emerged from the two methods along with the observations from the field work. While during the interviews leaders have opened up, often departing from the party lines of their organisations or industry, in the group settings the opposite was true. Since L-A-P explores the collective aspects of leadership practice I wanted to test other ways of engaging with the same level of reflexive attunement I have experienced in 1-2-1 interviews but in a collective setting. I was curious about capturing leadership-as-practice as it emerges by observing the poetics of the moment. This required leaders to shed their constructed identities by reaching a deeper and more embodied state of reflexivity which I already experienced during the interview process. The clue to achieving this in a group setting was in the work of Morgan (2022), Linstead (2022), Kara (2015), Stewart (2005) and others who encourage engaging with arts to elucidate unbridled

reflexivity. Having gained access to an immersive and virtual reality studio I decided to engage with digital technology as a medium of creating an immersive, multi-modal environment of experiencing and testing empirical data. This resulted in the ninety-minute, interactive focused group which I called “The Immersive Research Lab”.

The design

The multiplicity and unorthodox principles of DE (Pink et al, 2015) as well as Lonbinger’s (2016) work on creative and participatory visual approaches in audience research further informed the design process to include the engagement with AI (as described in the DE section). The overall design process was cantered around these three questions: How can I capture the process of L-A-P in flux when exposed to the research data? How can I invite unbridled reflexivity and openness to the context, self and other? How can I make this an embodied experience of interaction with the dynamic data? What other clues will be produced as a result?

The following Exercises 1, 2 and 3 depict the final design.

Exercise 1 “The BBC experiment”- the cultural poesis and affect (entering context and complexity)

The first experiment focused on exploring the idea of the contextual and relational comprehension of what might seem distant or alien but is in fact local. The “cultural poesis and affect” of accessing “different kinds of intelligence” constituted by embodied knowledge, emotion, interaction, and change of perspectives in dynamic settings (Thrift 2008, page 175; Stewart, 2005). Using mixed reality (augmented and virtual reality), the experiment was designed to immerse the participants in experiencing “an ‘intensive’ spatiality of affects ... between built space and individual resonances”, where “in touching and affecting the spaces we move within, we are correspondingly touched and affected”(Paterson 2007, page 101). In this exercise we began to experience the idea of leadership-as-practice by immersing participants in the orchestral rehearsal at the BBC studios. The participants could assume any position in the orchestra or the audience. With each change of the position, they would experience a different view (perspective) and different sound as well as relationship to other

members of the orchestra. Below is the image from the Immersive Research Lab experience. See Appendix 9 for a full design and script.

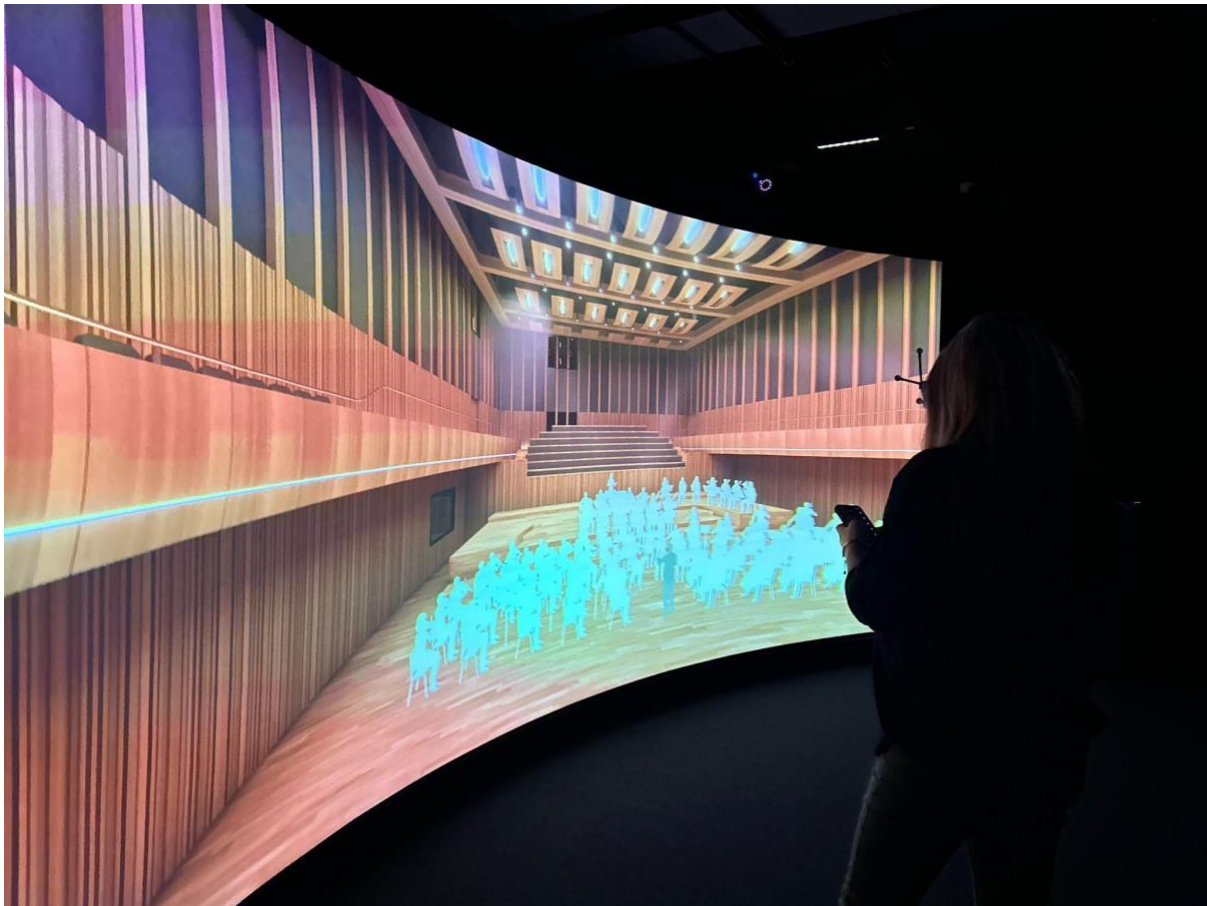


Figure 6 The BBC Experiment Photo by Ola Gwozdz (Immersive Research Lab)

Exercise 2: “The Persona experiment”- on becoming and unbecoming (self).

This experiment focused on reflexive exploration of ‘self’ as a leader. The participants were immersed (through sound and image) in direct quotes and descriptions of the interview participants, interpreted and personified using artificial intelligence. The exercise was a journey of “becoming and unbecoming” of leaders and their reflections on the dynamic process of forming an identity in shifting contexts (Grosz 2005; Deleuze 2004; Knights and Kerfoot 2004; Knights 2022; Collinson 2017). The additional, virtual participant represented by the AI persona offered a further scope for discussion about the role and impact of digital as well as the reflected biases of its creators.



Figure 7 The Persona Experiment Photo by Ola Gwozdz (Immersive Research Lab)

For a full design and script please see Appendix 9

Exercise 3: “The Red Thread experiment” - The emergent and relational nature of leadership (others)

This experiment focused on Leadership as a dynamic space marked by connections and tensions. Tension and connection exist together and make up this leadership space. As we experience these, we find ourselves in the entanglement of our experiences, connections and tensions of our own and ‘others’ - people, nature and technologies (Sheldrake 2021; Thrift 2008; Wood and Dibben 2015). These are often experienced in our minds and felt in our bodies (Sinclair 2007). By shifting from the traditional interpretation of leaders marked by heroic individualism and as separate from the followers and instead focusing on the space in between the leaders as and the ‘other’ and the real-life tensions and connections that govern this in-betweenness (Raelin 2011, 2016, 2023). For a full design and script please see Appendix 4.



Figure 8 The Red Thread Experiment Photo by Ola Gwozdz (Immersive Research Lab)

Concluding comments and observations

In just 90 minutes, the seven strangers became strangely connected and unified. The energy was high yet interweaved with moments of deep reflection and reflexivity. At the end of the final experiment, I asked if any participants would like to take the red thread and wrap it around their wrist as a memento-experientia (a memento of the experience). All participants came forward to have their red thread tied on their wrists. Some kept their thread for weeks. Here is an excerpt from an email from one of the participants: “ It was a lovely experience, and I still have my piece of wool. In fact, I think I might weave it into something else to remind me. We do need reminding that sometimes disliking the same experience is as bonding as liking the same things.” (IRL participant)

My red thread is still on my wrist as I’m writing this chapter. It is tatty and frayed but insistent on staying with me a bit longer, reminding me of these incredible 90 minutes with seven strangers trying to make sense of context, self and others as they engage in a “leaderful practice” (Raelin 2011 p.165).



Figure 9 My memento-experientia Photo by Ola Gwozdz

Data analysis method

“I operate within two worlds. One where data is and one where data are.

The first one has grown in confidence and power over the years. It boasts big statements like ‘data is the new gold’ and ‘data is the new oil’. It believes that data-enabled businesses have found their pot of data gold. In the second world data are made of threads and patterns, relationships and interactions. They can be dynamic and dichotomous, steady and capricious. As I reflect on this seemingly small inflexion, I try to make sense of these two worlds. Of the different types of data I’m exposed to and interact with, and the stories that these worlds reveal.”

(entry from the field notes)

Selecting the data analysis method

When investigating a dynamic ‘space’ of a mystery rather than a fixed gap it becomes apparent that the clues rarely come from a single source or indeed in a single format. Thus multiple ways of accessing, seeing and interpreting such clues needed to be adopted. This in turn required a robust yet diverse methodology of analysing this rich and in-depth data that would lead to uncovering “a meaningful order of persons and things” (Sahlins 1976). Silverman (2019) suggests a method of a sequential analysis, a choreography of steps, akin to a ‘dance’ with an empirical material. He believes that the sequence is crucial to the understanding of the material.

Goodall uses this sequential approach in the way he uncovers the mystery: “being a good detective is about using observations and interviews to elicit information and then using the information to establish motives, patterns, and connections” (2000, page 24). By “learning to read clues into the weave of contexts” leads in turn to constructing “layered account” of not one, but many stories (Goodall 2000, page 24); Goodall cited in Clair, 2003, p.56). This “layering’ of time, space, persons and contexts is what Denzin refers to as triangulation.

Triangulation

Fusch et al. observe that there is a “direct link between triangulation and data saturation” and that triangulation not only helps in organising and making sense of data but it “adds depth to the data that is collected” (2018, page 20). It is important to point out that data triangulation is often confused with methodological triangulation (mentioned earlier) which speaks to the way the data is generated rather than analysed. Denzin distinguishes between the two by suggesting that “data triangulation has three inter-related and ongoing subtypes: (a) time, (b) space, and (c) persons,” whereas “methodological triangulation can entail within-method and between-method triangulations” (1978, page 237). Fusch et al. adds that in case of data triangulation, the focus is on “discovering commonalities within dissimilar settings“, by analysing different data sources and representations within the same contexts (Fusch et al. 2018, page 22). This method can also extend to theories (theory triangulation) and other academic literature (investigator triangulation) (Fusch et al. 2018). Fusch et al. refers to triangulation as a “crystal refraction” of different viewpoints in order to extrapolate the truth and meaning of data or what Goodall refers to as “truth and beauty” (Fusch et al. 2018, page 20; Goodall 1994). Goodall advises using the combination of Denzin’s ‘triangulations’ augmented by reflexivity and intuition:

“ I begin to see patterns in the fieldwork that correspond to personal experiences and pieces I’ve read. When I begin to see those patterns emerge, I follow them. I try to connect those clues, those dots. I ask questions of the lines of reasoning and intuition that connect them in my head. Then I try to analyse and understand the making of those lines of reasoning... I am connecting fieldnotes to an emerging story.” (Lloyd Goodall 2000, page 120)

It is this augmented triangulation that was chosen as the most appropriate method to analyse the high saturation and diversity of gathered data.

However, qualitative data rarely come as neatly organised and fully formed units of information. Indeed, throughout this project data would often reveal itself in unexpected ways and in unexpected forms, from unexpected sources and in unexpected times. The complexity and fluidity of the research mystery and indeed the research field resembled what Law (2004) calls “data mess”. Law argues that traditional methods of research enquiry fail to reflect the “messes of reality” and capture the “poetics of interventionary narrative” (2004, p.3). Law’s analogy of data as living, fluid and messy encourages the relinquishing of the neat and precise view of reality and instead invites the perception of imperceptibility and nuance.

Law's invitation inspired me to initially map out all data sources in a form of a multi-dimensional, data collage (Figure 10). This process allowed for capturing the non-linear and conversational nature of data sources that emerged through the process of following the clues in this complex, research mystery.

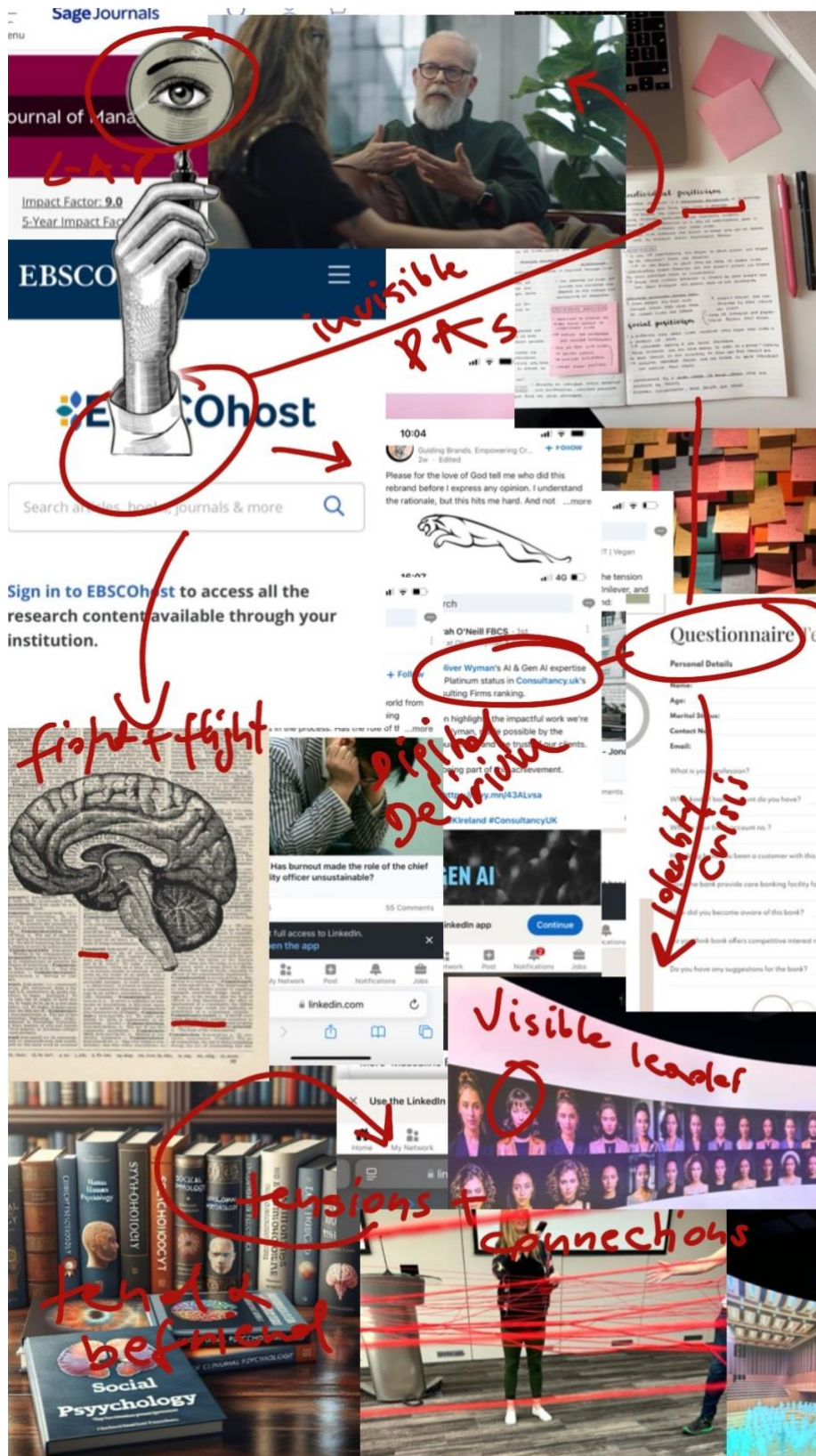


Figure 10 Data collage

Living the research mystery and indeed the research questions as they continued to emerge and evolve meant that different sources would produce data at different times and in different contexts of the mystery. Sometimes they formed connections and links leading to themes and initial stores, other times they would form breakdowns that could not be resolved or made little sense at the time. The messy complexity, and the asynchronous nature of data as they unfold called for multi-layered process of triangulation. Indeed, this process happened asynchronously and at multiple times, returning to theories and clues, that at each step would reveal new patterns or new stories. The Figure 11 (below) shows the process of the asynchronous triangulation of 'data mess' between difference sources.



Figure 11 Asynchronous triangulation of 'data mess' inspired by Law (2004).

This multidimensional and multi-directional, asynchronous process tested both theories and data against the superficial and rushed conclusions, leading to a deeper and more complex reflections. Out of the breakdowns, breakthroughs and breakaways emerged themes that formed patterns. Some came out as fully formed poetic expressions, others led to stories. What this process revealed is that triangulation is not a single, analytical act (once all data are

collected) but rather an ongoing practice in the course of a research mystery. One that captures the “poetics of interventionary narrative” over and over until the mystery of the story begins to come alive (Goodall, 2004, p.3). While this process requires rigorous analysis through coding, pattern-finding and theory-testing, the interpretive nature of this research project required a deeper engagement of the self through the practice of reflexive writing.

The practice of the reflexive self

“I think you don’t choose to do it as much as it chooses you”.
(Goodall, 2000, p.9)

The process of becoming an interpretive ethnographer is one that requires complete surrender. It’s a process of ‘becoming/unbecoming’ and being comfortable with the discomfort of questioning, de-constructing and reconstructing of self and others in a studied context (Bergson, 1946). “Can I construct/make sense of this material in another way than suggested by the preferred perspective/vocabulary? Can I let myself be surprised by this material? Can it productively and fairly be constructed in a way that kicks back at my framework and how we—in my research community—typically see and interpret things?” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007, p.1270).

Interpretive ethnographers understand that you can’t understand the most important things from a distance, you’ve got to stay close. “The knowledge and the person doing knowledge work/development cannot be separated” and should be cultivated through discipline, self-analysis and self-critique (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007; Calas and Smircich, 1992; Mills, 1959; Weick, 1989). Contrary to some of the critique against elevating oneself to the “i” of the research, it is the vulnerable “I” rather than the egocentric “I”. Choosing the vulnerable “I” “implies a shift in our understanding of data and its collection- something that is accomplished through an ongoing, internal dialogue, and constant (and intensive) scrutiny of ‘what I know’ and ‘how I know it’” (Hertz, 1997, p.vii-viii). The questions of ‘self’ in ethnography are not only about our position within the text of the research but also the internal transformation along the research process and “who we find ourselves to be when we get there” (Goodall, 1991, p.21). The researcher is in a constant, “multi-lingual” conversation between the unfolding empirical material and academic frameworks (Alvesson and

Karreman, 2007, p.1267). Cultivation of this conversation is an important process of the interpretive work, triangulation and the final framing and crafting of the written language. Alvesson and Karreman (2007) suggest using a combination of flexible theoretical frameworks with a reflexive approach towards empirical material are the key elements for keeping such conversation relevant, innovative and “theoretically inspiring” (p.1270). Below excerpt from the field notes journal speaks to this internal, reflexive dialogue:

“Learning of the Self:

Before we learn about others we must first learn about ourselves. Before we journey with and amongst others, we must first journey with and into ourselves.

Only when we know who we are can we truly learn who others are, otherwise we seek ourselves in the eyes of the one we look at, we smile at them as if to say: hello stranger, only to find we were in fact estranged from ourselves.”

(entry from the field notes journal)

Goodall describes reflexivity as “the process of personally and academically reflecting on lived experiences in ways that reveal the deep connections between the writer and her or his subject” (2000, p.137). To be reflexive is to hold a mirror to oneself each time questions about the context and others arise. The image seen in the mirror is one of the reflexive self “pointing to the struggle to acquire an awareness of how paradigms, sociopolitical contexts, frameworks, and vocabularies are involved in shaping the researcher’s constructions of the world at hand and his or her moves in doing something with the world”. (Alvesson and Karreman, 2007, p.1267; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Calas & Smircich, 1999; Hardy & Clegg, 1997).

Conversely, Silverman (2019) argues that reflexivity not only deals with capturing one’s own (researcher’s) reflections but those of participants. The process of capturing reflexive data of self and others was interwoven throughout the ethnographic experience and was particularly pronounced during the interviews and the Immersive Research Labs.

While reflexivity speaks to the process of an internal dialogue, “voice is the personal rhetorical imprint of who we are in and on what we write...a sound of a character speaking” (Goodall, 2000, p.139-140, Goodall, 1994b). It starts quiet and soft and it’s easy to miss at first. As it starts to engage in harmonies and rhythms arising from own stories and those of

others, it grows in strength and timber encouraging others (the readers) to join in. The voice is expressed through the writing style of the researcher often shaped and by internal and external influences (the supervisors, the literature, the life itself). Reflexivity and voice require practice, patience and discipline in crafting the “rhetorical character”, but most importantly, they require trust in the research process of becoming/unbecoming and in the still-small voice of the intuitive self (Bergson, 1946).

Organising of data

The chosen method of analysis in turn required a systematic and rigorous way of organising and storing data. The questionnaire data was stored and automatically analysed by Qualtrics software. The software enabled instant access to required data in the form of a graph, percentage or other filters relevant to each question. This provided an initial visual backdrop of researched contexts and helped in shaping the interview questions (Appendix 10). The interview recordings (audio and video) as well as transcripts were stored on the University of York server using Filestore and protected by double authentication. The transcripts were analysed for emerging themes and key quotes. These were then coded using in-vivo, colour-coded, clustered and transferred to Milanote digital board platform (Appendix 11).

The field notes were taken and stored in the Penzu digital diary (that is password-protected and encrypted for national protection) that enabled not only an easy access from any device in hand but allowed for making voice, text and image entries.

The personal diary remained in an analogue, pen-to-paper format and acted as a morning ritual for an unbridled, reflexive thought-processing and sensemaking.

From fieldwork to field notes

Fieldnotes are a critical part of empirical data collection. Goodall advises keeping two types of accounts from the field in the form of personal diaries and professional records (2000). A personal diary acts as a space for recording more intimate accounts that aren’t intended for public consumption. My personal diary was inspired by Julia Cameron’s “The Artist Way Morning Pages Journal” where she introduces a ritual (designed for artists and writers) of writing first thing in the morning in order to ‘download’ your brain onto the pages of your journal. I found this method effective in reckoning with anything that was on my mind from

the previous day and processing it through this unbridled, writing ritual. Sometimes this served as a way of deepening into my own reflexive self, other times it acted as a form of therapy. No matter what happened or how busy I got, I would show up every day to write in my Morning Pages. This very analogue experience of writing with pen onto paper felt sacred, and I cannot stress the importance of this ritual when doing interpretive ethnography and the impact it had on developing my voice and my reflective self. In the last months in the field, during experiencing my own crisis, this practice transformed into writing poetry. It took me by surprise but through it I was able to access deeper wisdom, knowledge and experience of “Poetry in Crisis” (as described Chapter 7).

The professional records of my field notes were documented using a digital diary called Penzu. Penzu is an encrypted, password-protected platform for writing and note-taking that enables users to access it from any electronic device in hand (mobile phone, PC, tablet). It allowed for writing text as well as uploading photos and images. This digital notebook served as a way to capture my observations, thoughts and wonderings, encounters and exchanges in the field. Goodall (2000) categorises field notes as records of: “verbal exchanges”, “practices” and “implied, inferred, or interpreted connections between and among them” (p.98). Some were more factual others more reflective:

“Writing is a practice, but ethnographic writing is more than that, it's a ritual. A ritual that goes beyond entering text onto the pages of an academic, rigorously curated work. It's a ritual that requires discipline of mind and a fully embodied presence with self, context and others. A presence with one's own fears of inadequacy, of "who am I to do this work?" and "why me?". The curation of the text is then secondary to the curation of self, to make sure you're never in a space of ego and certitude but always in a space of humility and hope that you are exactly where you need to be and that the clues will arrive and that you will find the courage to follow them. Writing is a ritual of cultivating self, the text is an expression of such ritual.” (22/07/23)

Coding

The collected data set spans across multiple dimensions, contexts and disciplines thus requiring multi-level coding in order to discover emerging patterns, stories and connections

in this research mystery. This called for a systematic and multi-step, coding design strategy to rigorously identify and follow the clues.

King's (2004) template analysis of ordering data through descriptive coding, organised hierarchically and relationally formed a basis for organising data sets in Milanote (Appendix 11). The flexibility of template analysis complements the unpredictable nature of qualitative research thus allowing for dynamic and non-linear following and reading "clues into the weave of contexts"(Lloyd Goodall 2000, page 24; Crotty 1998).

Initially, open coding was applied to identify and reflect emerging themes and ideas within a given disciplinary context (digital and AI, EDI, sustainable development).

These themes identified through DE, work in the field and within the questionnaire were selected and used for grouping the in-vivo, interview data sets. In a process of analysing the interview transcripts further sub-groups of additional and unique perspectives were formed (i.e. leading through crisis, temporal experiences, power dynamic). Soon relationships and patterns started to emerge which then were colour coded based on key words or themes. This approach was first applied to each interview data set and then again across all thirty interviews (see image below).

During this phase, a number of analytic techniques of generating the codes were used, such as 'flip-flop' looking at extremes in data; 'red flags' signalling expected/unexpected, visible/hidden, included/omitted data; and keyword analysis, listing all possible meanings and definitions of key concepts (i.e. Leadership, digital, crisis, uncertainty). In conjunction with this methodical coding, field and personal diaries capturing reflections, images, poetry and emerging stories, formed a significant part of this dynamic data analysis (Lloyd Goodall 2000).

As an example, it is during one of these literary deliberations that the idea of interviewing PA's as well as leaders emerged. Here's an excerpt from first communicating this idea with my supervisor:

"I had a bit of a revelation regarding leaders...As I'm booking all these interviews I have to go through the PAs. And PAs are so interesting as they have this unique perspective and positioning between the leaders and the followers, they occupy this 'liminal' space and see all interactions from the sidelines. If I want to get to the leader I need to get to his/her PA first, so how about I interview the PAs about their perspective on leadership and the changes they

have noticed and experienced in modern leaders? I think this would add some colour to the whole mystery as PAs themselves are in the shadows of the 'greats' often undervalued; mysterious yet super insightful characters... Keen to hear your thoughts..” (email to the supervisor).

Upon receiving encouragement from the supervisor to pursue this thread, I reached out to PA's of global directors. This proved to be one of the breakthrough and breakaway moments in uncovering the research mystery (see Chapter 6).

The initial coding (Figure 12) of the interviews and the data analysis led to designing the Immersive Research Lab (as outlined IRL section). Quotes and descriptions were used to contextualise each experiment and proved to be another breakthrough idea and moment in going deeper into the research mystery.

Digital: "anything that evolves a computer of any kind. So any interaction with any sort of system that requires like data or something" Change- people do care they're just not in a space for change "people want to do things differently, but they so that's really positive, you know. This gives me hope, at least, that people still have a desire to make change, even if they don't know how to do it, and it's just especially in digital." Digital optimism, human pessimism "digital technologies to to to bring faster and more significant change. But we just it's like a collective or something that we, you know, don't feel like we really do that anymore." we know we there's a better way but we don't do it coz it's too risky to change "We know that that works, but we still don't do it because we just don't. We just don't want to take the risk we we could in there."	mechanising old logic: "We like on the periphery here and there, doing some things and doing some other things. We followed the same process, but we just put it in something that's not paper, you know, and we've not truly changed the way we actually go about doing the thing doing" concern about lack of urgency in sustainability after Covid: "stop Button. Was that real and truly hit, and it just doesn't feel like we ever got going again." "People do really care. They do want to do things differently, and they do want to do things better." - that's where I get my inspiration from stating values without action "trying to as an organization to say that we're all about digital. And we've got this line where we say we use digital tools and technology to improve and in inspire. I believe that we should do that, but I don't think we do that"	Leadership: "what the first thought that came to my mind is actually things haven't changed that much at all, really" "and it's the sort of the person that's been put in a position to be. This, like all knowing entity that just makes all the decisions, and everyone just follows that really old school hierarchical way of doing things. And this is not how you know we really need places like to operate or successfully operate. But that's that's still what we do. This doesn't give people freedom" Lack of follow through, say the right things but no action: "We don't really feel it. I find it genuinely difficult to picture a situation where we would make truly make a financial sacrifice, not in terms of an investment, but actually we'll take the financial hit so that we can do something that improves up" So we we need to be able to look at our leaders for inspiration. But it's it. Doesn't really fit into the current structure" Leaders become leaders because they're specialist in one thing but we need generalism to understand context not just one discipline	"having a shared vision. That describes how the 3 are connected. And that's again something that's recognized by the organization will be super helpful to just make people's work more impacts in all 3 areas." "It's not so much about saving me time, probably, but just having a great impact on on of kind of the things that I do. So."
	Stoic vs more open to inspire. I would change everything		
"I tried to picture what that might look like. And I couldn't easily do that" "You can only imagine at the impact of that must be huge, but the guys, because I can't picture that clearly. That probably means that it would be a very big change from what we do now, so I think it would make it a really big difference" "I've also align those different aspects of how we go, about our business as a business that that could look really different, you know. But it needs really different way of of leading that too" It needs to be a more like genuinely collaborative approach to get to an answer that you know it would just be much better"	Alexandra language "I come with all of this social science baggage, and the language is completely different. And I'm trying to converse. Speak people that it's not all fluffy. And it's not all holy. And actually, when we talk about innovation, it's ultimately people that adopt innovation. And we're talking about consumers. We're talking about markets. We're talking about cultures. We're talking about so many things that technology alone will not solve."	Leadership: "It's a very personal journey. Because in the last 5 years I figured out a personal mission to be a catalyst of change. Maybe I am now more comfortable in using it, and a kind of thinking about myself as a leader in some ways, although maybe not in the traditional organizational kind of I am managing people." growing into a "leader voice" growth into a "leader voice"	
Digital: "with the digital there can't be just one, so you're always in it and context. And my context is the organization that I'm part of." digital needs social "From the beginning of how I make myself heard in the first place, to how can I get a few early adopters with me? And can you, yeah, we can champion the fact that we might need things like understanding behavioral insights or"		Leadership: "I am an accidental leader, it's not something I set out to achieve" I'm a leader of a team, a leader of a growing field for responsible technology and a leader of self (self-leadership) To be a leader in a field, is to be an active voice, to influence others, to champion a way of thinking and being Self-leadership:	
		Digital: "Digital is about applying the both ways of working and technologies of the internet to creating a new organizations, ways of existing and sharing value with people" "I think digital is the means now by which the majority of us have the greatest number of capabilities and power" "emerging definition of digital that this has to also include concepts of power and agency" Digital is not a neutral term: "small" digital and inclusivity: "can the benefits of digital be felt by more people by the most people possible. So it shifts from a kind of neutral definition in my mind when I was thinking about it, one that is political. It has to be because we want to live in a better future than the one we have today. And that requires decision making." self and context "I understand now that sort of separation between separation and connection, really between that self leadership, and then championing the change in the field"	

Figure 12 Initial interview coding

The researcher's notes (during and after the experiment) as well as participants' notes, drawings and feedback were further coded and formed the final qualitative layer of data.

Conclusions

This empirical research methodology was designed as a process of searching for clues through sustained attention to context, self, and others by noticing and analysing “the meaningful order of persons and things” (Goodall, 1991, p. 81). The contextual and theoretical complexity of the research problem, together with its emergent character, led me to reconceptualise the project as a mystery and the researcher as a detective engaged in an ongoing search for meaning (Goodall, 1994; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). The clues that emerged throughout the research not only shaped the direction of empirical discovery but also actively informed the methodological choices required to pursue them. This marked a decisive shift away from a rigid, pre-specified research design toward a dynamic and responsive process of discovery involving multiple, interrelated methods.

Grounded in the initial epistemological and ontological review, the project adopted an interpretive and phenomenological orientation. Multiple methods and data sources were brought into dialogue with one another, each shaping and reshaping the other over time. While the research began with a set of guiding questions, these evolved during fieldwork from questions located within a research space into a research space itself becoming the object of inquiry. This inductive turn was made possible through sustained engagement in the ethnographic field, which opened analytical directions that would not have been accessible through a linear or purely deductive approach. Early analyses of survey data and industry reports provided an important contextual backdrop, while the ethnographic and digital ethnographic phases added depth, texture, and new perspectives. Digital ethnography, in particular, expanded the analytical lens, unlocking new realms of creativity and alternative ways of seeing from the digital angle.

As insights emerged, I repeatedly returned to my fieldnotes, observations, and memos (vignettes) to trace the mechanisms behind systems, patterns, and relationships. This iterative process was characterised by moments of breakdown, breakthrough, and breakaway, marked by uncertainty and serendipitous discovery, by both ‘oh no’ and ‘aha’ moments. Each method enriched the others as the mystery unfolded. The process of noticing and analysing required close engagement with cultural textures and situational contexts, as well as sustained reflexivity of my own and that of participants. These reflexive practices were not supplementary; they were central to how meaning was produced and interpreted.

This methodological journey, however, was neither smooth nor linear. One of the most persistent challenges concerned chronology, both in conducting the research and in writing it. Methodological decisions often emerged in response to new clues encountered in the field, producing a back-and-forth, sideways movement rather than a sequential progression. These temporal dislocations were addressed, in part, through the incorporation of autoethnography. By positioning myself as both researcher and narrator, I was able to account for moments of disruption, vulnerability, and uncertainty as analytically productive rather than methodologically problematic. Writing from within moments of polycrisis made visible how knowledge was shaped through lived experience and ethical tension, and how these moments informed both methodological and theoretical insight.

Closely intertwined with these methodological concerns was an ongoing struggle with language and representation. Throughout the research journey, the question of how to represent complexity, emergence, and mystery across multiple stories was never far from my mind. I was not only navigating multiple empirical worlds, but also moving between multiple languages: technical, academic, anecdotal, and poetic. Each carried its own assumptions and ways of seeing, and each attempted (be it imperfectly) to give form to worlds from which different stories were emerging. Reflexivity and creativity were therefore not methodological embellishments but rather an essential practice for remaining faithful to the plurality of voices and realities encountered along the way (Pope et al., 2002; Kostera, 2022; Gilmore et al., 2019).

A persistent tension accompanied this process: the pull of the third-person academic voice, with its promise of coherence and authority, and the sense that such a voice would inevitably collapse the mystery into a single paradigm, a single story framed through scientific subjectivity. The knowing that emerged alongside the empirical material resisted this temptation. Instead, it pointed toward the need for a multi-paradigmatic, or perhaps beyond-paradigmatic, approach capable of holding what Law (2004) describes as “a wide range of transportable realities” (p. 9). Thrift’s call to move from “matters of fact” to “matters of concern” resonated deeply here (Thrift, 2008, p. 154). Indeed, to study leadership practice under conditions of polycrisis marked by acceleration, disruption, and continual flux required methodological responsiveness to movement, uncertainty, and change. Writing about that movement introduced another layer of complexity: how to represent what is constantly shifting without fixing it in place.

What followed was an evolving voice and position as I moved deeper into the mystery. This evolution was multidisciplinary, multimodal, and multilingual, oscillating between the analytical and the creative. It is visible across the thesis itself: from the predominantly third-person academic analysis of the early chapters, through increasingly interpretive and reflexive chapters, and into the poetic and artistic expressions that conclude the work. Writing became less about reporting findings and more about entering into conversation with the personal, the experimental, and the relational (Gilmore et al., 2019; Gilmore, 2024; Kostera, 2022).

This process was not without discomfort. Writing differently often felt like a quest rather than a technique, a search for meaning and beauty rather than mastery and metrics (Kostera, 2022). At times, it felt like a struggle between conforming to established academic forms and responding honestly to a mystery that resisted containment. Yet, as Merton (1948) reminds us, scientific writing often conceals the messiness of discovery. It is precisely through the unexpected, the anomalous, and the disruptive that new theories emerge or existing ones are extended. Serendipity, as Gabriel et al. (2014), De Rond (2014), and Feyerabend (1975) suggest, is not a methodological weakness but a scholarly capability: the ability to recognise opportunity and “to see bridges where others see holes”. Seen through this lens, what once appeared as chaotic breakdowns, breakthroughs, and breakaways become generative openings. They enabled new ways of accessing, analysing, and representing empirical material, producing not only new knowledge but new ways of knowing.

This thesis therefore embraces the ‘messy’ work of navigating liminal theoretical and empirical spaces, and of attending to stories and voices at the margins. The process unfolds as a dance between the autoethnographic self, complex and multimodal contexts, and the polyphonic other, capturing moments of transformation and being transformed through writing differently. This chapter, in particular, demonstrates the dynamic and often serendipitous need for methodological flexibility when engaging with shifting spaces and asynchronous temporalities, while investigating the mystery of leading amid polycrisis. The chapters that follow trace this transformation through stories, reflections, and experimental forms of writing, offering not a single answer but an invitation to remain with complexity, plurality, and becoming.

Chapter 5: Entering the mystery: leaders on leadership in polycrisis.

Introduction

The literature review identified gaps in theorising and contextualising crises in modern organisations and in leadership practice. The expansion of the aperture into other literature and scientific areas offered a fresh insight into contextualising crisis in terms of its complexity and emergence from the perspective of polycrisis, thus dispelling the notion of crisis being an isolated or singular event.

Consequently, through the lens of polycrisis the leadership practice enters a multi-paradigm realm. If ‘poly’ signals multitudes, then what are the multitude of stories, actors, identities, and practices caught in different context spaces? The further consideration of speed and acceleration also introduces uncertainty and ambiguity as different crisis contexts begin to converge and interact at different times and at different speeds. How does this asynchronous acceleration impact the practice, and what are the mechanisms of sensemaking and sensegiving amid the complexity and ambiguity?

The questions around “wholeness” but not “holism” both in addressing the context of polycrisis and the emerging leadership practice also arise in this mystery (Lawrence et al., 2022, p. 2; Morin 1992). According to Montuori (2013), leaders should be analysed and seen as ‘open systems’ through the lens of collective leadership practice, but to what extent is this openness enacted when instincts of self-preservation take hold?

Finally, what is the role of digital technologies in polycrisis and how do they inform the emergent polycrisis context space and the leadership practice?

This chapter begins to answer some of these questions through stories that arose from the data collection, synthesis and analysis process as described in the previous chapter. The following two chapters (Ch. 6 and 7) continue a deeper, narrative exploration into the

research mystery revealing the truth and beauty of the leadership practice in polycrisis from different vantage points, before arriving at the final results chapter.

What is leadership?

My initial enquiry into the leadership ‘space’ (Crevani 2018) was influenced by the Critical Leadership studies and the “Big D” discourses as outlined in Alexy’s (2020) Metatheory (see Chapter 3). Informed by my experiences and having undergone a deconstruction of my own leadership identity I had previously constructed for almost two decades, I was initially drawn to the work of Knights 2022, 2021; Learmonth and Morrell 2021; Learmonth 2022 and Collinson 2006, and others. The questions that served as my initial clues were about what leadership is, what it looks like in practice. How it is experienced and felt in the context of polycrisis and accelerated change. From the perspective of L-A-P I was interested in the shaping of the relational configurations within the spatio-temporal experiences triggered by polycrisis (Raelin 2016; Crevani 2018; Crevani et al. 2010; Morin 1992).

I could feel a shift happening in the leadership space, triggered by major events such as the pandemic, the climate crisis the rise of AI and the big social movements (#MeToo and #BLM), political unrest and the global economic downturn. I was curious to gain insights from other leaders’ perspectives and experiences in situ and how they were navigating these tectonic shifts and events. Was leadership the emerging, relational, fluid space as conceptualised by Crevani (2018) or an “invisible space residing in between subject and object, mind and body, and leaders and followers” as described by Knights (2021, p. 4)? Or was it a big con, an “empty rhetoric” of neoliberalism that pursues the interests of an elitist minority (of predominantly white men), as argued by Learmonth and Morrell (2021, p.1). Maybe a combination of the above or something else entirely, a mystery, emerging out of complexity, something to be observed and experienced collectively (Raelin 2023; Crevani et al. 2010; Crevani 2018; Uhl-Bien et al. 2007). The above discourses and critiques were largely set in fairly stable and static conditions but how relevant were these in the context of organisational polycrisis? Driven by Gherardi’s (2006; 2009) distinction of practice, I was curious about the moments when the practice became unstable, how leaders respond and what leadership practices emerged (both consciously and unconsciously)? I sensed the answers to these questions would not come from my theoretical and philosophical indulgence, so I

reached out to those in the trenches, to the leaders in my ethnographic field as they were still making sense of the Covid-19 pandemic.

I asked 24 senior leaders from multiple industries (Appendix 3) to describe their experiences of how the pandemic impacted the leadership space during and after the crisis. The answers varied from one leader to another but one thread ran through all of my conversations: leadership is changing as the “old tricks don’t work anymore” shares a Global Aviation Leader. Arden, the CEO of a global recruitment agency describes the shift that she has observed in recruiting leaders:

“I think there's 2 things that are a very apparent. I think that the authority that used to come with leadership that was based on experience and track record in senior roles is no longer apparent and required equally, I think, the behaviours that are required now, and I am constantly looking at this when in my day job, when I'm recruiting talent is, empathy in leadership. Leadership is so multifaceted for a day-to-day leader managing upwards and downwards, you know, from being technically applied to being strategic. Empathy plays a role in all of those aspects like it never did before. When these roles were back when they were back in the office when they didn't have visibility. So I think empathy is the behaviour that is required in abundance. I think people leave that off the job description quite often, but they do make the selection interview on the basis of it.” (Arden)

Jack, the Head of Digital Construction in a global construction company also comments on the shift he had noticed in the leadership, comparing it to a family: “We are a modern family, you know. You're not an old-school family with a domineering father, or someone like that who would beat you if you did anything wrong, and in the past honestly, I did feel like that with supervisors on projects.” (Jack).

Sustainability leader in a global consultancy company Fina shares her observations: “But I think my understanding of it (leadership) for myself has changed that anyone can be a leader. You don't have to be in a leadership position, it's about bringing yourself and driving forward what you know, and being authentic and turning up and listening. I definitely noticed what is changing and that is allowing other people's ways of doing things to be right and to be okay, and to be able to really allow all voices. Is it about being able to be in discomfort with that, and it's a really really interesting place...” (Fina)

Associate at a global consultancy Anya adds: "the expectations on how a leader behaves, and also who a leader is, has changed quite a lot... You have to bring people from different backgrounds together to kind of discuss ideas and come up with something new that hasn't been done before... everyone can be a leader. Everybody can have something that they're leading." (Anya).

Throughout my conversations with leaders, there was a sense of unravelling, of deconstructing the status quo in an embodied, critical and reflexive way. As Segal (2010) observes, times of crisis create "conditions in which the philosophical question of leadership becomes important (...) when we lose all sense of leadership" (Segal 2010, p. 384). On one hand, there was a sense of loss, of self, control, and power amid uncertainty and accelerated change, however, there was also hope budding in the void. The hope for reconstructing and reshaping leadership practice felt long overdue. The many breakdowns (both personal and social) were leading to breakthroughs and even breakaways in the way leaders were reconceptualising and envisioning the future of leadership. As Segal (2010) observes breakdowns offer moments of "reflexive attunement", that are deliberate and embodied. The openness, honesty and highly energised descriptions of leadership contextualised more as a collective and visible practice, as opposed to fixed traits and characteristics, resonated across many conversations. It felt like there was a post-pandemic fever of change in the air, that has dramatically shifted the idea of leadership towards a more open and collective vision. The descriptions were much more fluid, inviting new dimensions and paradigms into the leadership space. The pandemic and other global events seemed to have performed a type of 'open-heart surgery' on leaders which exposed and questioned aspects of leadership orthodoxy that no longer served them. Leadership was seen less in the context of the hierarchical dominance of one person, who holds the power and has all the answers. Instead, it was multidirectional and distributed across different actors. However, there was still a strong focus on intersubjectivity, of perfecting oneself by adopting certain behaviours and attributes. The questioning of self and other leaders was pointing to some kind of internal evolution that leaders were going through and making sense of, which in turn was informing their emergent practice. However, most of it was happening behind closed doors of makeshift, home offices and spare rooms. It felt like "leaders in isolation" figuring out leadership (Smith et al. 2018, p. 1441). Smith et al.'s (2018) analogy became quite literal during the pandemic marked by social distancing and isolated practice offering a space for

reflection that often recognised the value of empathy, connection and an embodied and collective practice.

Inspired by all the descriptions, I was compelled to test this emerging, leadership shift by creating a “leadership persona”. I was curious how this reshaping of leadership in isolation would resonate in a group setting. The description of this new “leadership persona” was made entirely of quotes from the participants with only minor grammatical edits. The plan was to use the Generative AI platform to create an image of this new kind of leadership and to have it presented both as a visual and sound description to a group of leaders in the room (as part of the Immersive Research Lab experiment). I was interested in the reactions and responses it would generate. It was also an opportunity to test some of the data as part of the data analysis and triangulation process and play it back to the participants as recommended by Silverman (2019). Below is the “leadership persona” description based on the interviews conducted with 24 leaders between April and June 2023.

“I’m a leader who is digitally aware, inclusive and focused on sustainability. I am an accidental leader, it’s not something I set out to achieve. I’m a leader of a team, and a leader of self, a leader that is owning the purpose, and makes decisions based on data rather than based on a “whim”.

As a leader, I had to grow from a generic understanding of data and sustainable futures to more meaningful and deeper knowledge. I’m working towards being a part of the solution and I need to understand the environmental impact on the business and the business impact on the environment.

To be a leader in a field is to be an active voice, to influence others, and to champion a new way of thinking and being. Yes, it’s really about knowing oneself and being able to recognize your emotional state process to make sure that you are well-resourced to do the other 50% of the strategy bit.

Leaders become leaders because they’re specialists in one thing but we need generalism to understand context not just one discipline. We often, as leaders are not as informed as the people that we are leading so we need to continually learn how to show up and how to be good leaders in the space. Asking, the right questions, never jumping to any kind of conclusions, never putting people in boxes, but always unboxing and always unpacking the

situation in front of you. The pace of change is so fast that the leadership role needs to be different now, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the breadth of leadership styles.

We need inclusive leadership that acknowledges different styles and different ways of being in order to solve complex problems. Because when you are dealing with a complex challenge you have to recognize that everybody's got their own little bit of understanding and their own knowledge about the situation. Therefore, real leaders of the future need to have a humble curiosity and need to ask questions.

I believe we as leaders need compassion, empathy and emotional intelligence. I lead with empathy and vulnerability as ego and arrogance lead to poor decisions. It's important to be authentic, humble, listen; allow all voices to be heard, and be able to be in discomfort with that. Be visible in demonstrating the values I believe in. It's essential to have wisdom and the ability to combine intuition and judgment to perhaps make decisions that are for the betterment of society or individuals. This takes courage, empathy, agency and thinking more audaciously.

I am someone who can integrate and facilitate and empower others to make the right decisions. Empowering through communication and visibility and leveraging different ways of communication as we don't all communicate in the same way. I believe in equipping people in high-pressure environments, having the confidence to try and fail and creating a safe space for others. Also, leading in vulnerability by example and not fear of admitting failure. People can see that I'm walking the talk. Leadership is so multifaceted, and empathy plays a role like it never did before.

Being a leader doesn't mean having to control everything. You have the operational power related to your job description and your role but the power to influence- it's softer and more important. I think the ability to empower is the best power of all.

And what we really need, is for everyone to be a contributor, to be in the process of 'leadering' because everyone can be a leader. Everybody can have something that they're leading because no one has all the answers."

To generate the image of the “leadership persona” I used Stable Diffusion AI, which (at the time), was one of the most advanced text-to-image AI platforms. The diversity of my participants spanned across different industries, disciplines, genders, ethnicities and ages (Appendix 3). I was curious to see how Generative AI would interpret these deeply reflective descriptions, and the kind of image (or images) it would produce as a result. From the description, Stable Diffusion generated thirty-two images of women as shown below (images 2.2 and 2.3).



Figure 13 Text to image generated by Stable Diffusion AI based on the above description projected in the Immersive Research Lab (June 2023).



Figure 14 Text to image generated by Stable Diffusion AI based on the above description with the additional prompt: generate a professional image (June 2023)

However, these were not thirty-two images of different women but of the same woman with different skin shades, hairstyles, outfits and of different ages. At first glance, it would appear that the participants' diversity was reflected with homogeneity and sexism. It played into the old narrative that male leaders cannot be empathetic, emotional, or reflective (hence they did not feature in the image) and that the only version of a woman is that of perfection and over-sexualisation. The images lacked the complexity and depth of human emotionality. Indeed, none of them resembled any of the men and women I had interviewed. However, I was curious to learn how the IRL participants would react to these images and the leadership descriptions.

After explaining the experiment, the lights in the room were dimmed and the male and female voices began to sound the “leadership persona” script through the surround system, while the images lit the screens around them. The seven leaders in the room were enveloped in the sound and images of these new emergent, leadership descriptions. The experiment lasted for about two to three minutes before the lights went back on. The seven participants responded in different ways. Some took time (and notes) to reflect, while others reacted almost immediately.

“Where are the men?” asked one participant, which is a question one would rarely hear in a room full of leaders. “Why are they all women? Men can have feelings too, they can be vulnerable too”, she continues. The visual representation of leadership as interpreted by AI sparked an initial discussion of homogeneity and leadership aesthetics. Kieran, the Head of Innovation and Improvement for a public sector institution shares: “I never thought about the embodiment part of the leadership, what they look like, none of the images looked like what I’d expect a leader to look like, they were too airbrushed with cold stares (Kieran). Anya, an Associate at a global consultancy firm adds: “I never thought of leadership in a context of beauty- they were all ‘beautiful’ ”. Another participant wrote in their notes: “I thought a lot about perfection, and about how broad inclusion is as a topic. AI did not pick anyone with any visible signs of disability - even sight defects - or anyone who didn't comply with fairly 'traditional' styles of clothing. If I think about the inspirational leaders who have impacted

me, I would absolutely not start with their looks if asked to describe them. If looks were necessary to the description, perfect would not come up as a word. I hadn't, though, questioned that there were no men.”

On the surface, it seemed as if AI had produced a highly skewed representation of biased and unbalanced algorithmic fantasy and to an extent it had. However, Jordan, a Director of a city innovation centre added another perspective that illuminated AI-generated response. “They look like influencers, like something I would hear on a podcast or see on YouTube”. Indeed, recent years have seen the rise of leadership influencers and celebrities such as Brene Brown, Simon Sinek and Adam Grant who curate leadership and organisational management discourses on social media and at super-conferences such as TedTalks. While leadership ‘evangelism’ has been a popular discipline in the US for decades, the rise of leadership podcasts and YouTube channels has opened up this space to a global audience. Furthermore, since the AI platforms such as ChatGPT, Gemini or Stable Diffusion (used for this experiment) have been largely trained on online content, it is understandable how its view of leadership spills into the realm of airbrushed influencers. This was not the case of AI hallucination but rather a reflection of a phenomenon, that was occurring in the leadership space, the visible leader, the influencer. Indeed, one participant commented: “maybe leadership is not about “leadering”, maybe it’s about influencing?”.

The use of the language of influence is interesting as it introduces the idea of flow and fluidity in leadership practice as conceptualised by Crevani (2018). It is much more subtle than the traditional power and authority traditionally attributed to leaders. As one of the interview participants reflects: “You have the operational power related to your job description and your role but the power to influence- it's softer and more important. I think the ability to empower is the best power of all.” What Pryia, the director in a global engineering company refers to is a “softer” kind of power that leaders practice, the power to influence. It is a much more subtle and embodied way of leading, argues Pryia, which is focused on empowering rather disempowering others, what Calkins and Follett (1924) call “power-with” rather than “power-over”. However, Jordan and others in the IRL were making an important distinction between embodied influencing as part of leadership practice (as described by Pryia) that is often placed within organisational boundaries, and disembodied influencing outside of those boundaries in the digital space and on online platforms. The AI interpretation of leadership pointed to a different kind of influencing which is not restricted

by time, geographical space or the materiality of the human body. In that moment, I was reminded of my interview with Jack who shared about being a ‘visible’ leader: “I do think that some things are changing as well. I don't think it's just me and I've gone on a personal journey. I do think that the way we need to operate is different. I also feel is that in terms of being a leader or being a visible leader that being actually quite active on social media. Is is quite important, and I'm not particularly..., if anything, I'm reluctant to be, because i'm not necessarily totally opinionated, like some people, or maybe like to think that the reason I'm not opinionated is because I know that I don't know everything, and therefore I can be a bit reluctant to put an opinion out there when I know that I can't prove what I believe...But yeah, I do wonder if that's gonna affect me (...) and other people that are much more active on social media that are much more visible leaders.” (Jack)

The ‘visible’ leaders

The term “visible leaders” featured quite frequently in my interviews however, the IRL experiment gave more context into the kind of visibility leaders were referring to, the digital visibility of a leader-influencer, “active” and “opinionated”. L-A-P is concerned with the emergence of leadership phenomena rather than individual leaders by observing the leadership space in context (Raelin 2023; Crevani 2018).

As Crevani (2018) reflects, “space gives us the ‘depth’ and ‘width’ of reality” in which “a number of simultaneously existing stories-so-far meet, co-evolve, leave, clash, return, and so on.” (Crevani 2018, p.89). But what if this ‘space’, the ‘depth’ and ‘width’ of reality is digitally augmented? What if leaders operate in the virtual reality of the leadership space? The leadership literature has been focusing on the leadership experience and practice in spacio-temporal and material, embodied contexts (Raelin 2023; 2016; Learmonth and Morrell 2021; Knights 2022; Crevani 2018; Collinson 2017), however the pandemic has introduced another dimension little explored in the literature. The increased interaction with and through the digital platforms proved essential in navigating multiple organisational contexts thus expanding leadership practice in crisis in a new and emergent way. To understand the potential impact this could have on leadership I returned to the literature outside of the leadership canon for clues.

Rosa (2016; 2003), Virilio (1986), and Stiegler (2013; 2019) all raise the discourse around different aspects of the technological augmentation of a human experience in social and political contexts. They discuss the cognitive, experiential or even physical impacts of technology of the ‘future’. They all speak of the disruption of the perception of the self, time and geographical space (and logistics) that comes from technological augmentation. Indeed, it would appear that the digital acceleration triggered by the Covid pandemic has disrupted leadership and organisational practice in a number of ways. Furthermore, the consequent rise of GenAI continues to further transform it. Indeed as Raelin observes “leadership occurs in practice as people engage with and are moulded by others and by their material arrangements.” (2023, p.2). Digital appears to have largely disrupted some of the material arrangements especially during and post-Covid, when the leadership practice moved from physical to digital space. The leadership practice paradox of geographically (thus physically) disconnected and digitally connected shifted the idea of a three dimensional leadership space as conceptualised by Crevani (2018).

Working from home in recent years has disrupted and transformed both the organisational practice and the culture. At the time of this research project leaders were still figuring out what this shift meant to them and their organisations, and yet there was a palpable feeling that things would not return to as was. Nevertheless, the phrase ‘new normal’ that became the refrain of the pandemic was replaced by ‘back to normal’ even though no one knew what the ‘normal’ was anymore. However, the general sense was that it was some form of a hybrid reality between what was and what has become. Indeed, hybrid became the descriptive word that became part of the organisational vocabulary to describe the emergent practice of blending the old and new, the human and technology, the physical and digitised, the embodied and disembodied. While Covid introduced a pause or at least slowing down of most industries, with the restrictions lifted, the existing and new technologies introduced a dramatic acceleration. The removal of physical space and travel allowed for removal of logistical friction of moving from one place to another which disembodied the leadership practice in a significant way (Urry 2014). The leaders were constantly ‘on’ switching from one virtual meeting to another regardless of geographical location or time zones. The physicality of space or indeed the human body became almost insignificant and in some cases invisible, as individuals could mute and take themselves off the screen. Grint (2005) argues that leadership is “hybrid in nature” and that there are “almost no cases of successful human leadership bereft of any ‘non-human’ supplement – that is naked”(p.2). While Grint would

most likely find it amusing that in fact there were incidents of high-profile leaders caught on their virtual calls without any clothes (BBC News 2020), nevertheless, the hybrid reality of leadership entered a new paradigm in the advent of the pandemic.

Digital facilitates both ends of these engagements by connecting leaders with others and curating, a 'visible' yet disembodied leadership practice that in turn can be shared (with a click of a 'share' button) with others. Indeed, the IRL experiment reveals the digital augmentation of leadership as an extension of leadership in identity construction and practice through influencing via digital platforms such as LinkedIn. These platforms are designed for leaders and businesses to showcase their successes, and connect them with wider audiences thus expanding their reach and practice outside of the organisational boundaries. This public leadership space (that in the past was largely reserved for political or celebrity leaders) is a new type of visibility of a leader-influencer, where they can be exalted, promoted or cancelled. The Diaries of a CEO Podcast (Bartlett 2021)- one of the world's most listened podcast and a YouTube channel hosted by Steven Bartlett, an investor on Dragons Den reality TV show, entrepreneur and the CEO and founder of social media marketing company speaks to an example of an extreme vision of such leader-influencer practice. However, in a passing conversation with a leader working in City Of London talks about her professional visibility online as she reflects: "I worry that if I don't post I will be forgotten".

What is interesting, is that this new kind of practice could be seen as falling under two opposing leadership paradigms. On the one hand, there is the focus on the individual, the leader-influencer which could be seen as the newer edition of the old leadership concept deriving from the trait-based, transformational leadership. On the other hand, it could be seen as a collective experience of sharing, learning and connecting with others from outside of one's usual network (be it highly algorithm-dependent), emergent and flowing. While the leader initiates the post, they have no control of what happens once it's released into cyberspace, what impact it has, who it affects and the responses it generates. It fosters discourse and critique and, in some instances, open collaboration between different diversity of people and organisations and networks. However, whilst this form of leadership is shared it can be seen more as interactional rather than collective (Crevani 2018) since the interactions and re:actions happen between individuals ('leaders in isolation') asynchronously, dispersed in time and in space.

Another, less visible aspect of the leadership augmentation had recently emerged with the introduction of AI assistant tools such as Pi, Copilot or ChatGPT. These tools are sold to organisations as a form of sensemaking and sensegiving amid increasing complexity in polycrisis. In 2024 an article featured in HBR predicted how “AI is poised to augment leadership by enhancing data analysis and operational efficiency, leaving humans to focus on long-term vision, ethics, and adaptability in dynamic markets.” (Hamza et al. 2024). While this vision seems attractive to some leaders who struggle with increased complexity and information overload amid polycrisis, this new practice does not come without its harms and risks. As Riggi et al. (2023) reflect, “complexity leadership theory illustrates that in complex crises,(...) the role of a leader is less about providing direction and more about providing adaptive space for stakeholders to generate novel responses collectively.” (p.210).

Digital pharmacology in complexity

The acceleration of new technologies has put additional pressures on organisations and leaders who have to navigate the return of investment into expensive digital transformations (DT), while simultaneously exploring new potential businesses and the release of new, disruptive technologies (O'Reilly III & Tushman, 2011; Gfrerer et al. 2020). This has resulted in the digital paradox where 70-90% of DT are deemed unsuccessful, costing organisations on average \$7 million a year in failing to materialise the benefits of DT (Ramesh and Delen 2021; Fergus Jayes et al. ; Barsky 2023; Kelly 2022). This phenomenon has given rise to academic and industry research into the causes and proposed solutions varying from change management, culture, and leadership necessary to ensure successful DT (ibid). A global recruitment agency CEO observes: “Digital and data now it's at the front and centre. It now has leadership responsibility...ultimately digital and data are driving all innovations within organizations” (Arden)

Head of improvement and innovation speaks about his expectations vs the reality of digital transformation: "We want digital technologies to bring faster and more significant change. But we just... It's like a collective or something that we, you know, don't feel like we really do that anymore "(Erik). Erik shares his frustration with the disconnect between the speed of technological adoption in organisations and the speed of collective change. Like other leaders I spoke to, he lives in the tension between the two which is both frustrating and

uncomfortable. Works Superintendent and the Project Lead for one of the largest construction infrastructure projects in the UK adds his experience with digital technology: "while it looks good, there's always an element of uncertainty with it, you know. If you try something, there is a level of uncertainty, and when you're recovering project costs over time we haven't got time for the uncertainty." (Sam) Erik adds: "we know there's a better way but we don't do it coz it's too risky to change "We know that that works, but we still don't do it because we we just don't. We just don't want to take the risk "(Erik)

The Global Digital Director for a global engineering company opens up about the increased complexity he has to deal with and how he believes digital technology can address that: "So you need something more complex to interpret that. And I think all of a sudden AI has come along. Is that thing that has the real, genuine potential to interpret that part of our lives and maybe do it better than human beings are doing it today"(Mark). Indeed, there was a strong sense, backed by an aggressive Big Tech marketing campaign on the AI's capabilities, of dealing with complexity and coproduction of sensemaking and sensegiving. The conversations with leaders representing different areas of the business on the topic of digital would initially start on a positive note listing the scripted taglines around efficiency, unlocking the power of technology and transforming business, marketed by the Big Tech.

However, once we dove deeper into the conversations the enthusiasm started to wane and leaders began to give voice to the challenges and concerns they had but might not openly voice them due to the nature of their role or the significant investments their organisations have made into Digital Transformation.

The UK Head of Digital Construction shares his experiences of digital acceleration and the impact it has on him: "I find it so hard as well to think. It feels like things are moving so fast. The analogy I came up with yesterday was a it was like you're on a roller coaster. Roller coasters are really exciting, and we've been in really exciting times. This roller coaster is getting faster and faster and faster, and you wonder when it's going to go off the rails, and that's what it feels like to me right now." (Jack)

While Jack shares the impact on the dizzying speed of digital and that it doesn't allow him time to think, the lead in restoration and heritage working in the public sector adds: "The digital world has opened up, increasing equality and oh, right dramatically. It's only us

dinosaurs that predate computers that are being left behind. we're being left behind them and dying off as dinosaurs." (John) John speaks of the paradoxical nature of digital where on one hand has opened up to 'everyone' yet leaving those who can't keep up behind. He refers to himself and leaders like him as a dinosaur heading for extinction.

User Research Principal in a Global Technology India, shares her concerns about digital becoming an organisational ideology that everyone needs to subscribe to or they get left behind. India shares: "everything must be digitised! the fact that lots of people for lots of reasons will need to access services in different channels and by different means. and that digital is not a solution. It's another channel. And so I really think that, like we need to think quite carefully about this." (India) A sustainability director in a global estate company Harper also shares her reservations in seeing digital as the silver bullet: "we really latch on to digital but for me it means, and it's a brilliant tool, but it's a means of driving change. We still rely on using the output of those who actually drive the change. Otherwise it's so it can be from my perspective ditch to a little bit, provides a false sense of security, and we have an overview on it, and we focus less on actually using the outputs of change. You see it in all facets, whether it's environmental, the social or governance. There's more calculators, tools." She continues: "it's a lot cheaper to create loads of tools and spam the market than actually genuinely try to change behaviours." (Harper)

Harper also sees digital as a tool that she fears can be a distraction to driving an actual change. She shifts the responsibility of change to people rather than things that can create a false sense of security. The Environmental Sustainability Business Partner Amber in a global construction company shares her concerns of shifting all responsibility for change to digital: "You can stick it into ChatGPT for and say, right, give me a brief for this. But the problem is that will eventually condition you to be in that mindset based on on the past and not looking forward. You, you lose the ability to have any creative new stuff, and the innovation is dead. To be honest within a I mean it's not. I can't. I can't see a way how that could ever work to be honest, because that's that's biology. That's what we do. There's always new things coming through, and I it doesn't give you new stuff. It gives you old stuff that's put together. So it's, and I and I get that. But it it obviously has potential to to make redundant all the processes that work essentially that people undertake." (Amber)

The Quality Systems Lead James opens up about his experience of working with digital technology: "there's a there's a strong link or correlation between neurodiversity and creativity. And what we're seeing now with the rise of digital. Actually, artificial intelligence which is very good at collating existing ideas, but is terrible, creating new ideas." (James)

Both Amber and James raise their concerns about creativity and innovation being substituted with Artificial Intelligence tools. They argue that these tools might be new but the mindsets that created them or indeed in data that train them are old. The Business Development Director Paulina in a technology company adds: "a bit of my work which is around the sort of evangelical piece, and sharing the information that this can be done. There is a different way. It's, it's it is disruptive, but in a positive way,"...Digital is male-driven "I am in the minority as a woman in the room" "I managed to and be invisible, and make sure nobody else realized that you were just be part of a team and get on with it...it that didn't matter to me. But now we're talking about the fact that AI is going to influence the way we do things in the future. It does worry me". (Paulina) Paulina qualifies the mindset that James and Amber talk about as male-dominated. She fears her invisibility in the Digital industry is now digitised and coded into the AI tools. She worries about the influence this 'new' way of thinking and doing things will have on the future. Sophia, the CEO of a digital design company concludes: "Digital is not a neutral term!" She further observes: "emerging definition of digital that this has to also include concepts of power and agency...applying the ways of working or technologies from the Internet to existing on new organizations doesn't include the consequences of that which is that it can create or exacerbate new kinds of power dynamics" (Sophia).

Global Digital Director Mark adds: "I think there is a conscious misuse of AI. You know, manipulating the outcome of an election, for example, is a would be a conscious use of AI..., but I firmly believe that Digital and technology Is still a net benefactor to society and I still believe that about the Internet and social media today, despite all the horrible things that are on there now, I still think that it's a net benefactor." (Mark)

Once we moved beyond the superficial, scripted corporate messaging and hype, I appreciated the level of depth and reflexive thinking in our conversations about Digital and AI. As these conversations shifted, so has the language. It became more ethereal, poetic, even spiritual with the use of words like 'belief', 'evangelism' or 'ideology'. Change was at the heart of the conversation but not always in the positive way. In fact many questioned if this was indeed a

real change or if we were in the midst of digitising (male-dominated) of the status quo, making it more invisible yet pertinent to the ways we think and act. There was an awareness of the impact digital has on society, of who holds the power and the unintended consequences. Yet I got a strong sense that these conversations would not necessarily be had in the boardrooms. They felt like unspoken reflections to be kept between us. Meanwhile, on the outside as the spell of digital continued to capture the main party line: Digital has the power to change everything! Indeed it does but I was not sure it would in a way we had hoped or imagined. It was not long after some of these conversations happened when I witnessed the harsh reality of this statement.

Leadership in polycrisis: How do we know it's the real you?

“Over the last few years it seems that all I’ve been doing is dealing with polycrisis” shared with me a Chief Operations Officer of a global company. This is the first time I heard the term ‘polycrisis’ in an organisational setting. This felt like a defining moment of the realisation that we are in the midst of a new leadership paradigm filled with the unknown and unexpected, where the usual leadership manuals no longer apply. “I try to pull all the levers but none of the old tricks work”- shared another leader desperately seeking some new ways to approach the challenges he had been facing. Brown describes this moment as “living beyond the human scale” as she reflects on GenAI entering the centre stage of our global and organisational consciousness (Lauren 2024). Indeed, the 2023 release of ChatGPT by Open AI created a new set of challenges that no one seemed prepared for. The dizzying excitement of the possibilities of human-like generative AI shifted the focus of leaders and organisations trying to grapple with the opportunities and threats that this new technology offers. The sense was that no one was in control and some leaders seemed very nervous about finding themselves in this new state of being. Morandini et al. (2023) refer to this new reality as the Industry 4.0 which describes the rapid pace change triggered by the implementation of AI technology in industries such as finance, healthcare and manufacturing. This change has already visibly impacted organisational strategies, policies, processes and practice along with a re-evaluation of the current and required workforce skills (Morandini et al. 2023; Jaiswal et al., 2022; Hancock et al., 2020). Leadership seems to be omitted in Morandini and others’ research and reports yet what I was experiencing and observing in the field directly impacted leadership practice.

Indeed, leaders were caught in the middle of these debates trying to navigate both the uncertainty and perceived opportunities. Apprehended by this unfolding mystery, I inevitably found myself in conversations with people from different teams, of different ages, roles and disciplines about the impact AI would have on them and their future practice. The general feeling was of unease and concern which did not necessarily translate into what was said in public forums. There was this discord between what people felt and said in the shadows and what was expressed publicly. The latter captured voices of excitement and optimism which often felt fake and unwarranted. In the midst of the excitement around the possibility ‘of unlocking the power of AI’ I learnt from the news about deepfake targeted attacks on organisations and on individual leaders. The sophistication of the attacks was such that some companies ended up losing millions of dollars. Indeed, according to the reports there has been a 31% year on year increase in cyberattacks in Europe (O'Connor 2024). One story from the UK based company Arup made the headlines as one of the first companies falling victim to the new AI-enhanced cyberattack. The story, widely discussed at the World Economic Forum spoke of the “socially-engineered” \$25 million transfer to criminals who disguised as Arup managers in video call with the use of the latest AI technology. As Rob Greig, the global chief information officer recalls: “What happened at Arup – I would call it technology-enhanced social engineering. It wasn’t even a cyberattack in the purest sense. None of our systems were compromised and there was no data affected. People were deceived into believing they were carrying out genuine transactions that resulted in money leaving the organization.” Social engineering soon entered the mainstream, organisational lexicon as new training videos and policies were issued to all, warning against this new wave of AI-enhanced attacks. Not long after my own, compulsory training in cybersecurity, I had witnessed leaders announcing that they were the latest victims of a highly complex deepfake scam that involved their own voice and facial cloning. As the leaders addressed the members the emotions ran high. What made it worse was that the information of the attack leaked into the press and everyone read about it on the news before finding it out internally. There was a feeling of betrayal. Betrayal by the leaders who were meant to ‘protect’ the organisation, and who had failed to communicate what was happening. Conversely, there was also the sense of vulnerability from the leaders who seemed overwhelmed and bewildered by the bigness of the mounting challenges that their organisation faced. Caught between the speed and the perils of AI development, and the fear of being left behind and missing out on opportunities highly disrupted leadership day-to-day practice. It appeared as if leaders were living from one

week to another with little long-term planning and vision-setting, which further added to the somehow chaotic and destabilising atmosphere. Many went through the motions of hanging on to old stories and the old tricks, hoping that one of them works and somehow reinstates the familiar, organisational homeostasis.

In the all-member call there was a sense of pent-up energy that oscillated between fear and anger. After the leader gave a remorseful speech about the attack and how they were ‘tricked’, the questions poured in: How could this happen? Why weren’t we better prepared? How do we avoid this from happening again? Are the people involved ok and supported? And then another question came through, sort of as a joke but with a hint of profoundness: How do we know it’s the real you? Behind the nervous laughter people were seeking embodied humanity from the two-dimensional leader on a screen. The need for human connection in the midst of this digitally augmented and pervasive reality was felt strongly. At that moment, the CEO in the call raised a packet of his favourite biscuits to prove it was him. People smiled. The gesture seemed both silly and profoundly real. In that moment of navigating the complexity between reality and fiction, it came down to a packet of chocolate biscuits to connect with one's own and shared humanity in an embodied way.

“We haven’t got time for uncertainty”

The VUCA model identifies uncertainty as one of the challenges modern leaders face amid global instability and change. Moreover, Ansell and Boin point out “uncertainty is inherent to crisis” but argue that many leaders lack “the cognitive or organizational means to tame” it (2019, p.1080). Conversely, Teece et al. (2016) insist that uncertainty is a critical part of the innovation economy and should be embraced rather than feared. While the leadership and crisis management literature debate on uncertainty continues, I reached out to leaders who work in one of the most volatile industries in the UK, the Built Environment, to learn about their experiences of leading through uncertainty. The Construction industry has faced ongoing, internal challenges such as labour shortages and aging workforce, mental health crisis (two workers take their own life every day in the UK), safety issues and slow technology adoption (CSN industry outlook - 2024-2028; Liversedge 2023; Sherratt and Dainty 2017; White and Clarkson 2024). The industry has also been impacted by the external factors such as supply chain disruptions, raising cost of living, political instability and

environmental pressures (62% of all waste in the UK is generated from construction) (Environmental Agency 2021; Construction statistics 2024; Cherian and Arun 2022; Adamson and Pollington 2006). Indeed, Construction could be seen as an example of an industry that not only continues to experience polycrisis but has been defined by it throughout the years.

The Environmental Sustainability Business Partner for a global construction company Amber, shares: "business leaders are quite focused on short term, you know, business preservation. They're always looking at the money. Where is the bottom line. How do I preserve the business as an interest is fundamental to capitalism in this world that we live in, that they have to preserve that, and that's priority number one for sure" (Amber). In a low margin industry such as Construction the short-term, bottom-line orientation seems understandable since any volatility could lead to bankruptcy even for the biggest players (Mischke et al. 2024). Indeed, recent years have seen very public collapse of global construction giants such as Tolent, ISG, and Carillion. However, Sam, the Project Lead for one of the largest construction infrastructures in the UK questions the general mindset and the approach in preventing or dealing with crises: "We need more diverse thinking in engineering, we see a problem and we attack it in the same way". Mark, Chief Digital Officer for a global engineering company adds: "For me, I'm not certain that all of our leaders are equipped to deal with that [polycrisis]. And therefore, they're doing the best thing they can. Which actually is not good enough. And I think it's sometimes reflected in some of the behaviours that we see from people that that they're not necessarily equipped to handle these kinds of situations. And don't necessarily get themselves to 60,000 feet and look down on what's what's going on." He continues: "And and get caught in their own agendas sometimes, which is, which is problematic, right? And change is difficult for all of us. So I probably sound like I'm making excuses for people. It's it's not that. It's just, I do, I do understand the the pressure and the challenge people face. I just wonder if we as an organisation have equipped them [leaders] to face that challenge and I'm not sure that we have."(Mark)

Erik, Head of improvement and innovation adds to Mark's argument: "Leaders become leaders because they're specialists in one thing but we need generalism to understand context not just one discipline" (Erik). A Digital Transformation Director shares: "I'm constantly context-switching, going from one meeting to another and dealing with unrelated things. It's exhausting and confusing".

In my conversations with leaders from the Construction and other industries it soon became clear that the level of complexity they have to deal with is overwhelming. Indeed, according to the results of my initial LinkedIn questionnaire, 42% of leaders strongly agree they're experiencing "leadership identity crisis in understanding complexity" (see Appendix 10).

"I think the industry is going through a particularly difficult time right now and there's a lot of tension in there. And there's also a lot of change happening which creates uncertainty and some leaders react to that better than others." Mark continues:

"We've got all sorts of geopolitical challenges happening all over the place and that instability in strategy creates economic instability and certain uncertainty, which of course in turn makes it harder to organisations like ours to win work because...." "We need to make multiyear investments to do that and even from private sector is a multiyear investment, isn't it? So I think that that uncertainty makes that that more difficult. So I think leaders are facing all these pressures now." (Mark)

Mark's use of the phrase "certain uncertainty" echoed the sentiment that uncertainty was becoming the new normal, and a kind of homeostasis for many organisations and industries. Many leaders have looked to digital and more recently to AI as a way of bringing certainty and navigating increasing complexity as explored in the previous section. However, Sam the project lead for one of the largest construction infrastructure projects in the UK adds his experience with digital technology: "while it looks good, there's always an element of uncertainty with it, you know. If you try something, there is a level of uncertainty, and when you're recovering project costs over time we haven't got time for the uncertainty." (Sam)

Sam points to the uncertainty paradox that leaders and indeed the literature seem to be caught in between. On one hand leaders are expected to avoid uncertainty or somehow to tame it (Ansell and Boin 2019) and that is where they lean to digital technologies with hope for certainty and clarity. On the other hand, any change and innovative endeavours are birthed in and from uncertainty as argued by Teece et al. (2016). Therefore, while leaders are expected to innovate and move with the digital acceleration, as Sam points out, they haven't got time or, as Mark argues, a capacity for being in a state of uncertainty. The polycrisis leaders have to navigate introduces a state of paradox where opposites can be true and where competing practices are both necessary. Furthermore, polycrisis also disrupts the idea of time and our

relationship with it, where phrases like “we haven’t got time” or “time is money” seem to accompany it like a refrain. And yet as Montefusco and Angeli (2024) observe, the great uncertainty requires great many pauses for sensemaking, learning and sensegiving amid complexity.

The UK Head of Digital Construction, Jack, shares his insight into navigating this dichotomous reality: “the pace of change is so fast that the role [of a leader] needs to be different now. It's much more about trying to set up a framework for people at project level to make the right or the best decisions” (Jack). Chief Data Officer Stephan, adds: “As a leader I had to grow from generic understanding of data and sustainable futures to to a more meaningful and deeper knowledge level of those topics.” (Stephan) Both speak to navigating the depth, the speed and the width of the leadership space in fast-changing contexts. Some reach out to digital technologies and AI to help them navigate this new paradigm while others shape their inner practice. Freya, the Major Projects Director shares: “I think my whole life is in this kind of you can be in it, and then you can flip to the other side, and in a way you’re kind of a bit of schizophrenic, but I actually think it is a beautiful ability to sort of be one, and then be something different. And I think that sometimes speed is necessary because of some stuff you just need to get on with and get it done. But there are other things when i'm like going... How do I plan for the next 3 years on this project to be really successful? And I can't do that in a speedy way. I have to pull myself out of that tolerance, to stuff and step back, and just create an idleness space. Just let that space and your mind. And if you believe in the power of space you understand that it will bring you speed because actually you've allowed all the things you've been subconsciously thinking about everything else, you allow space, and your cognitive processing is allowed to work through it.” She continues: “And and you've got to have that confidence, humility, curiosity to create that space.” (Freya)

Freya, alluded to engaging in an act of creating space where time flows differently, where instead of feeling restricted or suffocated by its lack, this generative, “idleness space” offers wisdom in time. I was curious about Freya’s practice and I wanted to explore the act of creating or being in this “idleness space”, especially in polycrisis. It seemed very counterintuitive and countercultural, exactly the kind of mystery I felt compelled to pursue.

The polycrisis we feel in our bodies

As Wu et al. (2021) observe, “crises have a heavy emotional toll on both leaders and other organizational stakeholders, and thus, it is important for leaders to gain knowledge regarding how they may effectively and strategically manage negative emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety, fear) that arise during crises.” (p.16). This widely unexplored area in crisis leadership literature (Wu et al. 2021) became central in my experiences in the field. Indeed, one of the effects that I had observed in living in organisational polycrisis was the impact on health and wellbeing.

In the course of a year, I noticed the increased amount of sickness going around. In our team almost every week someone would get sick, and often it would end up being more than one person. Some weeks half of the team would go down. It was also true to leaders, some being sick for days, weeks or even signed off for months. The feeling of stress and anxiety soon become normalised to the point of almost feeling guilty for looking too happy or being too relaxed. “Busy” or even better, “crazy busy” became the standard answer when asked how one was. Furthermore, the budgets for the team’s social activities were cut which inadvertently sent a message of: all work no play. The levels of creativity and innovation also dropped often reverting to trying old ways to generate work and opportunities with mixed results.

Initially, I thought it was just some phenomenon that affected our team or even our organisation but then one BBC News headline caught my attention: “Sick days at work hit highest level for 10 years” (Sri-Pathma 2023). The article talked about the latest research findings by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) on the record high sickness observed amongst the employees in the UK (CIPD, 2023). Many referred to toxic and stressful work culture due to increasing demands and pressures. The subject soon became politicised with a snappy tagline “generation sicknote” which blamed the fragility and lack of resilience amongst the younger generation of the workforce, who simply take the advantage of the system. However, that was not what I experienced, as everyone was getting sick regardless of their age, gender or position. The polycrisis seemed to be felt in our bodies either by experiencing anxiety and panic, keeping people in permanent state of ‘fight or flight’ along with hyperfocus on productivity and KPIs. The big focus was on instant results with pressure of generating instant success, often promoting the latest AI applications as the silver bullet. The HR and Wellbeing teams amped their messaging of self-care and

mindfulness while the leadership continued to stress the focus on cost-saving, productivity and work-winning. The two streams seemed at odds with each other and it was up to individuals to somehow figure this out by staying both healthy and productive. After two waves of redundancies, the word still lingered in the air and no one felt safe and many decided to pre-empt future redundancies and leave on their terms. One member shared in passing: “It's a bit like that show *The Traitors*, where they wake up in the morning and one of the group is missing. People keep disappearing!” A few weeks before Christmas we received news about someone taking their own life in a bathroom. The building was shared amongst different organisations so at first, we didn't know if it was someone from our firm. It turned out it was the other tenant, nevertheless, we shared one building, one ecosystem confined within the same walls. A feeling of loss was felt by many, of shock and pain in our bodies. The vacuum of somebody's life leaving the building because it couldn't take any more of being here, felt palpable.

As we reeled from the last round of compulsory redundancy another round was announced.

This time, it was my team and all of our jobs were at stake.

The announcement happened on a virtual call with all the affected. As I looked across the screen at the worried and shocked faces, I noticed over 70% of them were women. The teams affected by the latest redundancy were the research, innovation and the foresight teams, those responsible for change and new ideas. The other affected were the PA's, the stabilizers silently working behind the scenes making sure leaders and teams were coordinated.

Amongst the angst, anger and confusion there was the darkness that set. I recognised its shadow, it was the ‘dark side’ that Vaughan (1999) and Linstead et al. (2014) spoke of. For Vaughan, the ‘dark side’ in an organisation is not accidental but rather a systemic unravelling of routine nonconformity, mistakes, misconduct and disasters. She recognises and amplifies the central role of power and politics entangled in the crisis lifecycle by identifying the impact of “micropolitics of knowledge” (what is communicated and what is hidden) and “power as process” (i.e. operationalizing intimidation, shifting responsibility to individuals, psychological bullying). This was visible in the lack of transparency amongst the leadership trying to ‘protect’ the workforce. However this strategy sent mixed and confusing messages that oscillated between unwarranted positivity about future opportunities, and the stark realisation that we were going through tough times and everyone needed to take responsibility for playing their part. This enacting of power as process, of ‘shared’

responsibility and accountability however was not about sharing power. While on surface it might appear as a move towards a collective practice that galvanises everyone to participate in ‘fixing the problem’, Vaughan (1999) recognises this as part of power-play of the dark side that guilts everyone into thinking that they were as much part of the problem, and therefore also need to be part of the solution. This combination of communicating the ‘right narrative’ and operationalisation of fear in turn mask the true reasons for crises thus obstructing of forging meaningful solutions. Indeed, soon I observed a disconnect in envisioning the future where leaders believed in going ‘back’ to normal while the workforce felt like going ‘back’ was a step backwards. Some openly questioned and resented the old practices recognising them as the sources of the polycrisis. For the workforce there was no going back and new directions needed to be set. None of the official messages or narratives gave reassurance but instead created a culture of competition between the teams and individuals as well as mistrust towards the senior leadership. There was a clear feeling of ‘us versus them’ although no one could articulate who ‘them’ were. However, it was understood as this dark force, the structures and systems that hold all the power and are distanced from the reality and pain of the day-to-day experience of the most. Yet, beneath the dark side I saw the light. In my conversations behind the closed doors with individual leaders I witnessed something else percolating. Something much more honest and vulnerable which built trust and galvanised individuals to want to help each other. Beneath all of the theatre of creating false perceptions of stability and control, there was a genuine sense of care. It felt warm and all-encompassing, generative and energising. It was in those moments of holding a space for connections and tensions that new ideas arose and new solutions emerged. I explored this space more in the last IRL and The Red Thread experiment (Appendix 9).

Between tensions and connections

The L-A-P “movement” as described by Raelin (2016) is concerned with how leadership emerges and evolves in fixed social contexts. It also seeks insights that are based upon “alternative frames of time and space, deep exploration of moral and ethical dilemmas, empathic social awareness based on public and concurrent reflection in practice, and appreciation for the need to either make choices or transcend them in the deliberative decision-making process.” (ibid., p.7).

As already explored, the context of organisational polycrisis expands the aperture into some of these insights in situ, while also disrupting some of the fixed social and organisational contexts. Crevani proposes that leadership should be seen as a process of “weaving” and “re-weaving” characterized by “multiplicity” and relationality”, in which negotiations and contestations are inevitably part of such processes (Crevani 2018, p.90).

The context of polycrisis explored in this ethnographic research inevitably immersed me in what seemed like a collective experience rather than a case of collective leadership. At times it looked and felt like “leaders in isolation” coming together, other times there was the collective feeling experienced separately, unconsciously and often in secret (Smith et al., 2018, p. 1441). Many leaders were in a permanent state of fight or flight, stuck in the dark side of the survival of the fittest paradigm. However, Taylor who theorised the “tend and befriend” response observes: “There are many reasons to believe that humans have used social relationships not only as a basic accommodation to the exigencies of life but also as a primary resource for dealing with stressful circumstances.” (2009, p.4). What I was experiencing in the boardrooms and on virtual calls was different to what I was seeing and hearing behind the closed doors. I was curious how I could create a space where the two realities could converge in the same time frame and in one space. The Red Thread Experiment (as described in The Process chapter) allowed a space for seven leaders from different organisations to experience and express, in an embodied way, their tensions and connections. Standing around the room they were sharing their experiences that generate energy as well as fear, frustration and anxiety. The statement shared by an individual would connect them with someone else in the room who shared the same or similar emotion by the symbolic use of a red thread. After ten minutes of sharing their tensions and connections experienced in their practice as leaders, everyone had several connecting points with someone else in the room creating a red thread web (Fig. 8)

Here are two excerpts from the written feedback of the participants:

“It was interesting how it highlighted that we have shared experience through both positive and negative situations and in a different way to what I have considered before. Finding connections with people is so important and I guess it reinforces the fact that we can connect in different ways than we normally go to when looking to build empathy and a bond with somebody.”

“I had the least connections, but what I had were strongly felt. The experiment made me realise that I truly am very selective about who I connect with more deeply than at a superficial level. I have worked hard in my life as living the mantra of 'choose how you react', and I think that has made me disengage with the frustration quite a lot - possibly at the expense of the joy. I was interested to note how the tension in the thread impacted us all, even when we weren't directly endorsing a statement. This made me think about red tape and obscure processes causing such widespread effects within organisations, slowing everyone down.”

The Red Thread experiment made the invisible visible, showing the need for embodied connections especially in times of crises thus confirming the importance of Taylor's research and its relevance in crisis management and leadership. As Taylor et al. (2000) shows, our natural need for connection with others ensures not only safety from threat but also an effective mechanism for critical problem-framing and problem-solving. It is through affiliation with others, argues Taylor, that we gain the “ability to draw on mental representations of relationships” and “acquire the resources to explore and grow both emotionally and intellectually” (Taylor 2006, p.28). As demonstrated in the experiment, it is through the acts of exploring collective and embodied tensions and connection that the participants engaged in intersubjective practice. The holding space for both, the “me too” and “putting oneself in someone else's shoes” can in turn, lead to the “deep exploration of moral and ethical dilemmas, empathic social awareness (...) and appreciation for the need to either make choices or transcend them in the deliberative decision-making process.” (Raelin, 2006, p.7).

On the contrary, the digital disembodiment that had recently emerged as part of the leadership threatens the intersubjectivity practice. It can remove leaders from the reflexive and reflective practice, by bypassing the collective process of deliberative decision-making as a way of distilling to complexity and sterilising embodied emotionality. As Stiegler observes, “such technologies guarantee short-term satisfaction, while the long-term result is “exteriorization without return — that is, without re-interiorization”. (Stiegler 2012, p.10). It can threaten the efforts of collective connection and growing and making sense together and instead creates ‘leaders in isolation’ (Smith et al., 2018, p. 1441), ‘popping digital pills’ under extreme time pressures in hope for a silver bullet solutions to complex crises. However,

Stiegler (2019) points that there is a balance to be found between computational synthesis (very useful in managing volumes of complex data) and human reasoning. Both can co-exist but the latter should always prevail.

In addition, Morin and Kern (1999) would argue that polycrisis is both a collective and an individual experience thus should be approached as such. Indeed, Taylor et al.'s (2000) study is anchored in decades of anthropological and neuroscience research, the digital augmentation of leadership is a new phenomenon that is yet to stand the test of time. While I already witnessed some of its impact, the leadership and crisis management studies would benefit from further investigations into both theory and practice. Meanwhile it appears that the leadership practice I have observed already lives in the tension between the connection and disconnection, between the embodied and disembodied. I was curious to explore this in-between space, and what else was there hiding in the cracks, hidden from plain sight.

Conclusions

Read through the lens of the questions posed at the outset of this mystery, the investigation reveals leadership in polycrisis not as a stable role or discrete response, but as a fragile, distributed, and continually negotiated practice. The literature review opened an expanded aperture by challenging linear and episodic accounts of crisis and by reframing crisis as polycrisis, an ongoing condition marked by complexity, acceleration, and interdependence. The empirical exploration that followed confirms and deepens this move, showing how leadership practice unfolds across multiple paradigms, actors, and temporalities rather than within singular organisational or situational boundaries.

Indeed, the fieldwork responds directly to the question of multiplicity raised earlier: if polycrisis signals 'many', then leadership practice is populated by multiple stories, identities, and practices, some visible, some invisible, and some deliberately obscured. As crises converge and accelerate asynchronously, leaders are required to make sense and give sense across fragmented contexts, often under conditions of uncertainty intensified by digital mediation. These dynamics complicate assumptions of wholeness, revealing the limits of

openness, reflexivity, and collective leadership precisely at moments when self-preservation and control come to the forefront of the conversation.

In this way, the chapter begins to answer the questions introduced at its opening: how leadership practice is reshaped by acceleration, how sensemaking operates amid ambiguity, and how digital technologies reconfigure presence, agency, and relationality in polycrisis. Rather than closure, what emerges is a reframing of the research mystery itself. Leadership in polycrisis appears less as a coherent whole than as an assemblage held together through practice, power negotiations, and invisible digital and non-digital actors. It is this unresolved tension, between multiplicity and self-curation, openness and control, embodiment and digital augmentation, that propels the inquiry forward into the narrative and poetic explorations of the following chapters.

The clues encountered across the ethnographic field gradually assembled into a pattern. What began as a questionnaire unfolded into interviews and eventually into the Immersive Research Lab, where early assumptions were not only revisited but actively tested and unsettled. Across these modalities, I engaged with leaders situated in different organisational, temporal, and spatial contexts, moving between physical encounters and digitally mediated interactions, between immediacy and delay, presence and absence. What emerged was not a single site of leadership practice, but a distributed field in which leadership was enacted across overlapping worlds (umwelts).

Early in this investigation, it became clear that digital technologies were not peripheral to leadership in polycrisis but deeply constitutive of it. I found myself navigating what felt like two parallel realities: the physical and the digital. At times these worlds appeared distinct; at other moments they collided and blurred. As leadership practice extended beyond the bounded spaces of individual organisations into global, virtual communities, leaders were frequently caught in tension between digitally disembodied selves and the persistent demand for embodied, relational presence. These tensions revealed the spatial-temporal disruptions of leadership in polycrisis, revealing how practice oscillates between here and elsewhere, now and then, material and immaterial. These dynamics, further explored in subsequent chapters, point to leadership as a practice increasingly stretched across fragmented temporalities and mediated spaces.

This emerging terrain of digitally augmented leadership demands sustained scholarly attention. It simultaneously expands and unsettles existing leadership theory by introducing new forms of visibility, speed, and exposure. While digital technologies promise connectivity and reach, they also carry significant dangers. In the field, I observed how digital augmentation could slide into overexposure, producing what might be understood as a form of digital pharmacology resulting in overreliance that erodes reflexivity, narrows attention, and weakens intersubjective engagement. Leaders spoke of fatigue, isolation, and a sense of being constantly “on,” even as they were increasingly alone.

More troubling still were moments where digital mediation destabilised identity and authenticity itself. The cloning of leaders, the threat of cyber intrusion, and the presence of AI-generated artefacts raised profound questions: Who is visible? Who is real? What, and who can be trusted? In response, leaders repeatedly returned to embodiment, humanity, and empathy, emphasising the symbolic and affective power of being physically present, of speaking and acting in ways that reasserted relational grounding amid digital uncertainty.

Taylor’s “tend and befriend” framework offered an important lens here, highlighting how social connection and affiliation can buffer stress, support cognitive functioning, and reduce anxiety in crisis contexts (Taylor et al., 2000; Taylor, 2006; 2009). Yet the field also revealed a paradox: digital hyper-connection often intensified isolation, pushing leaders into fight-or-flight modes rather than fostering collective resilience. It was at this point in the inquiry that another clue emerged. As Mark, the global Chief Information Officer, remarked: *“Leaders don’t do things on their own. Leaders never do things on their own.”* This observation redirected the investigation toward the often-invisible infrastructures of leadership practice, opening a new line of inquiry explored in the following chapter.

It was at this point that the investigation followed the trail into the largely unexamined world of personal assistants (PAs). Positioned at the intersection of digital systems, organisational power, and embodied relational work, PAs occupy a critical yet marginalised role in crisis leadership practice. The following chapter traces this shift in focus, examining how leadership in polycrisis is not only enacted through leaders, but co-produced through those who manage their time, attention, exposure, and emotional regulation, often invisibly, yet decisively.

Chapter 6: “You are their voice”- Leadership-As-invisible-Practice

We have dozens of companies and thousands of employees, and I always have a new idea I am working on. With the logistics and details organised by others, I am free to think about the bigger picture. Without a world-class assistant, this wouldn't be possible.” — Richard Branson

Introduction

As Denis et al. (2010) observe, the practice of leadership gets messy in the organisational ‘world’, and it gets even messier during a crisis. The question that naturally arises is: if there is a mess, who cleans it? The crisis literature at large argues that it is the job of a leader. While some leaders certainly get their hands dirty (as explored in my previous chapter), there appears to be another mystery actor that picks up the broom. An actor outside of the leader-follower continuum, so invisible, I have almost missed them. Thankfully, once again, the clues had led me to another mystery I was so grateful to uncover. The mystery of the PA.

The role of Personal Assistants (PAs) is largely overlooked in the leadership and management literature. It would appear along with the rest of the world, researchers have fallen under the spell of leaders, often missing the clues closest to them. And yet this area (as I was about to discover), although invisible to most, holds critical information about not only the emergent aspects of leadership (that L-A-P is concerned with) but also crisis management.

The function of the Personal Assistant derives from the role of a receptionist or a secretary and has undergone a big transformation over the years. The traditional image of women sitting at a desk outside of the boss's office, picking up calls and managing diaries couldn't be further from the truth. Personal Assistants are almost always invisible in the physical space these days, yet growing in significance amid the organisational polycrisis. They operate in their leaders' shadows, whilst coordinating and enabling critical and intricate parts of

leadership practice. They are smart, intuitive, tech-savvy and emotionally intelligent, serving as trusted partners, advisors and a much-needed critic to a leader. They are so integral to leadership practice yet they rarely feature in the literature, thus stressing the importance of writing this chapter.

The 360 view

During the interview part of this research project, I would often liaise with PAs to set up online interviews with leaders. It soon became apparent that PAs know a lot about their leaders' time, plans or even what frame of mind they might be in, at a given moment. Sometimes a PA would advise interviewing a leader at a particular time of the day/week to get the most honest and uninterrupted answers. I got a real sense of care but also, a sort of protective instinct, that PAs would exude. Very soon, it became clear that I needed to win their trust first before I would gain access to their leader. This whole process of 'courting' of a PA before getting to the source sparked my curiosity. What if PAs were not just an access point to leadership time? What if they held keys to insights into the leadership space? Once again I followed the clues.

When I first had an idea of extending my interview to PAs I decided to run it past Kai, a PA I became acquainted with due to my frequent interactions with her leader. When I asked Kai's opinion she instantly responded: "of course, you want to have a 360 view of a leader". I was intrigued and relieved that I had not missed what seemed like an important clue. Encouraged by her response, I decided to investigate further 'the 360 view' Kai referred to, so I reached out to seven PAs hoping they would share their insight with me.

I contacted six existing and one retired PA with a request for an interview. All have worked with senior-level leaders and had 10+ years of experience in PA work.

At first, everyone I asked for an interview was deeply concerned about confidentiality, so I was careful to explain the strict ethical boundaries I followed as a researcher and reassured them of their anonymity as well as the anonymity of their leaders and their organisations. Sending questions in advance and explaining the interview and data protection process, further reassured them. I explained I was not after any confidential information but rather their stories that would help me to see the view that Kai referred to, I wanted to see

leadership through their eyes. Jesse, Sage, Ashley, Alex and Ari (see Appendix 3) agreed to online interviews, each lasting between 45min to an hour, which I carried out over the period of twelve months. Other two PAs rejected my invitation, one due to time constraints and the retired PA who felt she didn't have anything insightful to share. As she put it: "all I did was pick up his dry cleaning and make teas and coffees". I had a feeling she did more than that but did not want to pressure her as I could sense her anxiety. During the course of my interviews, I found out why this might be the case as I entered the invisible to most yet very real world of a PA.

Taking the rough, making it smooth

Unlike many leaders I interviewed, PAs always turned up on time having previously read through the questions, the Participant Information Sheet and having completed the consent form. Most of them were nervous to start with so to ease them into the conversation, I began each interview by asking them to simply describe their Mondays. What is a Monday like for a PA? - I would ask. What might have seemed like a simple question soon revealed layers of complexity in navigating change at a level I had not expected. Many started with a description of planning ahead, reading every email and prioritising what needed their urgent response, but one theme ran through every conversation like a refrain:

"Make sure he has a relatively smooth day (...) So all the background logistics." shares one PA (Sage).

"So you kind of like anticipating and just like creating this seamless experience which requires his day to be as smooth as possible, because he obviously faces much larger challenges in his day than I do" continues Jesse.

I quickly learnt that there is no such thing as an average day. What might appear as mundane and trivial, such as managing diaries, is in fact a hugely complex process that involves active engagement with multiple actors in multiple contexts. This process is fluent and emergent whilst following a robust, event sequence that is underpinned by communication and coordination between the leader and 'the outside world'. The boundaries of such a world are always in flux, sometimes they would stay within individuals or teams in an organisation,

other times they will stretch outside, thus entering different cultures, processes or even time-zones.

"I organise other people so they can do their job properly"... "so it's all about coordination and organisation" adds Alex who has a dual role as PA and Team Coordinator. "There's also time zones sometimes, and then there's workshops, which have multiple time zones (...) And sometimes I do that from a soft play. I do it from a playground." adds Team Coordinator and PA (Alex).

By working with and within the orbit of their leaders PAs quickly gain insights into alternative frames of time and space within contextual and cultural textures. It is more than 'just' managing the access to their leaders' time and attention (as explored in the next section), it is about managing challenging emails and often emotional conversations amid changes and sudden, unexpected events. Indeed, PAs context is almost always marked by uncertainty but their work is deliberate and detailed, which often requires making multiple, seemingly insignificant, yet critical decisions that would impact their leaders' immediate future.

PAs frequently operate within multiple time zones and from different locations (the use of digital technology made it possible) to create a "seamless" or "smooth" experience not only for their leader but also for the people in their orbit. It's about creating conditions for leadership that involve minimal, logistical friction, so that "others can do their job properly". It made me realise that leadership does not happen the moment a leader walks into a room, it happens before (and after) the leader enters centre stage. That there are all these dials and parameters that need to be set 'just right' for leadership to occur. While leaders are at the centre of leadership, PAs are behind the scenes creating conditions for leadership to take place.

Furthermore, by making a day 'smooth' for others, the same day can become quite 'rough' for the PAs. PAs deal with constant uncertainty as their work is a continuous evolution between structure (planning) and chaos.

"Each day is very different, and you can get an email that turns your entire day and all your plans go out the window" shares (Ari).

“You can have your best-laid plans of all the things that you want to get done and it is very reactive. It's obviously led by your leaders and your people. You're working with external influences and internal influences” adds (Ashley).

The anticipation of leaders' next steps and what might come their way and plan for every event and every (often worse case) scenario. What is interesting is that most of PAs work is planning not for when things go right but for when they go wrong by either preventing or “smoothing” anything unexpected and disruptive.

The mycelium network of co-influence

PAs act as a buffer that absorbs any unexpected challenges that in turn, can spill into their private lives (as explored in the next section). Indeed as we got deeper into the conversation I learnt about the unpredictability and fast-changing pace whilst navigating multiple contexts and ever-raising challenges that come their way.

“You come across loads of different challenges, and I think, being that kind of in-between person trying to do what I can to help him out and answer the bits that are easy for me to answer that he doesn't need to worry about” (Jesse).

While I wanted to understand better the challenges that Katy and others were referring to, I was first curious about Jesse using the language of the “in-between person”, and the relational nature of it. What did this mean, and what or who were PAs in between?

The clue came from another PA who shared how she responds to emails on her leader's behalf, and how they need to sound believable as if they were from him to close any communication gaps: “I am the gap filler in between all of these different people”- Ashley describes.

As opposed to the increasing AI impersonation either in a form of an AI assistant or worse, the AI clones (as described in the previous chapter), this in-betweenness spans different people, contexts and areas of the business. It's invisible to most and often on purpose to give a perception of the empathic leader that hears, sees, responds and understands everyone.

Thus, PAs often impersonate and embody (ears, eyes, voice) their leaders to fill in the communication gap and act as a multi-directional conduit of information flow between leaders and others both inside and outside the organisation. PAs would often represent them and their issues to leaders, which would prove very effective in issuing quicker and more adequate responses. They act as a subtle but important agent in alerting early signs of issues arising within individuals, teams or organisations. Moreover, if there are patterns of similar issues across multiple teams the network communicates and joins together to come up with a coordinated response and influence their leaders accordingly:

“there's a, like, a secret PA underground network, and we all work together and we all support each other (...) I think the PA network is a bit of a forgotten support system " admits (Jessie).

Alex shares more details on how the network acts in crisis prevention: "if there're certain things that are stirring in the business or within the team, you're there in the middle of it...So you hear things in the business because the PA network is a huge network and we talk a lot...So you're kind of picking up. You know, bits of information here, there and then relate it back..."It's not like you're spying but rather pre-empting a crisis that might happen" (Alex).

What Alex describes goes beyond the question of influence but rather co-influence and co-creation in the ‘in-between leadership space’ (Raelin 2011). The agency to take collective and coordinated action showed the level of empowerment of the self and the network I had not expected. Moreover, I was surprised by how subtle, invisible and forgotten the network was yet how influential, impactful and effective it was in conflict and crisis prevention and management across the organisation. Yet it seems its function or value is rarely if ever recognised. As Alex sums up “if you're in with the PA, you're in with the director” but I would argue that you are also connected to a mycelium network of wisdom, knowledge, influence (co-influence) and information that transcends leadership and organisational boundaries. It’s embodied, emphatic, deeply instinctual yet interactive and pragmatic.

Between the worlds- the lonely side of emotional labour

Having heard different descriptions of PAs ‘in-betweenness’, I was curious to find out what it felt like to inhabit this space:

“is a difficult one to describe, because I think you really have to adapt to your surroundings and adapt to the people” - shares Jesse.

"It can be quite lonely because you are between worlds, you know. You have to be obviously confidential. You're aware of so much. And you also, you know, potentially aware of things that are going to impact friends that you work with" (Ashley).

The adaptability that Jesse speaks of offers a profound insight into my initial questions on leadership identity formation in crisis and through the lens of L-A-P. Both the crisis literature (Riggio and Newstead 2023; Wu et al. 2021) and my initial observations conclude that crisis impacts leadership identity and prompts a shift towards an often hero-like persona.

Furthermore, L-A-P implies that both individual and group identity emerge in the practice of collective leadership. Indeed, I have observed some of that emergence in my Immersive Research Lab experiments. However, speaking to PAs has uncovered another clue to my initial identity question. When speaking about their ‘in-betweenness’, they were not talking about changing themselves to fit in the situation they were facing. Instead, the adaptability Jesse speaks of is more akin to the “reflexive attunement” that Segal (2010) mentions. PAs identity remains constant and grounded but their practice and response to changing environments is informed by instinctual and intentional reading of situations, contexts and people. The in-betweenness therefore speaks of their fluidity in positions and paradigms, dynamic and adaptive. Because no day is the same, PAs are tuned to listen and learn for any new information that might disrupt or improve their leader’s day. This further informs Montefusco and Angeli's (2024) argument for navigating complex adaptive systems (CAS) through learning and complex reasoning from an alternative perspective to that of a leader.

Furthermore, PAs ‘in-betweenness’ is marked by a sense of responsibility and the emotional burden of confidentiality. Indeed, I felt it deeply even before, and during our interview process. "this role holds a lot of information... and you can't share it with anyone" continues (Ari). All participants admit the reality of being “between worlds” made them feel lonely as often they couldn’t share or offload with their friends or spouses. “people come to me with a lot of people issues because they don't think HR is approachable and available. So I do also get that” -adds Ari. Ari and others shared how since Covid people would come to them with personal problems that were impacting their wellbeing and work, as they didn’t feel they

could go to HR. I soon learnt that PAs' work was not just about the complexity of tasks and crisis management. PAs get entangled in moral and ethical dilemmas as they express a high degree of empathic, social and organisational awareness. Something that is not necessarily recognised by leaders or HR. Furthermore, their role in co-influencing positive action paired with interpersonal and intersubjective reflexivity, and confidentiality makes them the touchpoint for organisational "offloading". Nevertheless, this newly (since Covid) found role is a form of emotional labour that deeply impacts PAs.

While Ward and McMurray's (2020) work presents the "dark side" of the emotional labour performed by the "invisible workforce" such as the waiter, the doorman, the flight attendant or the receptionist, this was different. These were not the accounts of emotional labour stemming from experiencing verbal aggression, physical violence or sexual misconduct (Ward and McMurray 2020). Instead, PAs were genuinely concerned about their leaders' and teams' challenges and carried the burden of care with them into their homes and into their private lives. As the challenges are mounting, the burden gets heavier and the emotional labour that PAs take on seems deeply profound.

PA's role in sensemaking and sensegiving in crisis

I have learnt that the 360 view that Kai was referring to was not just about the planning, time management, and insight into situations but also about the leaders themselves. PAs often see leaders at their most vulnerable and take the role of a trusted advisor and a sounding board. "then all the the soft side of it, you know, building relationships, checking in with your boss, making sure, they are ok you know, because you do end up having naturally getting to know everything about them." (Jesse) Another PA shares: "They don't get that sense of what people really think? So you offer them insight and wisdom". "Because you see the bigger context, you see more." (Ari) Ari recalls her frequent conversations quoting her leader: "I'm really worried about this. I'm feeling very stressed out. I'm very overloaded. I don't know what to do about it. -What do you suggest? I love when they ask you: "What do you suggest?" (Ari) She continues as her face lits up with genuine warmth and concern for her leader.

What Ari and others described was the vital role of PAs in the advisory role in sensemaking and sensegiving (Weick 1988). This becomes more prominent in crisis situations, the

contextualizing and interpretation of the situation. Interestingly, this practice is an intimate and collective experience between the leader and a PA. An intermediary point between what L-A-P is suggesting as a practice between other actors within an organisational setting. It's confidential and behind closed doors, nevertheless an incredibly important in leadership practice. They also have a role in seeing leaders in fight or flight mode and shifting them to tend and befriend by tending and befriending them (Taylor 2004). The significance of a trusted relationship between a leader and PA that can facilitate such a shift holds significance not only in improving a leader's well-being but also in shifting from suboptimal decision-making modes (fight or flight) in crises.

"leaders have got a really challenging time. I don't think it certainly hasn't got easier for them" (Jesse) "It's hard, hard work at the moment. I think the key thing is to work with them, not for them."-comments Sage. Sage's statement points to the shift in power dynamics between PA and leader. The shift from 'working for' to 'working with' introduces a new leadership practice triggered by crisis and instigated by PAs' dynamic and intuitive response to what is needed. This recalibration signifies a dynamic change not only in the PA's role and position but in leadership practice itself, a transformation from the singularity of closed leadership into a form of open, relational partnership that PAs referred to throughout this interview process.

I asked about some of the challenges and concerns PAs have observed their leaders face: "for leaders at the moment retaining a good workforce is key."(...) "sustainability is on everybody's mind. And I think that is a massive challenge."(...) "it's a challenge for leaders because they might not necessarily be their field of expertise, and so they very much have to rely on everybody around them to be coming up with these new ideas." (Jesse)

In our conversations, they shared about the multiple crises within organisations that have been triggered by the pandemic. Covid-19 seemed like a defining moment for every PA I spoke to and had accelerated many changes in culture, ways of working and mindset shift. Ashley shares about some of those changes: "I think there's been a lot of education, and they've had to really change and broaden their thinking. And they've attended like much more diversity, awareness courses, and also sustainability because you're looking at the impact and that of lack of travel." But the biggest change that Ashley noticed was in the practice of reflexivity that leaders "actually questioning themselves". Jesse adds: "Historically leaders

had to be shown to know everything but now they feel like they can be vulnerable and say I don't know and seek advice and knowledge from others. It's ok to not to know". She continues: "I think it'd be really naive of the leader to think that they know it all because you can't. You physically can't know it all. And people I don't think are expecting you to know it all."

Ashley and Jesse speak of a shift they have observed in dismantling the image of an all-knowing, god-like leader persona to a leadership practice of learning, openness and vulnerability as suggested by some crisis literature (Riggio and Newstead 2023; Montefusco and Angeli 2024) in admitting that leaders don't have all the answers. However, Jesse gives more insight as to the catalyst of this shift: "There's a whole workforce that you need to consider, and their challenges are completely different to ours. So I think that's a real challenge for them but I do think there is a real respectfulness about it now, and I think people are thinking differently". (Jesse) Sage shares her observations: "So maybe leaders having to become a little bit softer and I think he always has been actually so... He's more coming into his own". Ashley adds how role-modelling has become a more prominent part of the leadership practice since the pandemic: "reaching out to people became more important and being visible as a leader". Jesse adds that this visibility is particularly important as leaders are expected to embody and demonstrate the values of the company. However, Alex shares her recent experiences of how a crisis can trigger reverting to old values and leadership practices, as observed by Ansell and Boin (2019). "When I joined XXX people ethos was huge to me and that really showed throughout all my career and it was only the last six months that I feel like that's disappearing and I don't know if it's down to who our leadership is at the moment or just because they are panicking because they need to save money. But the care for the people sort of disappeared. This is not the way our staff get treated."(Alex)

Alex and other PAs exhibited a strong sense of responsibility and value even in the midst of crisis, something that as Alex observes can be diluted or even disappear amongst leaders operating out of the survival mode. It is in those moments that often PAs serve as a moral compass, holding leaders accountable to the values their companies represent.

He is still the boss

The impact the PAs have on leaders seems increasingly tangible and relevant in the context of organisational challenges but also in influencing cultural shifts. The subject of gender was undeniable and inescapable in our conversations since all of the PAs I interviewed were women and the majority of them worked for male leaders. Jesse recalls: "I'm a bit of a nightmare, because I'll constantly challenge my leader in... Have you thought about what they'll think about that on site because I've worked on site, and I know that there's quite an 'us and them' divide" (Jesse). Ari shares on her influence on shifting leadership mindset: "I don't know if you've noticed. But our leadership is quite male. I always try to challenge them, especially because I'm involved in the recruitment as well..." "I'm the only woman in the room, and I was like not only on it, but I'm also Latino. So this is all the cliches into one. I'm the ultimate diversity hire"... "like all getting all these guys that went to Cambridge and Oxford. It's not going to give you a different view of the world"(Ari).

Ashley further reflects on her conversations with leaders during and post-Covid:

"he said, I've got a real appreciation for mothers because he was seeing what his wife was doing, because she was basically taking on home and work life, you know that he wasn't able to. You know, they both were senior leaders in their various organizations. But he could see now what she's juggling, what you're juggling" (Ashley). Ashley shared how through working from home and in close proximity to his wife, her male leader began to appreciate the struggles (which were previously invisible to him) women have. The first-hand insight into the unequal division of labour made him in turn, more sympathetic to his PA's experience of managing work-life balance.

Ashley gives more insight into the historical stereotypes she had to deal with:

"Now we actually fought to be called PAs. And now see a as as well, because in there is that there is that natural connotation with you. Say you're a secretary, or there with the minutes, and you're there running around. And you know, it's it's it's the various stereotypes" (Ashley). Sage shares her evolution over the years and how she had to learn to say no and draw boundaries around some of the stereotypes:

"You know, they said they want the impossible, and you moved heaven and earth to do it. And then slowly, especially with the training that they've put in place, we started to realise that we could question things we could say, no, hang on a minute. This is completely

unrealistic. Let's drop that. Who else can do that, and it's taken me quite a while to get into that. I've sort of gone into that version of myself almost imperceptively. I think it's on occasion you'll say to him- You did it again, you know. Stop it, don't. yeah, no, but you couldn't necessarily do that with anyone. You got to have it. The relationship, haven't you? Perhaps..." (Sage)

Alex adds more insight on boundaries she had to negotiate: "I'm here to do PA work and it's kind of hard...cause PA does mean personal assistant, but the personal side for me is in the workplace. It's not personal tasks". She reflects and recalls being asked to organise her leader's mother-in-law's birthday party in the past. She continues with another story: "I once had a request from my male director who asked me to change my e-mail address from Alex to Alexandra..." "He didn't want his clients to think that his PA was a male". But why?- I asked: "Who knows? Because he was a male-chauvinistic pig and didn't feel like a man should be doing a PA role." (Alex)

Indeed, in my conversations 'he' was often interchanged with 'leader' and 'she' with 'PA'. It was hard not to notice how gender still plays a big role in organisational constructs and hierarchy. Indeed, Alex was the only PA I interviewed who worked with both male and female leaders. She further gave me an insight into the gender difference in leadership styles she experienced. "I don't know if I should say this.... I've worked better supporting females than I have males. I've clashed with male leaders a lot in my career because I haven't agreed with their approach"... that I'm there to do everything and anything for them like I am literally there." (Alex) She continues: "I was very lucky to find Clare, so when I had my interview with Clare and James, I was like, this is what I can do...And they were like, that's fine. They were like, we're moving forward. The world's moving forward. We need to support mums, we need to get mums back to work." (...) "So I think having that instant support and understanding and you can you give it back in other ways as well. So I would be like actually you know what, I can work four days this week because my husband's around and you know I can give back some time" (Alex).

I noticed when speaking about Clare, Alex would not refer to her as boss or a leader but always used her first name. She only used boss or leader when speaking of Clare's male predecessors. A clear gender hierarchy was present in my conversation with Alex which also ran through my other interactions with participants. She, the PA might have become a partner but 'He' was still the boss.

The “gatekeeper” of time, space and attention

Early into our conversations, I started to notice PAs referring to themselves as the “gatekeepers”. I was curious to find out more about what/who the gates were to and what/who where they were keeping from and Ari gave me some initial insight: "It's sort of like a gateway. You can use it as like a gateway like as a barrier. And then you kind of block off the access to the leaders at the same time you have all the information these people know, you know, because everyone knows I know more things than they do." (Ari) Ashley explains: “as well as being their gatekeeper, you are their representative, because you will have people coming to you, and you are their voice," (...) "Like it is like a gatekeeping, isn't it? It's kind of you are there. You're the eyes and ears for your director." (Alex)

Ari described herself as an access point that holds information that no one else has. She's not only the gatekeeper, it sounded like she is also the gate that “blocks off the access”. She sees both sides of the gate and therefore her perspective holds more insight and information. But the gate isn't just an access to information, it is an access to leaders' time and attention.

Ashley explains: “because they can go at 110 miles an hour, and they're reactive to a situation they might over-commit to things. So you need to basically be bringing them back and keeping them in check a little bit...making sure they turn up the right place at the right time, and making sure they haven't got back-to-back meetings, because, you know, especially now, I think... actually say... with digital everybody is connected and everyone can see everyone's calendar.” She continues: “so suddenly, you know, we struggle now with that. I think, that people send invites, but before they always would have the respect to think, I need to reach out to the PA first, before I would dare to put a meeting in. But now we just find people just send emails. They see they look at the scheduling tool on Outlook and think, oh, they got a free time. So it's like, you've kind of got to find ways to work around that and obviously bounce back and say we need to protect time for them. Because I think definitely, since Covid, the the world exploded in a different way. And people got used to back-to-back Teams calls and it's not healthy” (Ashley). As defined by Virilio (1986) this could be seen as an example of leaders trapped in a form of a “digital delirium” going from one virtual meeting to impacting their perception of time and of reality in the race to efficiency and productivity (Kroker and Kroker 1997). What PAs observed was that such practice came at the cost of the loss of self, of recognising the human need for pause and rest and its importance in maintaining the cognitive and physical wellbeing.

The idea of needing to ‘protect’ leaders’ time was strongly resounding in all my conversations with PAs. They all agreed Covid and particularly the introduction of virtual meeting tools became the catalyst for the transformation of the idea of leaders’ time and PAs’ time management. Ari shares her insight on how she tries to navigate this new challenge: “But what you need to do is figure out all these 15 meetings that request that came in. Which ones do I need to put in?.. A lot more meetings like now everyone seems to have to join everything...I have some directors who suffer from FOMO...They feel they have to be in everything and if they're not, they request the meetings to be recorded. I don't even think they watch the recordings to be honest but there's just so much more, and in this remember to keep people connected during the pandemic. I feel like you weren't alone at home, and that thing, this this situation of having all these comms. it is so overwhelming that there's always something going on, and the leaders just feel like there's always something coming...” (Ari)

What Ari and others observed is the speed and scale of digital acceleration through online meetings and online presentism triggered by Covid-19. While the pandemic seems a thing of the past, this new, digital reality in leadership and organisational practice is now firmly established, transforming leadership practice. PAs shared how this new phenomenon of always being on and available, constant visibility (to leaders’ diaries, activities, status) that virtual platforms such as Teams have introduced put additional pressure on leaders and PAs. As Ari observes leaders suffer from the fear of missing out (FOMO) which can lead to overextending themselves and saying yes to every meeting that they’re invited to. This in turn leads to becoming overwhelmed, bewildered and even to burnout. PAs shared how they were increasingly concerned about the impact this always being ‘on’ and ‘available’ has on them and their leaders’ wellbeing. Ashley observes:

“So they care equally. And they say, you know, they don't want us sending emails that just because they're sending emails at 11 o'clock at night. They're not expecting us to. So it's getting out of that psychological contract a little bit, because you do feel, well... They're up working there, so I should be out working and they would actually. you know, tell you off in it in a nice way, you know, just to say that you don't need to do that, and it's not what we expect. But then it's also looking at tools to help them. So they also don't need to send emails at 11 o'clock at night, and you know, and not, you say, freeing up the time for them. And then also, you've got people that lots of different people think that they're very important and

expecting facetime with bosses and the boss is generous. They want to be able to be there for everybody, but actually they can't. So it's looking at helping them delegate” (Ashley).

Time management has become increasingly important since Covid-19. The introduction of virtual meetings brought increased accessibility to leaders. But this comes at the cost to leaders and PAs who are increasingly under pressure to find ways and tools to manage their leaders' attention and time and to prioritise people and issues that arise. The leaders are overwhelmed and distracted by the amount of information coming their way and feel under pressure to always be on at the expense of overextending themselves and being fully present.

The role and the impact of digital technologies in the post-Covid era is undeniable (Bedi et al. 2021; Agarwal et al. 2022; Gfrerer et al. 2020). Indeed, shifting operations from physical offices into virtual ones with the use of platforms such as Teams and Zoom made working during Covid-19 pandemic possible while ensuring business continuity. While some of the changes to the established business processes and models benefit from digital tools, PAs' observations on the impact on leaders are worth considering. This is where the work of Virilio (1986), Kroker and Kroker (1997) and Stiegler (1998, 2013, 2019) amongst others, seems resonant. All of the above have warned against the perils of the 'digital delirium' that some organisations and leaders are now experiencing (as explored in the previous chapter). However, what PAs are beginning to notice is leaders' loss of attention and loss of time due to overexposure, facilitated by digital tools (Stiegler 2013). As Virilio predicted, many organisations have undergone 'techno-conditioning' as part of their digital transformation programmes (Virilio 1986). While it might offer an initial comfort and illusion of progress, PAs' accounts indicate that this came at the cost of narrowing vision and diminishing leaders' consciousness (ibid.). Furthermore, Virilio's (1986) study of dromology in the context of experiences and perceptions of time and space in 'high-speed' organisations offers scope for a deeper discussion around the impact on leaders' practice and well-being. PAs are acutely aware of this new phenomenon, so they act as gatekeepers to protect their leaders' time, space and attention. However, while the gatekeepers restrict access to others, the internal gates between PAs and leaders appear to have opened wider than ever.

“Hell no!”

Jesse, Sage, Ashley, Alex and Ari all shared how in recent years the work of the PA has become much more relational and is built on mutual trust and care. "It's about having a great relationship" ...it's two-way, they know everything about you too and you take care of each other" - observes Ashley "Yeah, you know. I see Google... I'm aware now, that they call them (PA) business partners. So you know, the leader will say I'll connect you with my business partner, which actually is a little bit more who we are" (Ashley). The description of relationship and partnership seemed interchangeable, but it also indicated a shift from a traditional idea of the leader/ PA power dynamics. It seems that in recent years while leaders have been dealing with more complexity so have PAs thus the idea of leadership in this context have become more nuanced, like a dynamic space between the 'visible' leader and the 'invisible' PA. There is a recognition that PAs role is more complex and oscillates between facilitation, management and advisory. In this space, while the title, pay and progression hierarchy are defined and fixed, the practice boundaries seem more blurred and dynamic.

After the conversations with PAs the mystery of leadership-in-practice-in-crisis gained more lucidity and obscurity. On one hand, it was clear that L-A-P in crisis has a strong application and merit. What was not clear is if such a form of leadership practice could ever be fully expressed by leaders. And should it be? Raelin would say L-A-P "looks for leadership in its music and activity rather than in the traits and heroics of individual actors". (2011, p.195) If that is the case, then the PAs were the symphony of L-A-P, however their 'geographic' location within the organisation could be seen as problematic since currently, they are not on the map of leadership and OM or indeed crisis literature. Moreover, while the recognition of PAs' vital role in leadership-partnership seems undeniable, when I asked the participants if they ever would aspire to be a leader, I received a resounding 'hell no'. None of them would ever consider themselves as leaders or would aspire to become one. While in the shadows they appeared to have been already performing a significant portion of leadership functions, and creating space for effective leadership, the leadership itself seemed either unobtainable or unwanted. Jesse shares: "No, I think my strengths don't lie in leadership. That's for sure. I think it's key to know where your strength and weakness lie, and my strength is not in leadership". Ari adds: "There's no career path for me to be a leader". While Jesse seemed to allude to the 'visible' leadership strengths she believes she lacks, Ari speaks of the invisible

barriers to career progression once you become a PA. Ashley adds: it's an incredibly, incredibly difficult job. I know when you put questions like, would you want to be a leader? And the answer is, No...it just makes me happy to support." Alex shares her perspective: "Don't want to be a leader...No, I've always said I wanted to mentor, maybe a mentor for people joining the business because I feel like after being here for 10 years and I can sort of give guidance and support."

PAs I interviewed were happy to be the guardians, facilitators and custodians of the leadership time and space, or even 'leading' their leaders. However, the leadership itself (that in that moment seemed very defined to them) was not something they aspired to or wished to pursue. Their response both surprised and intrigued me. On one hand, some of the ways PAs acted and embodied could be considered leadership-in-practice as theorised by Raelin and others. Conversely, from PAs' perspective, leadership was something else entirely that they supported and enabled but not practised or embodied.

Stuck in this paradox I returned to the prime question. What is leadership? Crevani et al. (2010) argue that it is leadership and not leaders that we should pay attention to and study. Raelin (2011) contributes to the argument through his conceptualisation of the leaderful practice. However, maybe the problem is not with various concepts and definitions but with the word itself. Maybe with all the descriptions and theories developed over the years, the word lost its meaning. While the literature has reconceptualised the theory of a leader, in practice the idea remains outdated and binary. The fact that the vast majority of leaders are male, and some events want to preserve the imagery of the hero and the practice of "managing like a man" is no mystery (Schyns et al. 2024; Lewis et al. 2022; Wajcman 2013; Harding et al. 2011; Brewis and Linstead 1999). Maybe we don't need a new definition or theory of leadership, maybe we need a new word? Or maybe, as one of the participants in the Immersive Research Lab concluded following the "Persona Experiment": "Leadership does not need to be described, it needs to be felt, embodied, experienced and lived".

The question whether the task is not to reframe leadership, or to rethink the language around it seems critical. Rather than generating yet another leadership concept, this move offers a way out of an increasingly circular theoretical conversation. It does not call for abandoning leadership altogether, as Learmonth and Morrell (2021) provocatively suggest, but for exercising imaginative courage in naming something else, something that might enable different identities, practices, and forms of recognition to emerge.

This tension became especially visible in the Immersive Research Lab's BBC orchestra experiment. Participants debated whether the conductor should be understood as a leader, a member of the orchestra, an observer responding to what was unfolding, or a figure simultaneously in control and uncertainty. The answer, inevitably, was 'yes!', and not only for the conductor. Leadership, or whatever we might call it, was distributed across the room: in the musicians' attunement to one another, in the audience's interpretive presence, and in the collective emergence of the performance itself. Yet only one role carried the symbolic label of "leader". It was this label that just didn't stick with the five PA I had the privilege to learn from.

Conclusions

This chapter set out to follow an unexpected clue in the study of crisis leadership and, in doing so, surfaced an actor who remains largely invisible within both leadership and crisis literatures: the Personal Assistant. Through the accounts of experienced PAs, leadership-in-crisis emerges not as a moment of heroic intervention, but as a continuous, relational, and highly mediated practice that unfolds across time, space, bodies, technologies, and power relations. In this sense, the empirical findings of this chapter strongly reinforce the argument advanced in the literature review: that dominant models of crisis leadership, grounded in episodic, leader-centric, and rationalist assumptions, are increasingly inadequate for understanding leadership under conditions of polycrisis.

The experiences of PAs reveal crisis not as an exceptional rupture, but as an ongoing condition of instability characterised by uncertainty, acceleration, and emotional strain. Their work takes place within precisely the kinds of recursive, interconnected dynamics described by polycrisis theorists (Morin, 1992; Morin & Kern, 1999), where organisational, technological, sustainability, affective, and ethical pressures intersect. PAs do not merely support leadership during crises; they actively participate in shaping the temporal, relational, and material conditions through which leadership becomes possible. Leadership, therefore, is shown to occur well before and well beyond the visible actions of leaders themselves.

Consistent with the L-A-P ontology, this chapter demonstrates that leadership is enacted through situated practices such as anticipation, sensemaking, sensegiving, boundary-setting, emotional containment, and the orchestration of time and attention. Yet, crucially, the findings also expose the limits of existing L-A-P theorising. While PAs exemplify leadership as emergent, relational, and collective, their practice unfolds within asymmetrical power relations that remain structurally unaltered. Despite exercising significant influence, judgement, and moral agency, PAs remain positioned outside formal leadership recognition, advancement pathways, and symbolic authority. This tension directly reflects the critique advanced in the literature review: that practice-based approaches risk romanticising emergence unless power, hierarchy, and exclusion are explicitly theorised (Collinson, 2006; Learmonth and Morrell, 2021).

The chapter further illustrates how leadership practice is deeply shaped and often distorted by digital acceleration. PAs operate at the frontline of what Virilio (1986) and Stiegler (2013, 2019) describe as the erosion of reflective capacity through speed, overload, and perpetual connectivity. Their role as gatekeepers of time, space, and attention becomes critical in mitigating the effects of ‘digital delirium’ on leaders’ cognition, wellbeing, and decision-making. In doing so, PAs act as human counterweights to algorithmic logics of availability and efficiency, highlighting the limits of technological substitutions for relational, embodied, and ethical labour.

Importantly, this chapter also brings the “dark side” of leadership into focus. PAs’ accounts reveal how crises can trigger both reflexivity and regression where moments of vulnerability, learning, and care coexist with panic-driven cost-cutting, ethical erosion, and the reassertion of hierarchical control. In these moments, PAs often function as informal moral compasses, holding leaders to organisational values that risk being abandoned under pressure. This finding aligns with Vaughan’s (1999) and Linstead et al.’s (2014) insights that crisis is frequently produced through routine organisational practices rather than leadership failure alone.

In practice, hierarchical and traditional constructions of leadership appear so deeply sedimented in organisational life that no accumulation of theoretical alternatives seems able to dislodge them. This became particularly evident in the PAs’ accounts. Despite demonstrating high levels of relational judgement, anticipatory sensemaking, ethical reflexivity, and influence (qualities strongly aligned with L-A-P), participants categorically

rejected the idea of seeing themselves as leaders or aspiring to leadership roles. Their responses were visceral and immediate, a resounding “hell no”, as if leadership itself marked a boundary not to be crossed.

This reaction cannot be explained by a lack of competence or confidence. Rather, it points to the enduring symbolic weight of Leadership as a category that remains tightly bound to hierarchy, visibility, authority, and historically masculine ideals. In this sense, the problem is not simply that Leadership theory has failed to keep pace with practice, but that the language of leadership itself continues to organise identities, aspirations, and exclusions in powerful ways. No matter how relational, collective, or processual leadership is theorised, the word still evokes a particular figure that many practitioners neither recognise themselves in nor wish to become.

The persistent gendered nature of the PA role further exposes what is at stake in this linguistic fixation. Leadership practice is routinely sustained by feminised, undervalued, and emotionally intensive labour, yet those who perform it often dis-identify with leadership altogether. This dis-identification reflects not an absence of agency or ambition, but the enduring structural, symbolic, and linguistic boundaries that define who leadership is for and who it excludes.

In this respect, the chapter raises a question that resonates strongly with the literature review and the deeper mystery of this research project: whether the limitations of crisis leadership scholarship stem not only from how leadership is practised or theorised, but from the concept and language of leadership itself. Until this language is unsettled, even the most sophisticated practice-based theories may continue to reproduce the very hierarchies they seek to transcend.

Taken together, the findings suggest that PAs occupy a critical yet unacknowledged position within the leadership constellation, one that becomes particularly visible under conditions of polycrisis. Their work exposes leadership as a fragile, distributed, and ethically charged practice that is sustained through invisible labour, affective attunement, and continuous negotiation with instability and unpredictability. By bringing this hidden practice into view, the chapter extends crisis leadership theory beyond leaders and moments, toward a more honest engagement with emergence, constraint, power, and care.

In doing so, this chapter reinforces the central claim of the literature review, that advancing crisis leadership theory requires not simply new models, but a reorientation of attention towards overlooked actors, invisible practices, and the conditions through which leadership is quietly made possible, sustained, and sometimes undone.

Indeed, the 360 view that Kai referred to was not just of a leader, it was a view of a leadership time and space, complex, dynamic and ever-changing. I guess Alex was right, “if you’re in with a PA you’re in with the director” and these conversations with PAs served as a portal into the larger, leadership story that I got to capture.

A few weeks after my interviews, mainstream news outlets and social media platforms began to circulate articles on how AI tools will replace some jobs, including that of a PA. “The technology is likely to find quick traction as an assistant to humans.”- read one of the article lines (Aitken and, Bennett 2024). While on the surface it might seem like a good idea to use a virtual assistant to manage one’s calendar, as I have learnt from our interviews time, space and humans do not abide by algorithmic laws, they disrupt and redefine them. Interestingly, Reid Hoffman, the founder of Inflexion AI, an AI-based platform that created a personal assistant Pi, continues to have a human PA. After all, as Richard Branson admits: “I am free to think about the bigger picture. Without a world-class assistant, this wouldn’t be possible.” While the creation of Pi might have been inspired by Hoffman’s PA, after my conversations with Jess, Sage, Ashley, Alex and Mary, I am fairly certain that Pi still has a lot to ‘learn’.

This and the preceding chapter traced leadership in polycrisis as a fragile, distributed, and deeply mediated practice, sustained through often invisible labour, affective attunement, and continuous negotiation with instability. They also revealed the limits of dominant leadership vocabularies, particularly when confronted with asymmetry of power, acceleration, emotional strain, and the erosion of reflexive space. As the inquiry moved further away from heroic, leader-centric accounts and closer to lived experience, it became increasingly clear that conventional academic language struggled to hold what was being revealed. Leadership in polycrisis did not resolve into coherence, rather, it remained fragmented, ambiguous, and often contradictory. This next chapter emerges from that impasse.

If earlier chapters unsettled *who* leadership belongs to and *where* it is practised, this next chapter unsettles *how* leadership in polycrisis can be known, made sense of, and

communicated. Building on the recognition that leadership practice unfolds in the liminal space between visibility and invisibility, power and care, embodiment and digital augmentation, this chapter turns to poetry as a mode of inquiry capable of engaging precisely those spaces that resist rationalist capture. Poetry here is not an aesthetic diversion, nor a representational supplement to empirical analysis, but a methodological response to the instability, ambiguity, and affective density of polycrisis.

Chapter 7: Poetry in crisis

"Creativity is a means of controlling chaos, finding order. Business and poetry draw their waters out of the same well." - John Barr, President, Poetry Foundation

In 2007 thirty-two people lost their lives as a result of the mass shooting at Virginia Tech. In the midst of this unfathomable tragedy, the university leadership reached out to the poet, writer and University Distinguished Professor Yolande “Nikki” Giovanni to deliver the speech at the memorial service. With less than twenty-four hours notice, Giovanni turned to poetry. In the moment of grief, shock and loss she wrote this poem (below) which she passionately delivered at the memorial service. Here are her words:

We are Virginia Tech.

We are sad today, and we will be sad for quite a while.

We are not moving on, we are embracing our mourning.

We are Virginia Tech.

*We are strong enough to stand tall tearlessly, we are brave enough to bend to cry,
and we are sad enough to know that we must laugh again.*

We are Virginia Tech.

We do not understand this tragedy. We know we did nothing to deserve it, but neither does a child in Africa dying of AIDS, neither do the invisible children walking the night away to avoid being captured by the rogue army, neither does the baby elephant watching his community being devastated for ivory, neither does the Mexican child looking for fresh water, neither does the Appalachian infant killed in the middle of the night in his crib in the home his father built with his own hands, being run over by a boulder because the land was destabilized. No one deserves a tragedy.

We are Virginia Tech.

The Hokie Nation embraces our own and reaches out with open hearts and hands to those who offer their hearts and minds. We are strong, and brave, and innocent, and unafraid. We are better than we think and not quite what we want to be. We are alive to the imaginations

and the possibilities. We will continue to invent the future through our blood and tears and through all our sadness.

We are the Hokies.

We will prevail.

We will prevail.

We will prevail.

We are Virginia Tech.

(Giovanni, 2007, Virginia Tech Archive)

<https://www.archive.vtmag.vt.edu/memorial07/VTMagazinePDF/convocation.8.pdf>)

The YouTube link to the live recording of the reading:

<https://youtu.be/ItQlcw3Siok?si=bQsFW0-G2M-b0taj>

Giovanni's instinctive response to crisis is what Taylor (2011) advocates for in leadership practice (be it in everyday practice and not necessarily in crisis). He remarks: "For me, the idea of acting from a passion to do something meaningful that makes the world a better place is the essence of the artistic process, and the potential of what business could become in the 21st century. This is what I hope that poetry and the broader world of art can bring to business." (Taylor 2011, p.66).

While I was already flirting with creativity and artistic expression in my research practice, I was about to live out Taylor's words as I stumbled onto another mystery, the mystery of poetry in crisis.

Entering poetry in crisis

In my research practice I turned to poetry as a way of navigating the unknown and the uncertain, as a "need to recognise meaning as unstable" (Morgan 2010, p.24). I have lived my research questions so that I could live into the answers and I 'accidentally', "woke up the poet to become a researcher" (Guiney Yallop et al., 2014, 3). As outlined in my methodology chapter, the poetic inquiry rendered my work reflexive and attuned to the in-betweenness of

spaces, people and practices (Knox, 2020; Linstead 2022). Sometimes it would manifest through disrupting the linearity of my research process (and writing) other times I would enter the “poetic moments” which would lead me to the discovery of new connections and stories that were mysteriously unfolding before me (Linstead 2022). Learning and writing about crisis leadership proved difficult enough but when I found myself entangled in crises of my own, poetry found me once again. This time it was not about reading poetry and interpreting poetic moments (Morgan 2010, 2022), this time I discovered what writing poetry brings to my own leadership practice and business (Taylor 2011, p.65).

As outlined in the methodology chapter, Stewart (2005) speaks of the emergent nature of the ethnographic experience when it’s opened up to the creativity of life itself. Linstead (2022, p.107) further reflects “the world both takes shape in real time before us and creeps up behind us, catching us by surprise”. In summer 2024 the ‘world’ indeed took me by surprise. The company I worked for, found itself in a series of crises which resulted in cutting costs through defunding research and innovation programmes, and entering a third round of redundancies (that by this point had lasted for over nine months). I had finished coding my interview data and begun to write the research analysis and findings. I was genuinely happy with my progress of my breakthroughs and started to feel like I was owning the space both in my research and my work. I had just completed an Alpha testing of a leadership framework I developed alongside the research when I had another, this time a professional breakdown.

This time was different. Things were not just happening around me, they were happening to me. I shifted from being an observer to an insider of a lived experience as the organisational crisis became my own. With a receipt of an email followed by a briefing call, along with my team I entered the compulsory redundancy process.

What I was seeing and experiencing made little ‘logical’ sense and contradicted many established theories I became so fluent in. During the redundancy processes, I found myself engulfed in procedures, cold, legal and technical language, and binary, reductive data. I felt overwhelmed and reduced to an inconvenient statistic, an overhead that was not producing the commercial value. My work and my team felt insignificant and invisible in the sea of metrics and numbers. I needed to feel like a human being and connect with my inner humanity. In my time of need, in my own crisis, I turned to poetry to seek meaning and to

navigate these ambiguous and uncertain times. I have accidentally become a student of poetry in practice in what seemed the least inspiring times, void of beauty and awe.

In those times of bewilderment and confusion, poetry found me and gave me the language I needed to comprehend the incomprehensible and to rise above all that was bringing me down and clouding my judgements. To see the visible and the invisible, and to view it from all kinds of different vantage points. It brought me closer to the situation so that I could process and feel everything I needed to feel in a fully embodied way. But at the same time, it also distanced me in a way I could see, with clarity and calmness, what was happening to me and those around me. For the duration of 121 days (the length of my compulsory redundancy process), my academic writing was replaced with the writing of poetry, or rather ‘poetic expressions’ (since I’m not a trained or experienced poet). These expressions would come unplanned and unbridled, often catching me by surprise. I never knew where they would take me or how they would end. I would simply put pen to paper and start writing. The creative process would take over and take hold of my imagination. In the end, it resulted in twenty-five poetic expressions which I did not expect to include in this thesis.

Yet, on reflection, the themes that surfaced through this practice mirrored and extended the insights of the earlier chapters. As Taylor (2011) suggests, poetry as a practice has particular relevance for leadership and business in times of crisis. It attends to the moral, emotional, and relational dimensions of experience that Leadership-As-Practice scholarship calls for but often struggles to express (Raelin, 2011). If leadership in polycrisis is enacted through everyday practices of complex sensemaking, sensegiving, then poetry can be understood as one such practice, one that captures the everyday poetics of leading, surviving, and making meaning under pressure.

This chapter, however, does not seek closure or resolution. Instead, it extends the inquiry into a different register, one capable of holding contradiction, vulnerability, and ambiguity without forcing coherence. In doing so, it responds to a question raised following the mystery of the Leadership: whether advancing crisis leadership scholarship requires not only new theories and overlooked actors, but also new forms of expression. Poetry becomes, here, both method and mirror, reflecting leadership in polycrisis as it is lived rather than as it is idealised, and opening space for knowing that is affective, embodied, and ethically attuned.

Amid the unknown unknowns

The redundancy process was emotionally and physically draining and marked by many unknown unknowns. Every day, new questions would arise and decisions I needed to make that would inform not just my own future but the trajectory of the team and my research. Some of the questions were harder than others and felt visceral as if my body was bowing under the weight of each question mark. Soon I could no longer take their weight, and my intuitive response was to release some of these questions out into the world. This practice came as an act of creative expression. While the crisis literature speaks of uncertainty (Teece et al. 2016; Griffin and Grote 2020; Ansell and Boin 2019) and of learning (Riggio and Newstead 2023; Montefusco and Angeli 2024), it says little of the process of reflective questioning, of what happens in the void before arriving at the answers and solutions. I found the question space both disarming (I did not have the answers) and empowering (I did not need to have the answers). It was in the practice of asking questions that I found a distinction between types of uncertainty, one that is passive as observed by Ansell and Boin (2019) and one that is active as suggested by Teece et al. (2016). The first one is paralysing and bewildering as a person enters a state of being in an uncertain space. The second type of uncertainty comes from engaging in a conversation that leads to creativity and innovation amid crisis (Teece et al. 2016). My experience from moving from passive to active uncertainty was through an embodied practice of asking questions that were reflected through my poetic expressions. Asking questions felt like an act, not a state. Thus, entering uncertainty as a space of asking questions without knowing (or expecting to know) the answers. I found this important distinction to be missing in crisis literature. By defining this type of uncertainty, I was able to enter a space of complexity, complex reasoning and sensemaking that Montefusco and Angeli (2024) and Riggio and Newstead (2023) explore. It was reflective and reflexive yet free of solution framing or finding. This practice was not about finding answers, this practice was about asking questions.

Below is a poetic expression that captures one of those moments of active uncertainty:

Questions

So, what now? What do I do?

What position do I take?
Do I turn another cheek or just wait?
I'm in a state of total disorientation where I lost my balance.
It is in this imbalance that I can't find who I am
or what I am supposed to say, write, think...
I feel like with each moment that I lose hope
is the moment that I lose my voice.
Do I even have a choice?
And if I do, then what is it?
I feel lost, I feel trapped.
I don't know where to turn next,
what move to make.
Am I supposed to leave or wait?
Is this the time to be still and in the stillness find knowing?
Or will my knowing arrive once I take the step into the unknown?
Which one is it?
Do I turn left or right,
look ahead or behind?
Which way is it?
And why?

The politics and power of data- entering the dark side

The compulsory redundancy process can be a highly emotional and tense experience as decisions are made about those who stay and those who leave the company. Leaders often revert to rational models and practices as a way of making difficult decisions 'fair' and 'objective' (Ansell and Boin 2019). Gathering information in the form of data and performance-measuring metrics is supposed to serve this purpose. However, framing, interpreting and contextualising data and such metrics can be problematic in a crisis. Indeed, this process can surface individual and organisational shortcomings that might have been previously hidden or concealed (Vaughan 1999). But above all, it is highly political as it exposes internal formal and informal agreements of power and power asymmetries. This is

where I stumbled across the dark side of the organisation as theorised and interpreted by Vaughan (1999) and Linstead et al. (2014). Throughout this time, I experienced the “micropolitics of knowledge” in the form of the economy of data and measuring metrics used in the redundancy process. While gathering information is important, what matters is how information is contextualised and interpreted, argue Ansell and Boin (2019). I observed that data and key performance metrics were used predominantly in automating complexity and in easing difficult decision-making. This new economy of data was as fluid (and disjointed) as the metrics themselves. Indeed, superficial metrics and poor or incomplete data were used to make decisions with maximum efficiency and minimal friction. Furthermore, the word ‘data’ became a source of false certitude and unquestionable ‘truths’. A way of making decisions without taking responsibility. In a crisis, leaders are pressured to look for quick answers and silver-bullet solutions with minimal emotional friction and accountability. Data-enabled or data-disabled decision-making practices seemed to have offered an antidote to increasing complexity. ‘The data shows’ became the en vogue phrase I began to hear more frequently, like a voice from an oracle that is not to be questioned (n.b. data largely understood as quantitative in the form of charts and graphs). There was a dark side to this practice that often resulted in weaponizing data against inconvenient people (i.e. defunding EDI and/or researchers who don’t generate profits) or inconvenient truths (i.e. altering diversity and/or sustainability targets). This “power as process” phenomenon, as observed by Vaughan (1999), was visible particularly in the misinterpretation (conscious or unconscious) and misuse of data. It was often sterile and selective in what data were disclosed and what were hidden. Here is another poetic expression I wrote that speaks of my experience of the interpretation and use of data and metrics in the redundancy process:

Data is, data are

*I live between two worlds,
where data is and data are.
Right now, right here
as I look at you, the data is clear:
I'm not enough.*

*Not billable enough, not utilised enough,
 not profitable enough.
 The data you preach
 seems final and bleak.
 In Times New Roman's red
 my work here is dead.
 This data speaks fast
 no questions asked.*

*But data are stories,
 and stories are people
 systems and complexities,
 connections and patterns,
 dissonance and harmonies
 generative and expansive.*

Coz data are questions, not the final answers.

*So as 'you' go home,
 and think this is it.
 I will be shaping another reality.
 Of futures that thrive,
 and systems alive.
 Emergent and humming with possibility,
 through inter and transdisciplinarity.
 With eyes open wide
 I won't step aside.
 I won't be a 'good girl'
 that keeps her mouth shut.
 This won't silence me
 and curb my curiosity.*

Coz data are questions, not the final answers.

Letting go, letting in

The traditional crisis leadership practice places control in the mind of the individual leader “who becomes the mastermind of events, both present and future.” (Raelin 2011, p.197). Raelin (2011, 2023) argues that L-A-P does not centre ‘knowing’ within the mind of the ‘knower’ but in the collective and emergent knowing. This calls for a practice of intersubjectivity which requires transcending individualistic ideas, theories and concepts. The tighter we hold on to truths and constructs, the less true and meaningful they become. However, entering the “collective consciousness” and collective knowing, as envisioned by Raelin (2011, p.197), in crisis requires internal and external liberation of the self and others. I had already experienced this in my research process which forces one to continuously review one’s position, not in search of perfection, but in search of truth and beauty (Goodall 1991). But the practice of letting go is far more universal. The tightening of ideas tightens our minds and our fists (fight or flight) and creates blind spots which in crisis can prove catastrophic. This has become such an important lesson for me as a leader and a researcher to hold on to positions, ideas and power loosely, especially in times of crisis when the temptation (and our natural predisposition) is to seek self-preservation and security (Taylor et al. 2006). It speaks against the idea of “taming” and controlling the crisis (Ansell and Boin 2019), but rather embracing uncertainty with an open heart and mind and thus accessing new ways of sensemaking and sensegiving (Teece et al. 2016; Montefusco and Angeli 2024). The letting go serves as a precursor to letting in, a conditioning space before any teaching and learning of complex understanding and reasoning as suggested by Montefusco and Angeli (2024) can take place meaningfully. Letting go serves as a pause, accessing a liminal space (Montefusco and Angeli 2024) before contextualised and informed action can take place (Ansell and Boin 2019). Like exhaling carbon dioxide, which no longer serves us before inhaling fresh oxygen, that can fill our lungs and run through our bloodstream to other parts of the body. Furthermore, I have noticed that the practice of letting go serves as an antidote to entering or remaining in the ‘fight or flight’ mode. Letting go, was opening me up to new perspectives, paradigms, and to others in a ‘tending and befriending’ way. This practice allowed me to access different parts of my brain and tap into much more creative and generative space. As I let go I automatically liberate others to do the same. Below is another poetic expression that describes my practice of letting go. The poem ends with what met me at the end of this process and the hope and energy it generated not as an act of surrender but as an invitation.

Space

*Let go of your job,
your income, your title.*

*Let go of your car,
your independence, your identity.*

*Let go of your house,
your security, the roof over your head.*

*Let go,
breathe...
Then let go again.*

*Let go of your shoes,
your clothes, your diamonds.
Let go of your books,
and old letters from once loved ones.
Let go of the past,
the parts of you that aren't you anymore.*

*Let go,
breathe...
Then let go again.*

*With all this letting go
what is there left?*

Space...

To let in

You.

*All of you,
here and out there you.*

*The present you,
the future you,*

the healed and renewed you.
A space for everything that's possible
and improbable,
to arrive and set up a camp for a while.
Until it's time,
to let go again.

Time is a persistent illusion

Another important theme that was running through my experience in crisis was the elusive nature of time. The temporal boundaries seemed warped, and I experienced the slowing and/or speeding of time, depending on the locality of the context and situation. In his letter to a dying friend Michelle, Einstein wrote: “time is a persistent illusion.” (Rovelli 2019) Indeed the persistence (but not relativity) of time seems inescapable, even for the greatest physicist who redefined it. Whilst Virillio’s (1986) dromology or Stiegler’s (1998) technics and time speak of acceleration of time (triggered by technology) that diminishes our consciousness, in times of crises I have experienced different types of temporal relativity. During the ‘defined’ 121-day period, I experienced different time zones and time signatures colliding and interacting with one another. Some days, some moments, felt slow and silent while others accelerated in speed and intensity of ‘noise’ and information. It was confusing and discombobulating. Accessing the liminal space-time (dis)continuum through poetry became another transformative practice. Writing poetry allowed me to linger in liminal spaces where time is relative. Where multiple truths and paradigms reside and co-mingle in an emergent way. It was in this space-time that I was reminded of Frey’s words, how she needs to access ‘idle space’ to make sense of complexity and plan in the midst of chaos. Could poetry act as a portal to this ‘idleness space’ Freya was referring to? It certainly helped me in my sensemaking and sensegiving practice where I found myself liberated from the constraints of the lists, tasks and linearity, and instead invited to the abundance of possibility and creative complexity. Finding the rhythm as practice was the key to finding equilibrium. Rituals, akin to dance moves, systematic and purposeful, helped me to navigate the stage of the crisis and move (not always) gracefully through it. Below is another poem that speaks to my experience

of temporality in crisis and the practice of finding the rhythm to navigate the elusive mystery of time.

Discontinuum

*There is this moment, often featured in movies,
when after a crash or an explosion the protagonist enters into the time and space
discontinuum.*

*Where time slows down, and the space is filled with particles of moments from the past, the
future and the present, all dancing around while your mind tries to make sense of it all.
Silence envelops the screen except for the constant, ringing noise in your ear like when
transmission stopped at the end of an old television program.*

*But what if the movie is real,
and the explosion or a crash is the end of a 121-day chapter of your life?
A chapter that you had not planned to write or had not even imagined.
And yet you had been thrown into it and had to navigate it without a map or a compass.*

*“The Compulsory Closure” - seemed like a good title at first,
As all the doors, one by one begin to close in front of you,
and you had no choice but to walk away with a smile,
when all you wanted to do was to rage in anger.
The feelings of injustice, confusion and constant disappointment
kept swirling in your mind forming some kind of bitter cocktail that became undigestable.*

*But then,
you woke up one morning and a new title awoke with you.
A better title that arrived wrapped in a bow of hopeful energy.
“The Radical Acceptance” - the writing flashed in front of your eyes,
like a signpost guiding your way forward.
The radical acceptance, that comes with an invitation,
a quest, a question:
What could you do with this?
What could you create even out of this?*

This invitation to accept what was happening to me called me into a dance with each moment,

each challenge, each situation.

A dance with many steps changes and many partners.

At first, my steps were clumsy and I kept missing the beat, tripping over my own feet.

But after a while, it got easier and at times,

I even enjoyed this new rhythm.

Syncopated and off-beat

but with a mysterious flow that brought me comfort.

I began to dance with more confidence

as more details were unfolding

and more complex realities entered the space.

I accepted most of them and moved with them

Into a new, unknown area of the dance floor.

A new pace, new time signature, new moves.

My mind and my body started to make up their own moves,

inhabiting new perspectives, new ways of being, both radical and accepting.

There is this moment often featured in movies,

when after a crash or an explosion the protagonist enters into the time and space discontinuum.

With my heart wide open,

I observe all the particles of moments from my past, my future and my present dance around me.

I smile and say to them:

Can I join you in your dance?

Shall we create something good, something beautiful even out of this?

Conclusions

If the earlier chapter asked, *who sustains leadership in polycrisis?* this chapter asks, *how can leadership in polycrisis be known, felt, and expressed without collapsing into the very hierarchies it seeks to unsettle?* The clues that emerged here are subtle but generative. The practices that slow, soften, and creatively open the self to the context and others, dissolve the heroic and invite the human. Yet, both chapters mark a significant shift in the trajectory of this mystery. What connects them is not simply a change of empirical focus, from PAs to poetry, but a deepening of the inquiry into how leadership in polycrisis becomes possible at all. If the previous chapter exposed the invisible labour that holds leadership together in organisational space, this chapter explored the interior labour required to hold oneself together within that space. Both reveal leadership not as heroic command but as ongoing work of containment, sensemaking, attunement, and care.

L-A-P as theorised by Raelin (2011, 2016, 2023) and others, can be interpreted as a form of a “collective effervescence”, a solidarity of energy, ideas and practices enacted in the leadership space (Durkheim 2022). In polycrisis, however, this space is much more complex and nuanced as individual and organisational survival instincts take hold. The temptation is to take action, but as Taylor et al. (2000) observe, this is the time to connect outward and go inward, to pause and engage in complex learning and reasoning (Montefusco and Angeli, 2024). As revealed in this chapter based on my journey through polycrisis, writing poetry can offer such reflexive and multidirectional pause.

Over a period of 121 days, writing poetry became a critical component of my leadership practice in polycrisis. It enabled me to access the in-between space of creative and critical scholarship, a space that is reflexive and acutely aware of the nexus between self and other, personal and public (Guiney Yallop et al., 2014). This liminal space allows complexity to reveal itself through the coexistence of multiple truths, and no truth at all. Within it, time and space engage in an asynchronous dance that softens the rigidity of the mind and its internal constructs. Such a process supports the reconceptualisation of defined, normative behaviours, as well as systems and structures of power. Indeed, L-A-P requires openness to context and to others through the continual dissolving, forming, and reforming of both the individual and the collective self.

However, in crisis, the self often enters the fight or flight mode to preserve and protect itself Taylor (2004). Yet, when applying the lens of L-A-P, leading in polycrisis requires accessing the collective self through tending and befriending. Writing poetry can act as a portal where “the self is to be discovered, revealed, expressed, and shared” (Linstead (2022, p.107). It helps in accessing a growth mindset through the practice of letting go to let in new ideas, perspectives, paradigms and people. Furthermore, it helps to develop a practice of active uncertainty through the act of reflective and reflexive questioning.

While PAs’ practice of orchestrating time, attention, and emotional temperature can be understood as an external architecture of reflexive space. Poetry, by contrast, becomes an internal architecture of reflexivity. Where PAs create pauses within accelerated organisational systems, poetry creates pauses within the accelerated self. In this way, the methodological turn to poetry does not depart from the earlier findings; it extends them.

Furthermore, practice of writing poetry in crisis is a practice of reflexive solitude but not loneliness. It’s generative and transformative from the inside out. It dissolves the heroic and invites the human. However, writing poetry also confronts the limitations of language: the thread that keeps resurfacing in the course of this mystery. My encounter with the PAs disrupted the category of “Leadership” organised around hierarchy, gender, and power, even if practice-based theories such as L-A-P attempt to dissolve it. However it is through a deeper engagement with language itself by turning to poesis, that offered a way of unsettling the conceptual rigidity that conventional academic discourse struggles to escape. If leadership vocabulary reproduces exclusion, poetry offers a means of loosening its grip, not by abandoning rigour, but by engaging ambiguity, multiplicity, and affect as legitimate modes of knowing.

As demonstrated in the introduction of this chapter, poetry gives language and framing in crisis that settles the disturbed and provides direction to those seeking meaning. Importantly, the move toward poetry does not romanticise crisis. Rather, it acknowledges the psychological and embodied realities identified earlier: the fight-or-flight reflex, the erosion of reflective space under digital acceleration, and the ethical strain of decision-making under uncertainty. Where PAs mitigate “digital delirium” for others, poetry becomes a practice of resisting it within oneself. In this sense, poetic anchoring can be read as a continuation of the

same impulse that animated the PAs' work as the protection and cultivation of reflective and critical space within polycrisis.

Thus, the movement from invisible organisational practice to poetic inquiry is neither methodological indulgence nor aesthetic diversion. Rather, it is a response to another clue that points towards the liminal: that to advance crisis leadership theory we must turn our gaze toward what is overlooked, undervalued, and resistant to articulation. At first, this required rendering visible the hidden relational labour of PAs as the quiet architects of coordination and care that sustain leadership from the margins. Now, it calls for attention to the equally concealed interior work through which leaders and practitioners metabolise complexity, ambiguity, and contradiction by transforming madness into meaning.

In this light, the act of writing and reciting poetry, as illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, may be read not merely as expression, but as enactment. One might interpret such moments as instances of charismatic leadership, as Wu et al. (2021, p.11) and Riggio and Newstead (2023) argue that crises often require "a certain type of charismatic leadership." Yet perhaps it is not charisma alone that moves a room or calms the disturbed. Perhaps it is poesis in the generative act of 'becoming' that momentarily moves some leaders from a place of commanding to composing. As they gather fragments of fear and uncertainty and give them cadence, coherence, and shared resonance, in such moments, leaders become, if only briefly, poets.

Chapter 8: Living into the answers.

Introduction: Staying with the mystery

This research began not with a hypothesis, but with a disturbance, an interruption in the ordinary flow of life. It emerged at a moment of cautious reopening, as the world transitioned out of prolonged closure caused by the global pandemic. In this in-between space, moving across contexts and boundaries, I was unexpectedly drawn into a mystery that quietly redirected the course of my life and my own leadership career while contributing to a broader leadership story.

At the time, I did not fully understand what I was undertaking. I only sensed that questions left unresolved from my earlier research were beginning to coalesce into my own leadership practice, disrupted by the pandemic. Montuori (2013) gives voice to this uncertainty in his question: What do we do in contexts marked by ambiguity and uncertainty? This question, posed to modern leaders and leadership scholars alike, soon called me further into the mystery, inviting me to “read context, self, and others as clues” (Goodall, 1991).

These clues led to the mystery, which refused to stay still as it bled into multiple scientific disciplines, across multiple methodologies and into everyday life. I was not standing outside the scene, notebook in hand; I was already implicated. My professional work placed me inside the organisational worlds I was trying to understand. Leadership was not an abstract concept to be examined from afar; it was something I was living, negotiating, and questioning in real time, alongside others doing the same under conditions of profound uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity. Soon, my role as a researcher became that of an “organisational detective”, “an intersubjective participant” and eventually a poet (Goodall 1991, p.XV).

As the inquiry unfolded, it became clear that this would not be a case with a single voice, a single story, or a neat resolution. Instead, clues appeared in fragments: in casual conversations with leaders, in survey data that hinted at patterns without explaining them, in interviews, focus groups, LinkedIn posts, and in moments of personal disorientation captured through journaling and poetic reflections. Some clues were deliberately sought; others arrived

serendipitously. However, each altered the direction of the research through breakdowns, breakthroughs and breakaways (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011).

Gradually, the mystery revealed itself as relational rather than singular. Leadership practice shifted across contexts, accelerated by polycrisis and shaped by competing temporalities, power relations, embodiment and digital disembodiment. No single theory could account for what was happening. No single method could hold it. This realisation led to reaching across multiple disciplines and theories, and applying multiple methods.

Throughout the journey, language itself became the mystery and the clue. The traditional third-person academic voice that promises order and authority repeatedly threatened to flatten the moments of poesis and affect I encountered in liminal spaces and in liminal times. Writing became a source of curiosity and internal turmoil: With what voice do I speak? What form could remain faithful to movement, emergence, and plurality of the mystery? The search for answers turned into a search for ways of knowing, and ways of “writing differently” that could hold the complexity rather than prematurely resolve it (Kostera 2022; Gilmore et al. 2019).

Methodologically, this meant abandoning the illusion of a linear investigation. The research moved sideways, backwards, and occasionally stalled. Decisions were made in response to new clues rather than predetermined plans. Breakdowns, those “oh no” moments where nothing quite fits, often preceded breakthroughs and breakaways. Alongside, serendipity emerged not as a failure of rigour, but as a capacity and the ability to recognise meaning in disruption and to “see bridges where others might see holes” (de Rond 2014, p.18).

Interpretive ethnography and autoethnography became essential for holding the space where the mystery could fully emerge. By positioning myself as both an outsider and insider, I could trace how knowledge was shaped through vulnerability, ethical tension, and lived experience. Writing from within moments of crisis made visible how understanding emerged, not despite uncertainty, but because of it.

Across the empirical chapters, leadership appeared less as a stabilising force and more as an unfolding, situated practice shaped by acceleration, fragmentation, politics and power asymmetries hiding in the organisational “dark side” (Vaughan 1999; Linstead et al. 2014). Identities shifted across contexts; practices adapted, fractured, or hardened; and temporal pressures distorted decision-making and relational capacity. These findings consistently

challenged dominant crisis leadership models that frame crisis as an episodic disruption and leadership as a moment of decisive intervention (Pearson and Mitroff, 1993, James et al., 2011, Wu et al., 2021). That was not my experience in the field. Indeed, situating these insights within the broader literature reveals a significant theoretical gap. Despite renewed scholarly attention, crisis leadership research remains constrained by ontological and epistemological assumptions that struggle to engage with complexity, temporality, and power (Riggio and Newstead, 2023; Wu et al., 2021). Linear, instrumental logics continue to dominate, limiting what can be seen, how it's expressed, and studied. Reframing crisis as polycrisis disrupts these assumptions, revealing crisis as an ongoing condition of entanglement rather than an exceptional event, and leadership as a continuous, contested practice unfolding over time.

This shift exposes the limits of even relational and practice-based approaches when power, politics, and organisational dark sides remain under-theorised. While Leadership-As-Practice offers an important corrective to heroic narratives, the empirical material gathered here confirms that leadership practice in polycrisis may not subscribe to the ethical and democratic ideals of LAP (Martyna Śliwa 2024). Polycrisis thus emerges not simply as a context in which leadership is enacted, but as a condition that actively reshapes, distorts, and sometimes weaponises leadership practice itself.

Furthermore, leadership emerges not as the reminder of formal authority, but as a relational practice enacted by multiple actors, including those positioned outside conventional leadership roles. This further suggests that existing leadership vocabularies might be insufficient in capturing how leadership is actually conceptualised and lived.

This chapter also reflects on leadership's growing entanglement with technology, showing how digital mediates sensemaking and sensegiving in ways that disconnects leadership from bodies, disrupts the experience of space and time, and reconfigures material and ethical relations. Against this backdrop of digital augmentation and disembodiment, the thesis introduces poetry not only as a representational device but as a practice of leadership in crisis, one that slows attention, restores affect, and safeguards humanity in moments where efficiency, abstraction, and control threaten to dominate.

Finally, this chapter reflects on the methodological journey itself: a multimethod, autoethnographic inquiry in which writing, language, and reflexivity function as rigorous

practices rather than neutral tools. The process of researching, like leadership under polycrisis, is shown to be formative rather than extractive, an act of becoming rather than simply knowing.

What follows considers the implications of these insights for leadership theory, organisational practice, and future research, while remaining attentive to the central claim of this thesis: that leadership in times of polycrisis cannot be resolved through better models alone, but requires reimagining ways of attending, relating, and staying with complexity.

In the end, this research did not solve the mystery; it deepened it. What it offers is not a new theory of leadership practice in polycrisis, but a textured map of how leadership is enacted, disrupted, and reimagined across shifting worlds. The journey itself became the finding: a demonstration that knowing emerges through movement, relation, and attentiveness to the language and the margins in liminal space and time.

These final pages do not restore order so much as invite you, the reader, to notice differently. The clues remain available, not as evidence to be judged, but as openings for further inquiry. The mystery stays open not because it failed, but because the world it investigates refuses to stand still.

Polycrisis: Bridging the gap from crisis to permacrisis. Contribution to knowledge and future directions.

This research makes a conceptual and theoretical contribution by reconceptualising crisis as an ongoing, relational, and structurally embedded condition rather than an episodic disruption, and by positioning polycrisis as a critical bridge between traditional crisis frameworks (Riggio and Newstead, 2023; Wu et al., 2021) and the emerging literature on permacrisis (Anisimova et al. 2025; Lundberg et al. 2024; Hallencreutz et al. 2024). In doing so, it challenges the dominant ontological and epistemological assumptions that continue to shape crisis management and crisis leadership scholarship, which limit their capacity to engage with contemporary organisational realities.

The ongoing and accelerating disruptions at both local and global levels indicate that crisis is no longer an episodic or exceptional phenomenon but an enduring condition of contemporary

social, political, and organisational life. These dynamics suggest that this ‘new’ context is not only complex and interdependent, but increasingly ever-present. This volatile and uncertain “new normal” has recently been conceptualised as permacrisis. Lundberg et al. (2024, p. 103) define permacrisis as a “continuous period of turmoil and multiple crises”, while Hallencreutz et al. (2024) argue that its widespread societal effects are likely to persist over an extended period. Reflecting this shift, the April 2025 issue of the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing* published a systematic literature review and future research agenda on “brand activism in the era of permacrisis” (Anisimova et al. 2025), signalling the growing consolidation of permacrisis as an analytical frame.

Across the literature reviewed in this thesis, crisis has predominantly been treated as a bounded, exceptional event that interrupts an otherwise stable organisational order and can be managed through linear stages, rational sensemaking, and decisive leadership intervention (Riggio and Newstead 2023; Wu et al. 2021). This research demonstrates that such assumptions are increasingly untenable. Drawing on complexity theory, social acceleration, and critical organisational scholarship, it argues that contemporary crises unfold as entangled, recursive, and mutually amplifying processes across technological, socio-cultural, political, and ecological domains (Virilio and Lotringer 1983; Rosa 2003; Simmel 2004; Urry 2014; Stiegler 2019). The grammar of polycrisis (Morin & Kern, 1999) provides the conceptual footing for understanding crisis as multiplex rather than singular, disrupting not only the event-based framing of crisis but also the heroic and instrumental models of leadership that accompany it.

As Riggio and Newstead (2023), and Wu et al. (2021) demonstrate, classical crisis literature has typically treated crises as unexpected, bounded events that disrupt otherwise stable systems, an assumption that underpins much of crisis management and crisis leadership research. In contrast, permacrisis focuses on prolonged instability, requiring leaders to operate in conditions where ambiguity, disruption, and uncertainty are continuous rather than episodic. This shift raises fundamental questions for leadership practice and theory, particularly in relation to sensemaking and sensegiving.

From a sensemaking perspective, Weick (1988) work emphasises that leaders play a central role in enabling meaning construction under conditions of equivocality. However, sensemaking frameworks have largely been applied to discrete crisis events. Under conditions of polycrisis and permacrisis, sensemaking becomes recursive and ongoing, with

sensebreaking and sensegiving occurring not as exceptional interventions but as routine leadership practices. The permanence of crisis thus stretches Weick's and others (Angeli and Montefusco, 2020) sensemaking beyond episodic disruption toward sustained meaning work in environments where stability cannot be restored.

Similarly, complexity leadership theory (Uhl-Bien et al. 2011) offers important insights into leadership as an emergent, relational process within adaptive systems. Polycrisis aligns closely with this view by highlighting the nonlinear, interconnected, and cascading nature of contemporary disruptions. Yet, while complexity leadership accounts for dynamic interaction and emergence, it has only begun to grapple with the temporal endurance implied by permacrisis.

Grint's (2022) distinction between tame, critical, and wicked problems further illuminates this challenge. Polycrisis situates leadership firmly within the domain of wicked problems, characterised by contested interpretations, no clear solutions, and high stakes. Permacrisis extends this framing by suggesting that such wickedness is no longer situational but structural. Leadership, therefore, becomes less about resolution and more about ongoing sensegiving, ethical positioning, and the negotiation of legitimacy in the absence of closure.

What these theories cannot adequately account for is leadership in contexts where crises persist, where multiple disruptions interact across temporal and spatial realms, and where leaders must sustain meaning amid ongoing uncertainty and complexity. In the absence of a polycrisis lens, leadership theory lacks the conceptual resources to explain how sensemaking and sensegiving become continuous rather than episodic, and how leaders maintain organisational coherence when instability is a permanent condition rather than a temporary deviation from the status quo.

By introducing polycrisis as a central organising concept, this thesis addresses these limitations. Polycrisis enables leadership theory to move beyond event-based models of crisis and adaptation, offering an analytical framework capable of explaining leadership practice in conditions of chronic interdependence, cascading uncertainty, and temporal endurance. In doing so, the thesis challenges and extends existing leadership theories rather than replacing them, demonstrating how sensemaking, sensegiving and complexity are reconfigured when crisis shifts from an interruption to a defining context of organisational life.

Furthermore, by bringing polycrisis into conversation with Leadership-As-Practice (L-A-P), this study advances leadership theory in two key ways. First, it reframes leadership not as episodic decision-making under pressure, but as an ongoing, situated, and contested practice that unfolds across multiple temporalities and contexts. Leadership, in this view, is neither neutral nor inherently stabilising. As argued, it may in fact actively participate in the production, reproduction, or intensification of crisis (Vaughan 1999; Linstead et al. 2014). Second, the study critically interrogates the normative assumptions embedded within L-A-P, particularly its emphasis on dialogue, consensus, and shared meaning-making. Under polycrisis conditions, leadership practice may be shaped by asymmetrical power relations, coercion, manipulation, and moral ambiguity (Śliwa 2024). Polycrisis thus emerges not merely as an empirical setting for applying L-A-P, but as a stress test that exposes its conceptual limits and calls for its transformation.

Crucially, this research positions polycrisis as a conceptual hinge between past and future crisis theorising. While recent scholarship increasingly acknowledges the multiplicity and interconnectedness of crises, emerging work on permacrisis marks a further ontological shift: from crisis as multiplicity to crisis as permanence. Permacrisis reframes instability not as a transitional phase but as a persistent condition shaping organisational life, leadership practice, and societal expectations over extended periods. By introducing the grammar of polycrisis into leadership and organisational studies, this research provides a theoretical bridge that enables dialogue between established crisis management and crisis leadership literatures and emergent permacrisis scholarship. In doing so, it offers a vocabulary and analytical lens capable of engaging with both the complexity of interlocking crises and their temporal endurance.

Methodological Innovation and Contribution to Research Practice

Methodology as an empirical finding

A central finding of this research is that methodology itself became a primary site of empirical discovery. Rather than functioning as a neutral container for data collection and analysis, the multimethod, ethnographic and autoethnographic design actively shaped what could be seen, known, and articulated about leadership practice under conditions of

polycrisis. The research process unfolded as an ongoing search for clues through sustained attention to context, self, and others, guided by the ethnographic practice of noticing and analysing “the meaningful order of persons and things” (Goodall, 1991, p. 81).

The contextual and theoretical complexity of the research problem, together with its emergent character, required a shift away from a linear, pre-specified research design. From the start this project became a mystery, with the researcher positioned as a detective engaged in an iterative search for meaning (Goodall, 1994; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). In this framing, empirical material did not simply accumulate as it appeared as clues that surfaced at different moments, disrupted prior assumptions, and redirected both analysis and method. Indeed, these clues actively informed methodological decisions, producing a dynamic, responsive, and non-linear research process.

Multimethod inquiry and the emergence of non-linearity

Grounded in an interpretive and phenomenological perspective, the research brought multiple methods and data sources into dialogue. Early engagement with survey data, industry reports and my own experience provided an important contextual backdrop, while ethnography and digital ethnography added depth, texture, and alternative perspectives. Rather than progressing sequentially, these methods informed one another recursively, reshaping the research questions as the fieldwork unfolded. What began as a set of guiding questions evolved into an inquiry where the research space itself became the object of investigation.

This inductive turn enabled analytical directions that would not have been accessible through a purely deductive or mechanistic approach. Digital ethnography, in particular, expanded the analytical lens by opening creative and speculative ways of seeing leadership practice through digitally mediated spaces. Across methods, sustained engagement with fieldnotes, observations, and analytic memos (vignettes) allowed patterns, themes and relationships to be traced retrospectively, often only becoming visible through ongoing and asynchronous triangulation.

Breakdowns, breakthroughs, and breakaways

A key empirical pattern across the research process was the recurring rhythm of breakdowns, breakthroughs, and breakaways. These moments were not methodological failures but

productive, and often serendipitous disruptions, that generated new insights (Alvesson and Karreman, 2011; de Rond, 2014; Gabriel et al., 2014).

One breakdown occurred in the conceptualisation of leadership and crisis as singular, stable, and atomised phenomena. This gave way to a breakthrough in reconceptualising crisis through the lens of complexity as polycrisis, characterised by entanglement, acceleration, and simultaneity. A further breakdown emerged in relation to space and time, where under polycrisis conditions, leadership practice did not adhere to linear temporalities or bounded spatial norms. Entering these space-time liminalities revealed alternative practices of sensemaking and sensegiving, including poetic forms of expression during crisis.

Another significant breakdown concerned visibility of what counts as leadership practice, and whose practices are recognised. This led to a breakthrough in illuminating the often invisible leadership work of Personal Assistants, alongside a critical interrogation of increasingly visible digital practices, conceptualised as digitally augmented leadership and digital pharmacology. These findings emerged precisely because the methodological design remained open to being redirected by the clues encountered in the field.

Some breakthroughs prompted breakaways of moves beyond established methodological boundaries. These included the integration of digital ethnography as a means of engaging with emergent technologies, particularly AI, which were simultaneously shaping leadership practice and the broader polycrisis context. The development of the Immersive Research Lab functioned as an experimental space for testing emerging insights through embodied, technologically augmented practice. This creative intervention shifted the trajectory of the research mystery in ways that would not have been accessible through traditional empirical methods.

Another breakaway was prompted by engaging in the liminal, in-between spaces of leadership where the leadership practice was redefined and the leadership language and imageries questioned. While the leadership practice was distributed across invisible actors (PAs) and moments, the recognition remained singular. This gap between distributed practice and singular labelling highlighted a conceptual misalignment between lived organisational realities and dominant leadership vocabularies, prompting the recognition of the need for a new language to represent and name Leadership.

Autoethnography, writing, and methodological growth

And then, there was my own story where the autoethnographic ‘self’ got entangled into research mystery. Indeed, autoethnography played a critical role in making sense of the temporal dislocations and affective intensities of the research process. By positioning myself as both researcher and narrator, moments of disruption, vulnerability, and uncertainty became analytically productive rather than methodologically problematic. Writing from within moments of polycrisis spotlighted how knowledge was shaped through lived experience, ethical tension, and reflexive engagement with the context, self and others.

Language and representation emerged as persistent methodological challenges and findings in their own right. The research required movement between multiple languages: the academic, technical, anecdotal, and poetic, where each offered different ways of knowing and seeing. Reflexivity and creativity were therefore not methodological embellishments but essential practices for remaining faithful to the plurality of voices and realities encountered in the field (Pope et al., 2002; Gilmore et al., 2019; Kostera, 2022).

A significant breakthrough occurred through the adoption of poetry as both an analytical and sensemaking practice. Engaging with the grammar of poetry enabled me to shift away from the distant third-person voice toward a more relational and intersubjective mode of inquiry (Gilmore et al., 2019). This move culminated in what Linstead (2022, p. 111) describes as a “full poetic immersion,” where “writing differently” became a site of embodied understanding rather than representation alone (Kostera 2022; Gilmore et al. 2019). In this sense, the research process itself functioned as a form of epistemic, methodological, and personal growth and transformation.

Contribution to research practice

Taken together, these findings position methodology-as-process as a substantive contribution to research practice. The shift from investigating a research problem to living within a research mystery expands the analytical horizon of leadership studies and offers a framework for engaging with multiparadigmatic, multicontextual, and non-linear inquiries. By treating self, others, and context as living clues, this approach emphasises emergence, reflexivity, and poetic attentiveness.

This innovative methodology challenges dominant mechanistic and single-paradigm approaches within crisis and leadership research, offering instead a creative, human-centred, and human-led alternative, suited to conditions of uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity (Goodall, 2000; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Harding and Kostera 2021; Linstead 2022). The plurality of voices, both human and non-human, assembled through multimethod and multimodal practices provides a counterpoint to reductionist narratives that continue to dominate crisis management and leadership literature as outlined by Wu et al. (2021), and Riggio & Newstead (2023).

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that the process of inquiry is itself a form of leadership practice. By “writing differently”, noticing differently, and remaining with mystery rather than prematurely resolving it, the study offers not a single conclusion but an invitation to remain attentive to complexity, to cultivate methodological courage, and to allow research to become a site of internal transformation and ongoing becoming (Kostera 2022; Gilmore et al. 2019).

Finding Certitude in Uncertainty and Clarity in Ambiguity: Digitally Augmented Leadership in Polycrisis

The literature review revealed the heightened visibility and exposure of leaders during crisis, noting how leadership actions become subject to intensified scrutiny (Wu et al. 2021). Yet what the fifth chapter of this ethnographic inquiry revealed was a different, more elusive form of visibility. Beyond being watched, leaders in polycrisis are increasingly required to curate themselves and their leadership practice within digitally mediated environments. This digital visibility operates through platforms, systems, and interfaces that reshape how leadership is enacted, perceived, and sustained.

From the outset of the ethnographic journey, the pervasive and disruptive presence of digital technologies in leadership practice, including my own, became impossible to ignore. As leadership increasingly unfolded beyond the bounded physical spaces of single organisations into global, virtual communities, leaders were frequently caught in tension between the disembodiment of their digital selves and the persistent demand for embodied, relational presence. In polycrisis, leadership practice appeared suspended between parallel realities: one

accelerated, abstracted, and mediated through screens; the other grounded in empathic care, ethical judgment, and relational responsibility.

This tension revealed a further, often overlooked dimension of leadership practice in crisis: the disruption of space and time. Spatial-temporal assumptions that underpin much leadership theory around co-presence, linear temporality, and bounded organisational contexts, were shown to fracture under conditions of digital acceleration, intensified exposure, and most recently, the emergence of Generative AI. Leadership practice did not simply use technology; it was increasingly reconfigured by it. Aligning with Stiegler's (2022) theory of digital pharmacology, I first-hand experienced how leaders don't just use AI tools, but like medicines, they alter their bodies, minds, and ultimately their practice.

Digitally mediated leadership as a constitutive condition of polycrisis

The findings presented in Chapter 5 contribute to leadership theory by conceptualising digitally mediated leadership practice as an increasingly constitutive condition of polycrisis, rather than a neutral or peripheral feature in leadership practice. Leadership is shown to be fundamentally reshaped as sensemaking and sensegiving become filtered through digital platforms that disrupt embodiment, reconfigure visibility, and fragment space and time.

In extending Leadership-as-Practice (L-A-P) and crisis leadership scholarship into the under-theorised terrain of digitally augmented leadership, this chapter challenges foundational assumptions regarding presence, proximity, and relationality. Leadership in polycrisis does not emerge as a stable role or coherent identity, but rather as a fragile, distributed assemblage enacted across disrupted space-time. Urgency, digital over-exposure, and acceleration intensify stress while simultaneously eroding opportunities for reflection, collective sensemaking, and embodied engagement.

Sensemaking and sensegiving in the digitally accelerated mind

A further theoretical contribution lies in focusing on a mystery that remains marginal within dominant crisis leadership accounts: digital acceleration. Building on Vaughan (1999), Linstead et al. (2014), Stiegler (2013; 2019), Virilio (1986), and Rosa (2003; 2016), this study demonstrates that crises often arise not from organisational breakdown, but from the normalised routines, technologies, and governance structures that shape everyday organising.

Digitalisation is theorised here not as a neutral tool for crisis response, but as an active force that reshapes temporality, agency, and sensemaking. It privileges speed, automation, and scale, frequently at the expense of reflexivity, ethical deliberation, and interpretive plurality. Leadership practice becomes increasingly shaped by immediacy, narrowing the space for judgment and what du Gay (2016, p.86) describe as intelligent restraint (also discussed by Angeli and Montefusco 2020; Thrift 2008).

Neuroscientific insights into stress and threat responses, particularly Taylor et al.'s (2000; 2006; 2009) "tend and befriend" theory further deepen this analysis. The findings highlight the importance of social connection and embodied affiliation in sustaining leadership under prolonged uncertainty. The role of personal assistants (PAs), for example, emerged as a critical yet under-acknowledged relational anchor within digitally augmented leadership practice.

Conversely, the study also reveals how digital hyper-connection can produce "leaders in isolation", increasingly operating in fight-or-flight modes of response. Such practices draw on individualistic survival instincts and risk tipping into what Kroker and Kroker (1997) and Virilio and Lotringer (1983) describe as digital delirium- a condition in which acceleration erodes the very principles of reality required for sensemaking and sensegiving. As one participant observed, leaders must actively cultivate an "idle space": a reflective and reflexive leadership practice in which the perception of time slows sufficiently to make sense of complexity and enable resilient, long-term judgment.

Digital visibility and the reconfiguration of leadership practice

While crisis leadership literature has long acknowledged heightened visibility during crisis, this research identifies a qualitatively different phenomenon: digital visibility. Leaders in polycrisis are not merely observed; they are compelled to continuously perform and curate leadership across digital platforms, social media, and technologically mediated organisational spaces.

This visibility is not neutral. It privileges immediacy and performativity while eroding reflexive distance, embodied presence, and intersubjective engagement. As digital environments destabilise distinctions between what is visible, what is real, and what is true, questions of authenticity, trust, and legitimacy move to the centre of leadership practice. The

chapter surfaces ethical and ontological risks associated with digitally mediated leadership, including cyber vulnerability, identity cloning, and AI-driven manipulation, demonstrating how digital technologies reconfigure power and agency during crisis.

Embodiment, disembodiment, and the digitally augmented leader

A central empirical and theoretical contribution of this section (based on Ch. 5 and 6) is the identification of the digitally augmented leader. Building on Weick (1988) and Angeli and Montefusco (2020), the ethnographic findings unravel how leaders in polycrisis increasingly rely on digital platforms and AI systems (such as generative AI assistants) for sensemaking and sensegiving.

While such augmentation offers immediacy and cognitive extension under conditions of complexity, the research reveals its ambivalence. Leaders were increasingly pressured to delegating and outsourcing critical sensemaking capacities to digital systems, raising concerns about overreliance, diminished reflexivity, and the narrowing of interpretive horizons. These dynamics resonate with philosophical critiques of digital acceleration and digital delirium (Kroker & Kroker, 1997; Virilio & Lotringer, 1983), where speed and automation undermine reflective judgment and distort reality.

In exploring this emerging mystery, the study does not reject digital augmentation outright. Rather, it theorises its double-edged nature: simultaneously enabling leadership under conditions of overload while introducing new vulnerabilities, dependencies, and ethical risks. Prolonged digital hyper-connection was shown to intensify exposure while diminishing opportunities for embodied relational grounding, reframing care, social connection, and presence as core, rather than peripheral leadership practices in polycrisis.

Implications for Future Research

The findings point toward several important directions for future leadership research in the context of polycrisis and the emerging condition of permacrisis. As crises become ongoing rather than episodic, leadership scholarship must continue to move beyond static roles and trait-based models toward the study of “leadership moments” captured in situ and realised through the emergent properties of complex situations (Larsson et al., 2025).

Future research would benefit from deeper engagement with temporality, embodiment, materiality, and digital mediation, particularly in extreme and digitally saturated contexts. Greater attention is needed to how AI systems and digital platforms co-produce leadership outcomes by shaping attention, reflexivity, ethical judgment, emotional regulation, and the distribution of agency, especially with the emergence of AI agents. This includes examining digitally mediated sensemaking, senselistening (Cros et al., 2025), and sensebreaking (Chaudhry & Amis, 2025) within liminal spaces characterised by permanency and sustained uncertainty.

Methodologically, interpretive ethnography, and digital ethnography are particularly well suited to capturing leadership as it unfolds across disrupted space-time and hybrid realities. Finally, the ethical and political implications of digitally augmented leadership demand sustained scholarly attention. As leadership becomes increasingly entangled with AI-driven systems, questions of power, accountability, authenticity, and trust move from the margins to the centre of leadership theory and practice as an increasing concern in an era where crisis is no longer an exception, but a defining condition of organisational life.

From Leadership-as-Practice to the Limits of “Leadership”: Rethinking the Language of Leadership in Polycrisis

This section reveals the story that unfolded in the shadows of leaders and the leadership scholarship. The mystery of leadership-as-invisible-practice surfaced during my seemingly insignificant interactions with Personal Assistants (PAs), when booking meetings with leaders I was interviewing for this study. Yet, it was in noticing this in-between space in the leadership story that a significant contribution emerged.

While L-A-P has made notable strides in decentring the heroic leader and championing relational, collective, and emergent processes, the findings of this study suggest that the term “leadership” itself remains a powerful organising category that continues to reproduce hierarchy, exclusion, and gendered expectations. This study joins the Critical Leadership “Big D” (Alexy 2020) discourse led by Learmonth (2022) Collinson (2017), Knights (2021) and others, and raises the argument that advancing leadership scholarship in conditions of polycrisis may require not only new theories of leadership, but new language altogether.

Empirically, this limitation becomes visible through the experiences of Personal Assistants. PAs enact many of the practices central to L-A-P such as relationality, anticipation, sensemaking, sensegiving, emotional containment, ethical judgement, and the orchestration of time and attention, yet they consistently and explicitly reject identification with leadership. This rejection is not explained by lack of capability, influence, or agency. Rather, it reflects the enduring symbolic weight of leadership as a category tightly bound to visibility, authority, hierarchy, and historically masculine ideals (Schyns et al., 2024; Lewis et al., 2022; Wajcman, 2013; Harding et al., 2011; Brewis & Linstead, 1999).

Therefore, the central contribution of this research lies not only in extending L-A-P into the context of polycrisis, but in exposing a deeper tension: while leadership practice has become increasingly distributed and collective, the dominant language and imaginaries of leadership remain stubbornly individualised, heroic, and masculinised. This mismatch, the study argues, is not merely theoretical. It actively shapes recognition, aspiration, and exclusion in organisational life.

The return of the Messiah Leader

This tension became especially visible during the final stages of this research when the publication of Ranjay Gulati's (October 2025) Harvard Business Review article, "Now Is the Time for Courage," appeared on my LinkedIn feed. Framed as a response to global uncertainty and crisis (again singular and isolated), the article calls for courageous, bold leadership, language that is strikingly familiar and that featured in some of the critiqued crisis leadership literature (Riggio and Newstead 2023; Wu et al. 2021). Despite decades of critical leadership scholarship and practice-based theorising, the Messiah leadership discourse re-emerges once again, calling for courageous leaders, heroic leaders, bold leaders, great leaders (Gulati 2025).

Rather than signalling conceptual progress, this moment reads as a return to the leadership imaginaries of the 1980s, when transformational leadership rose to prominence and organisations were promised salvation through visionary individuals (Burns 1978; Bass 1985). That era sold a powerful narrative, that exceptional leaders could engineer organisational culture, secure loyalty, and mobilise extraordinary commitment. Employees were invited to give not only their labour, but their identities and emotional lives, in service of a leader's vision often at the cost of long hours, precarity, and burnout.

As critical scholars have long argued, this persistence is not accidental (Harding et al. 2011; Learmonth and Morrell 2021; Schyns et al. 2024). The continued promotion of heroic and transformational leadership serves the interests of a powerful institutional triad that I too have experienced and participated in: corporate elites, elite business schools, and global consultancies. Leaders receive legitimacy, prestige, and extraordinary compensation; organisations invest in executive education that reinforces leader-centric myths; and consultancies secure lucrative contracts by promising leadership solutions to complex systemic problems.

Simon Western's critique of the HBR article, recently posted on LinkedIn as well as his ongoing contribution to leadership literature (Western 2019), highlights how easily the language of courage becomes detached from questions of power, inequality, and structural harm. It is a very different form of courage from that evoked in the poetic call by Giovanni (Ch.7). Courage, in this framing, is individualised and aestheticized, symbolised by the now-infamous leonine imagery (Fig. 15) rather than understood as poetic, collective, relational, and ethically constrained.



Fig.15 The front cover of HBR, 2025

This critique resonates strongly with the empirical findings of this study, showing once again the importance of the clues that lingered in liminal and invisible spaces of the leadership theory and practice.

Indeed, the PAs did not recognise themselves in heroic or courageous leadership narratives. On the contrary, they actively rejected them. Their leadership practice was quiet, continuous, and deeply relational. It involved holding uncertainty, absorbing emotional strain, mediating competing demands, and preventing crises from escalating through performing invisibly in the shadows, and away from the spectacle of Messiah leadership.

Leadership as a boundary-making category

Furthermore, the study of PAs identifies leadership not only as a practice, but as a boundary-making term by viewing it from the perspective of liminality and in-betweenness. Despite decades of theoretical reconceptualisation, leadership continues to function symbolically as a marker of status, legitimacy, and identity (Learmonth and Morrell 2021). As revealed in my conversations with the PAs, leadership operates as something one either is or is not, rather than something one does. For the PAs, leadership marked a boundary not to be crossed, a boundary associated with exposure, risk, moral compromise, and the reproduction of hierarchical power.

This finding aligns with, and extends critiques that leadership theory has outpaced leadership practice. However, the contribution here goes further by showing that even practice-based theories may unintentionally reproduce leadership hierarchies if they retain the same linguistic frame. No matter how relational or collective leadership is theorised, the word itself continues to organise recognition and exclusion in powerful ways.

This tension was further illuminated through the Immersive Research Lab's BBC Experiment. Leadership was distributed across the conductor, musicians, audience, and the collective emergence of the performance. Participants repeatedly answered "yes" when asked whether leadership was present in each of these roles. Yet only one role carried the symbolic label of "leader".

The same pattern appeared in the PA narratives. Leadership practice was distributed across actors and moments, but recognition remained singular. This gap between distributed practice and singular labelling highlights a conceptual misalignment between lived organisational realities and dominant leadership vocabularies.

The original contribution: language, imaginaries, and the limits of leadership

The original contribution of this study, therefore, lies in showing that the problem is not simply outdated leadership theory, but the continued dominance of leadership as a linguistic and symbolic category. Even L-A-P, while theoretically sophisticated, often retains the word “leadership” as its organising anchor. The findings here suggest that this anchor may itself be limiting.

For the PAs, leadership was not aspirational. It was something to be avoided. This was not due to a lack of agency or competence, but because leadership signified exposure, hierarchy, moral compromise, and alignment with values they did not share. Leadership, as a word, continued to organise who was seen, who was rewarded, and whose labour remained invisible. In this sense, leadership functions as what this study conceptualises as a boundary-making category. It marks inclusion and exclusion, legitimacy and marginality, even when practice-based theories insist that leadership is collective and emergent. The gap between distributed leadership practice and singular leadership recognition remains firmly in place.

The observations of PAs and other invisible (human and increasingly non-human) actors therefore point toward the need for new language and new imaginaries, ways of naming organising, coordination, care, and ethical judgement that do not automatically collapse back into heroic individualism. As one participant reflected, leadership does not need to be described; it needs to be felt, embodied, experienced, and lived. This insight challenges the field to move beyond refining leadership concepts toward questioning the concept and the language around it.

Future directions for leadership research and practice

The implications for future research are significant. First, leadership scholarship should expand its empirical focus to include invisible actors and invisible practices, particularly those that sustain organisations under conditions of polycrisis. This includes often feminine, relational, and emotionally intensive labour that is central to organisational survival yet systematically undervalued.

Second, greater attention is needed to the political economy of leadership knowledge production. Understanding why heroic leadership narratives persist requires examining the

institutional interests that sustain them, even in the face of mounting evidence of their limitations and harms.

Third, leadership research would benefit from experimenting with alternative vocabularies and conceptual frames that decentre leadership altogether, without abandoning concerns for coordination, responsibility, and ethical action. This may involve drawing more explicitly on the ‘invisible’ practice-based, relational, and care-oriented perspectives that resist easy personification.

Finally, for leadership practice, this study suggests that courage in polycrisis may not lie in bold individual action, but in the collective capacity to slow down, listen, care, and attend to what is usually unseen. The quiet and invisible labour of PAs offers a counter-image to the Messiah leader: leadership not as spectacle, but as attuned and selfless practice; not as salvation, but as sustained, relational work.

The reappearance of the leonine leader on the cover of Harvard Business Review serves as a timely reminder that leadership scholarship does not operate in a vacuum. While academic theory may advance, cultural imaginaries often lag behind (or actively resist) such progress. By bringing the practices of invisible actors into view, this study challenges the field to confront not only how leadership is practised, but how it is imagined, named, and rewarded.

In doing so, it argues that the future of leadership studies may depend less on finding better leaders, and more on finding better ways of seeing, valuing, and speaking about the work that already holds organisations, and societies together under conditions of profound uncertainty.

As these findings have shown, leadership in polycrisis does not resolve into coherence, authority, or heroic clarity. Instead, it remains fragmented, relational, embodied, and often sustained through invisible labour that resists capture by dominant leadership vocabularies. The persistence of Messiah leadership imaginaries reproduced even in contemporary calls for “courageous leadership”, reveals a widening gap between how leadership is lived and how it is named. The experiences of PAs make this gap palpable: leadership is practised, felt, and endured, yet repeatedly misrecognised or rendered unspeakable within existing conceptual frames. This creates a theoretical and linguistic impasse. If conventional academic language struggles to hold the affective, temporal, and ethical textures of leadership in polycrisis, then new modes of inquiry become necessary. It is from this impasse that the final section emerges. Turning to poetry-as-practice, the following findings reveal an alternative way of

knowing and expressing leadership in crisis, one that privileges rhythm, pause, ambiguity, and embodiment over definition and control. Poetry does not seek to resolve uncertainty, but to dwell within it, offering a form capable of holding what leadership theory, and its language, repeatedly leaves out.

Poetry-in-Crisis as Leadership Practice

Quiet friend who has come so far,

feel how your breathing makes more space around you.

Let this darkness be a bell tower

and you the bell. As you ring,

what batters you becomes your strength.

Move back and forth into the change.

What is it like, such intensity of pain?

If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this uncontainable night,

be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,

the meaning discovered there.

And if the world has ceased to hear you,

say to the silent earth: I flow.

To the rushing water, speak: I am.

(Sonnets to Orpheus II, 29, Rilke, 2016)

As this mystery, the mystery of seeing, of comprehending, of writing otherwise draws toward its quiet close, I find myself once more in the shelter of Rilke's poetry, tenderly anchored, gently led home. I am at once spent and at ease, unsteady and serene, as though the ground beneath me shifts even as it steadies my step.

When I turn back to that first day, the day that opened into years of devoted reading, the first day in the field, the trembling moment I wrote the very first word (only to erase it almost at once)- I am overcome. Overcome by the vastness of the mystery I have lived and carried in my body these past years. It has made me and unmade me, shaped me and reshaped me. I trace its passage in the silvering of my hair, in the fine new lines upon my face, in the quiet ache that settles in my lower back. I have lived this mystery; I have felt its pulse nearly every day.

Would I do it again? I cannot say. And yet I know this: the “meaning discovered here” will not loosen its hold on me. It will guide my steps beyond these pages. My words will not fall silent with the final full stop of this chapter.

For as I move back and forth into a world I now behold anew, I find myself understanding it less and understanding it more.

The self that is discovered, revealed, expressed and shared

Through my ethnographic and autoethnographic journey I have discovered how in times of polycrisis, the leadership space-time becomes unstable and contested. How individual and organisational survival instincts surface, drawing leaders toward immediacy, control, and action. Yet, as Montefusco and Angeli (2024) observe, crisis is precisely the moment that calls not for acceleration, but for pause, for complex learning and reasoning.

The Poetry in Crisis Chapter has revealed how the practice of writing poetry can create such a pause. Across 121 days of crisis, poetry became a critical element of my leadership practice. It opened access to what Guiney Yallop et al. describe as the “in-between space between creative and critical scholarship”: a reflexive, liminal space that holds self and other, personal and public, together (2014, p. 3). In this space, complexity does not resolve but reveals itself through the co-existence of multiple truths, and no truths at all. Time and space loosen their grip, entering an asynchronous dance that softens rigid mental constructs and normative assumptions about behaviour, power, and organisational order.

The following findings argue that such liminality is central to L-A-P in polycrisis. Leadership emerges through openness to context and others, through the dissolving, forming, and reforming of both individual and collective selves. Yet in crisis, the self often collapses into fight-or-flight, seeking preservation over connection (Taylor et al. 2000). Applying L-A-P

lens reframes this response: leading in crisis requires accessing the collective self, through practices of tending and befriending rather than heroic control. Writing poetry functions here as a portal, one in which “the self is to be discovered, revealed, expressed, and shared” (Linstead, 2022, p. 107). It enables leaders to let go in order to let in: new ideas, perspectives, paradigms, and people. Through reflective and reflexive questioning, poetry cultivates a practice of active uncertainty, a willingness to remain with the mystery of not-knowing.

Importantly, writing poetry in crisis is a practice of reflexive solitude, not loneliness. It is generative and transformative from the inside out. It dissolves the heroic figure of leadership and invites the human. As illustrated in the response to the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, poetry provides language and framing that can settle disturbance and offer direction to those seeking meaning. Moreover, the act of writing and reciting poetry, such as the public performance referenced in the Giovanni example, can be interpreted as a form of leadership presence. While Wu et al. (2021) and Riggio and Newstead (2023) draw our attention to the importance of charismatic leadership in crisis, this research suggests a subtle reorientation: it may not be charisma that moves people, but poesis. In moments of crisis, some leaders become poets, not by design, but by attunement.

By bringing together the work of (Taylor et al. (2000), Taylor (2011), Morgan (2010), Linstead (2022), and others within an L-A-P framework, this thesis positions poetry in crisis as a leadership practice worthy of further epistemological and empirical exploration. It offers a novel contribution to leadership studies by focusing on the embodied, creative, and relational sensemaking at precisely those moments “when we lose all sense of leadership” (Segal 2010, p. 384)

Poetry-as-Practice-in-Polycrisis

Polycrisis exposes leadership to a contextual mystery defined by uncertainty, ambiguity, and disrupted relations of space and time. Organisational orthodoxies such as linear planning, stable roles, predictable causality no longer hold. While survival instincts again push toward action within a fight-or-flight paradigm, polycrisis also opens a deeper terrain: one that invites leaders to linger within complexity rather than rush to resolve it.

Within this research, poetry emerged almost accidentally as a leadership practice capable of engaging this terrain. Writing poetry in polycrisis enabled complex learning and reasoning

through unbridled, creative expression. It supported a shift away from fight-or-flight toward practices of tending and befriending the liminal, the unknown, and the relational within self, context, and others. Building on Morgan (2022), Linstead (2022), and Taylor (2012), poetry became a means of accessing in-between time and space, where complexity appears not as a problem to be solved, but as a condition to be inhabited.

This practice facilitated the reconceptualisation of normative behaviours, power structures, and leadership assumptions. More significantly, it reframed leadership practice in crisis from fear and survival-of-the-fittest toward curiosity and collaborative co-creation. The guiding question shifted from *How do I control this?* to *What can I create, even from this?* In doing so, this research extends Montefusco and Angeli's (2024) work on complex adaptive systems by offering poetry as a concrete practice through which leaders can "linger in liminal spaces" and encounter complexity as potentially "delightful" and even "beautiful" (ibid., p. 21).

This contribution also responds directly to the growing digital augmentation of leadership. While digital technologies promise efficiency and reach, they frequently disembodify leadership, intensify isolation, and amplify what Kroker and Kroker (1997) describe as digital delirium. Poetry offers a counter-practice, an embodied, humanising mode of leadership that reconnects leaders with felt experience, relational presence, and meaning-making beyond algorithms and dashboards. As Linstead (2022, p. 107) notes, "poetry enables the self to be discovered, revealed, and shared", an essential corrective to disembodied leadership in times of crisis. Where uncertainty becomes the only certainty, poetry provides language and framing that settles disturbed and offers orientation.

Although crisis scholarship has begun to move from singular events to multiple crises, there remains a significant gap in addressing the relational entanglement and contextual complexity of polycrisis. By introducing Morin and Kern's grammar of polycrisis into leadership and organisational studies, this research bridges traditional crisis management, crisis leadership, and emerging permacrisis perspectives. It foregrounds temporality and embodiment, arguing that leadership in polycrisis must be understood as situated in disrupted space and asynchronous time.

Within this context, *Poetry in Crisis* advances the crisis leadership work and the contributions of Morgan (2022) and Taylor (2012) by demonstrating how practicing poetry supports complex sensemaking, sensegiving and "sensebreaking" (Chaudhry and Amis

2025), through reflexive attunement and embodied practice. The recent handbook by Boncori et al. (2025) further legitimises this convergence of poetry and organisation through lenses of liminality, affect, and embodiment. Together, these contributions position poetry not as an aesthetic add-on, but as a serious leadership practice in times of profound uncertainty.

Contribution to Knowledge

This research makes an original contribution to leadership and organisational studies by establishing Poetry in Crisis as an embodied, reflexive, sensemaking and sensegiving leadership practice within conditions of polycrisis. While existing literature has explored crisis leadership, complex adaptive systems, and Leadership-As-Practice (Raelin, 2011, 2016, 2023), these streams have largely privileged cognitive, relational, or structural responses to uncertainty. This study extends these bodies of work by theorising poetry not as metaphor, artefact, or communication device (Morgan 2022), but as a practice of leadership itself, one that enables leaders to engage in complex reasoning, sensemaking, sensebreaking, and sensegiving through embodied, creative, and affective means.

Specifically, the research contributes a novel understanding of how poetry functions as a liminal leadership practice that supports “tending and befriending” responses in crisis, countering dominant “fight-or-flight” paradigms (Taylor, 2004). By situating poetic practice within L-A-P, the study demonstrates how leadership in crisis emerges through reflexive attunement to disrupted space and asynchronous time, rather than through heroic intervention or charismatic performance. In doing so, it advances current crisis leadership scholarship by focusing on the role of embodiment, uncertainty, and creative poesis in sustaining collective sensemaking under conditions of instability.

Furthermore, by introducing Morin and Kern’s (1999) grammar of polycrisis into leadership-as-practice research, this study provides a theoretical bridge between traditional crisis leadership, emergent permacrisis perspectives, and lived leadership practice. It responds directly to the growing digital augmentation and disembodiment of leadership by offering poetry as a counter-practice that re-centres humanity, relational presence, and ethical attentiveness in times of systemic disruption.

Empirically and epistemologically, this research opens a new stream of inquiry into under-researched and under-practised modes of leadership in crisis. It demonstrates how poetic practice enables leaders to linger in liminal spaces where complexity is not resolved but held, thereby contributing a multiparadigmatic and polycontextual understanding of leadership suited to contemporary and future crises. In doing so, it offers a substantive and timely contribution to knowledge and practice in crisis leadership concerned with complexity, embodiment, and the human condition.

The mystery beyond words: personal conclusion

While this research project was largely focused on the leadership-as-practice in polycrisis through the lens of a collective setting, it also recognises the multiplicity of self which is boundless and generative and can open up to more creative and innovative practices in multiple contexts and with others. Operating within tensions and connections, crossing the fixed boundaries of space and time and entering the mystery of leadership-in-practice-in-polycrisis.

Seeking an alternative way of expressing the findings of this mystery I reached out to an Italian artist Fabio Orioli. Fabio is a queer illustrator and visual artist whose work transcends the linguistic barriers and challenges fixed, social concepts and norms. Indeed, I reached out to Fabio to interpret and describe what my language could not. The ones and zeros of the digital world that I brushed up against. The embodied connection of tending and befriending and the isolation of the fight or flight state. The red thread that connects even through tensions that separate us, and the emergence of the new practice that can be found in the most unexpected places.

In poesis of the moment, in the darkness and powerlessness, in the invisible and the ordinary. Compelled by the resounding of boundless stories of connection that surfaced in this research process, I therefore invite you, the reader into the brave space of creative complexity and mysteries that lie within. Where might your own conclusions take you next? Here, this story pauses, not with resolution, but with invitation. The page turns from words to shapes, colours, and felt sense. What else might be discovered if we dared to loosen the linguistic corset of academic certainty? Where might leadership lead, if we allowed mystery to remain?

Here is where this story ends, and where another begins.

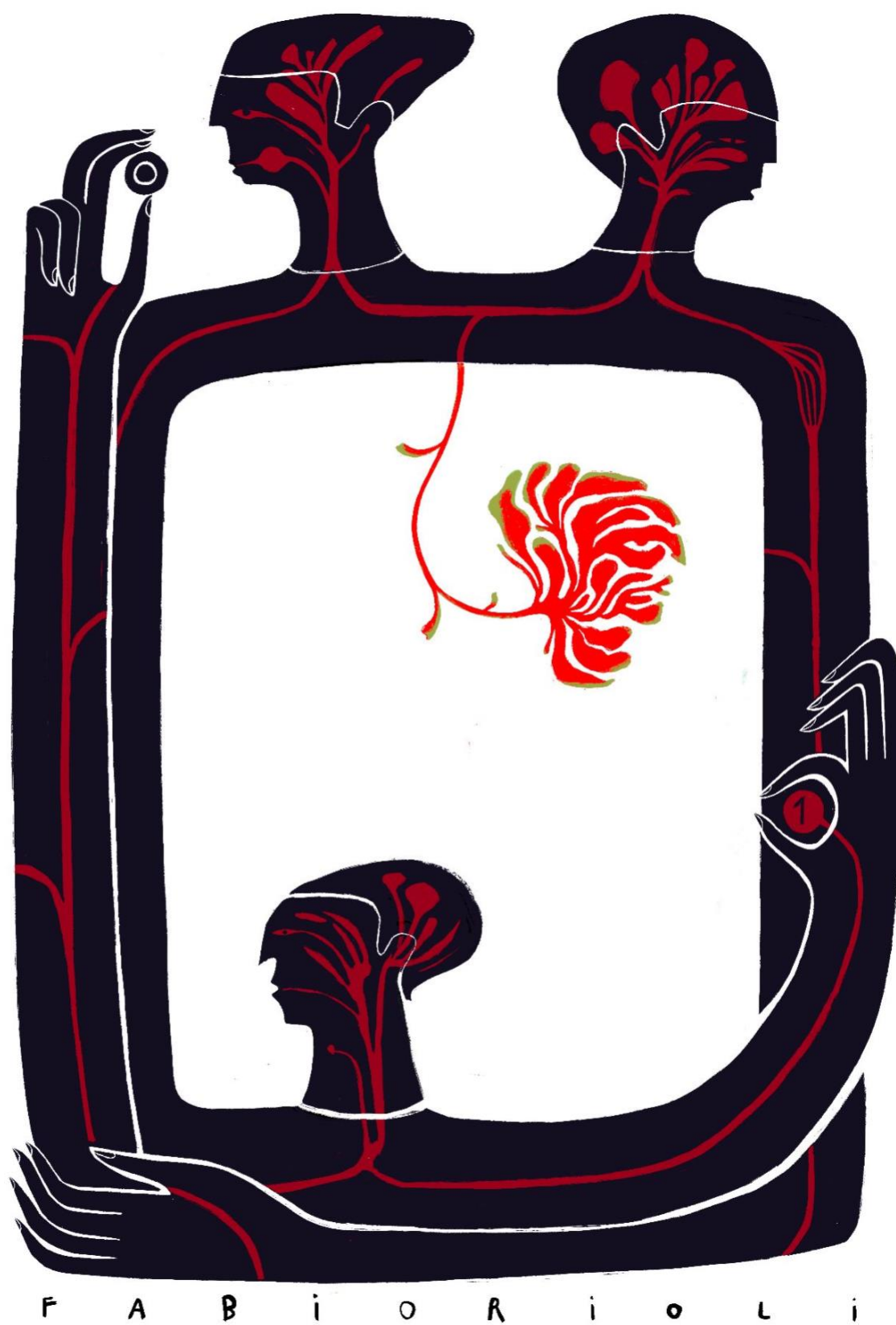


*Illustration 1- Interpretation of leadership in polycrisis: space, time and mysteries of practice
by Fabio Orioli*

Appendices

Appendix 1 Ethical form/approval

Appendix 2 Research Participants Interviews- Leaders

Appendix 3 Research Participants Interviews- PAs

Appendix 4 Immersive Research Lab Participants

Appendix 5 Participant Information Sheet

Appendix 6 Questionnaire Consent Form

Appendix 7 Questionnaire

Appendix 8 Doodle pad

Appendix 9 Immersive Research Design and Script- Experiment 1,2 and 3.

Appendix 10 Questionnaire data results

Appendix 11 Millanote in-vivo, colour and thematic coding

Appendix 12 MSc Research Project overview

Appendix 1: Ethical form/approval

THE UNIVERSITY *of York*

ELMPS Ethics Committee Application Form

(Version: 12 November 2021)

This form is for all *staff and PhD candidates* in the five departments (Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology), and two research centres (Centre for Human Rights and the Centre for Women's Studies). ***Please note: Masters and UG research is dealt with at department level***

Your ELMPS application is intended to ensure that your research will be compliant with the University codes of practice, ethical guidelines on research integrity and the General Data Protection Regulation (in line with University Data Management Policy) as well as any relevant professional guidelines for your discipline (e.g. the Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association) or funding organisation (e.g. ESRC Framework for Research Ethics). Please ensure, **prior to your submission of this form**, that you familiarise yourself with the following guidance:

University of York data protection and research data management guidance:

Data protection: <https://www.york.ac.uk/records-management/dp/>

Research data management: <https://www.york.ac.uk/library/info-for/researchers/data/>

Personal data: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/key-definitions/what-is-personal-data/>

Special category data:

<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/special-category-data/>

Criminal offence or conviction data

<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/criminal-offence-data/>

Internet research may involve new and unfamiliar ethics questions and dilemmas. A good place to start is the Association of Internet Researchers 2002 Guidelines and the BPS 'Conducting Research on the Internet: Guidelines for ethics practice in psychological research online (2007)'.

Note: If you are collecting data from NHS patients or staff, or Social Service users or staff, you will need to apply for approval through the Integrated Research Application System (IRAS) at <https://www.myresearchproject.org.uk/Signin.aspx>, in which case you do not apply to ELMPS. When your IRAS application has been approved you should email a copy of your completed IRAS form to ELMPS with their approval for our records. Masters and Undergraduate student applications for approval through IRAS should be pre-reviewed by the relevant department level ethics committees.

Completed ELMPS application forms should be submitted by the advertised deadline (see ELMPS webpage). Applications **will not be accepted after the deadline unless the Chair agrees that there are exceptional circumstances. Exceptional circumstances are for example, that the timing of your application is beyond your control and that funding will be lost if you do not get approval before the next ELMPS committee meeting.**

Email one signed electronic copy (including attachments e.g. consent form and participant information sheet) combined into **ONE pdf file** (email to: elmeps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk). We no longer require a signed hard copy. Initial decisions will normally be made and communicated to you within two weeks of the Committee meeting.

SECTION 1: ABOUT YOU

1a. Please provide the following details about the principal investigator at YORK

Name of Applicant:	<u>Olga (Ola) Gwozdz</u>
E-mail address:	omg511@york.ac.uk
Telephone:	07826924803
Staff/Student Status:	PhD student
Dept/Centre or Unit:	<u>School of Management</u>
Head of Department:	<u>Prof Karen Mumford</u>
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Head of Research: (if applicable)	
HoR E-mail address: (if applicable)	
If you are a student please provide details about your supervisor(s)	<u>*Prof Stephen Linstead, Prof Federica Angeli</u>

1b. Any other applicants (for collaborative research projects) Expand as necessary

Name of Applicant:	<u>N/A</u>
e-mail address:	
Telephone:	
Staff/Student Status:	
Dept/Centre or Unit:	
Head of Department:	
HoD e-mail address:	
Head of Research: (if applicable)	
HoR e-mail address: (if applicable)	

SECTION 2: ABOUT THE PROJECT**2.1 Details of Project**

Title of Project:	“We don’t need another hero; exploring an inclusive, emergent leader identity in digital and sustainability”

Date of Submission to ELMPs:	10.01.2023
Project Start Date:	Feb 2023
Duration:	6-9 months
Funded Yes/No:	No
Funding Source:	Self-funded
External Ethics Board Jurisdictions (if any):	N/A

2.2 Aims and objectives of the research

Please outline the aims of your project and key research questions. Show briefly how existing research has informed the research proposal and explain what your research adds and how it addresses an area of importance (**N.B. Max 300 words**).

This research is a continuation of my award-winning MSc independent research project journey. This project informed by Knights (2022), joins in with the critique of the traditional leadership and also proposes an alternative definition that invites leaders to cross the boundaries between the self and others. Knights (2022) sees "leadership as the "invisible" space residing in between subject and object, mind and body, and leaders and followers" (p. 4). An idea of relational leadership, first articulated by Hoskins and Dachler (Hoskins, 1988, Dachler and Hoskins, 1995) and more recently developed by Crevani explores the importance and the "significance of relations and relational dynamics in leadership" (Carol et al, 2019, p.223, Cervani, 2011). This relationality transcends the material self and extends into the immaterial wider world of digital and sustainability.

For example, Simmel introduces us to the idea of the "new human type" which is marked by the disconnect between the self and the world around. Simmel calls this phenomenon "de-synchronisation" as it comes as a result of lag between rapid technological advances and the regression of cultural and spiritual life, further contributing to our current ecological crisis (Wajcman and Dodd, 2002: 18–19).

The aim of the project is to explore the emergent landscape of inclusivity (of self and others), digital and sustainable development through the lens of leadership identity. What does an inclusive, digital and sustainable leader look like? How does the singular identity formation impact the practice? Is new kind of leadership a person or a leadership space. The purpose of this ethnographic, inductive, field study is to gain a deeper understanding of the leadership, individual and organisational identity in the context of inclusivity, digital/data and sustainability.

The unprecedented time and the emergent nature of the subject of this research make this study a unique contribution to knowledge.

2.3 Methods of Data Collection

Provide a brief summary of the method(s) of the research making clear what it will involve for participants (e.g. interviews, observation, questionnaires). If you (or your research assistants) are meeting face-to-face with research participants, specify *where* you will be meeting them (and you will need to address how any risks associated with this will be managed in Section 2.10)

This multi-discipline, multi-method, interpretive ethnographic project (with elements of digital ethnography) will consist of three levels of data collection, to include online questionnaire, 1-2-1 interviews and interactive focus groups (The Research Labs). This ethnographic, field-based research

is hosted by my current employer and one of the research participants- Arup, located at 80 Charlotte Street, London. The nature of the research means that there will be minimal risk to the participants. Wherever, there are details or stories shared, that could impact on personal reputation, individual's names, company names or project specific details will be anonymised to ensure full protection of participants.

1. Questionnaire

The purpose of the questionnaire is to collect qualitative and quantitative data that will provide basis for forming interview questions as well as designing focus groups. The questionnaire will be formed of close-ended quantitative and open-ended, qualitative questions posted/sent to participants using Google Docs or Qualtrics. These will be posted/sent as links and will not directly obtain any personal data. At the end of the questionnaire there will be an invitation for a voluntary participation in interviews and/or focus groups. The sample size for this part of the project is aimed at 100 responses. An invite to participate in the questionnaire will be generated via a video link/post explaining the research project, what is involved and the next steps. The video will end with a QR code which will lead to Participant Information Sheet, Questionnaire Consent Form and the Questionnaire itself. Questionnaire participants will have an opportunity to self-select for further research by providing their email address and stating which (interviews/focus groups) they wish to participate.

2. 1-2-1 Interviews

1-2-1 interviews will be semi-structured, qualitative lasting between 30-45min. Although most of the interviews will be conducted online using Teams or Zoom, some London-based participants might welcome in-person interviews. Should this be the case, the interviews will be conducted in the collaboration space (mix of private booths and sound-proof rooms) at Arup, 80 Charlotte Street, London. The in-person interviews will not be recorded but the notes will be taken by the interviewer. Online interviews will be recorded upon participant's consent. Should the consent not be granted, the notes will be taken. Participants will be sent questions prior to the interview along with a consent form and Participant Information Sheet. The sample size for this part of the project is aimed at 25-30 participants. The participants will be selected through the combination of convenience sampling and self-selection from the snowball and random stratified sampling via LinkedIn and email video campaign (as detailed above).

3. Focus groups (The Lab)

The purpose of this exercise will be to add another layer of practical context and qualitative data as part of triangulation process and distillation/testing of key themes using digital ethnography (interacting with digital technologies). To prevent risk of harm, no topics deemed sensitive (business, commercial or personal) will be discussed in this setting, and special attention to ensure this will be paid by the moderator. This is a purely experimental exercise, focusing on aspects of discovery, ideation and play using sound/image, immersive technologies (AR, VR) as ways of testing and producing knowledge from emerging theories and hypothesis. This will be based on the real time observations and impressions as experienced during the session. All participants will be sent a consent form with Participant Information Sheet and the focus group agenda. The focus groups might hybrid (depending on the in-person availability and geographic location of participants) and will be held at the 'collaboration space' at Arup 80 Charlotte Street, London. The best location has already been identified taking into consideration anonymity, safety and comfort of participants. The space is located in a lower ground, and to insure privacy it has its own entrance, kitchen area (with free refreshments, private breakout area and gender-neutral toilets. The focus groups will be held in the Creative Room/Lighting Lab. The sample size for this part of the project is aimed at 25-30 participants (3 separate focus group session events of 5-10 people each). The participants will be selected through the combination of convenience sampling and self-selection from the snowball and random stratified sampling via LinkedIn and email video campaign (as detailed above). Each focus group will be composed of individuals previously unknown to each other, so that pre-existing

relationships, and certain assumptions or expectations that these involve, do not influence disclosure. Upon reaching everyone's consent, the hybrid sessions might be recorded via Teams. Participants will be briefed about confidentiality clause and encouraged to use aliases. All participants will be briefed prior to the event about the non-disclosure of personal information and ethical boundaries. In addition to giving information in advance of a focus group, the moderator will discuss and negotiate a set of ground rules immediately prior to starting the session.

2.4 Sampling and Recruitment of participants

How many participants will take part in the research? How will they be identified – describe your **sampling** method? How will they be invited to take part in the study – describe your **recruitment** method? If research participants are to receive any payments, reimbursement of expenses or any other incentives or benefits for taking part in the research please give details, indicating what and how much they will receive and the basis on which this was decided.

The recruitment of participants has been an ongoing process that continued from my last research (as part of the MSc independent research project). The project has already gained a lot of attention from various individuals, and organisations who expressed interest in the research subject and in the research participation. Over the last 12 months I have been invited to give talks and keynotes about the topic of my previous and current research and I used these forums to promote my work, and invite interested individuals, and organisations to participate in the upcoming project. The audience had an opportunity to scan a QR code with my LinkedIn details and my university email address, where they could enquire about how/when they can get involved. I have also been featured in profile articles by Kevri and Arup also supplied with the link to my details for further enquires. The targeted participants for this project are leaders involved in digital/data and sustainable development initiatives.

Further recruitment of participants will consist of some convenience sampling (30 leaders that have already expressed willingness to participate), but majority of snowball sampling (1K of my LinkedIn followers some of whom would share/reshare on their profiles; current contacts sharing with their network via email, Arup comms sharing on their media channels- 760K on LinkedIn) as well as stratified random sampling (the targeted sample is for leaders working in digital/data, sustainable development and EDI sectors, and direct and indirect contacts will be encouraged to share the participation invite to those leaders in their own network). An invite to participate in the research will be generated via a video link/post explaining the research project, what is involved and the next steps. The rationales for using this form of recruitment tool are: the accessibility and approachability; LinkedIn algorithm favours video content; higher response rate to video content; higher likelihood for people to share and reshare the video on their social media channels (snowball sampling). Questionnaire participants will have an opportunity to self-select for further research by providing their email address and stating which (interviews/focus groups) they wish to participate in.

Another method of recruitment will be through contacting industry specific organisations (some of which I'm a member) that focus on leaders in digital and sustainable development, some of which are listed below:

Arup- <https://www.arup.com/>

Arup University - <https://www.arup.com/our-firm/arup-university>

Women in Innovation - <https://womenininnovation.co/>

Institute of Civil Engineers- <https://www.ice.org.uk>

I3P - <https://www.i3p.org.uk>

2.5 'Vulnerable' Participants

Please indicate whether any research participants will be from the following groups; if so, please explain the justification for their inclusion. In most cases, researchers working with vulnerable people will need to be registered with ISA (www.isa.homeoffice.gov.uk) which has links with the DBS (formerly the CRB). The DBS offers organisations a means to check the background of researchers to ensure that they do not have a history that would make them unsuitable for work involving children and vulnerable adults.

***NB:** If you are collecting data from NHS patients or staff, or Social Service users or staff, you will need to apply for approval through the Integrated Research Application System (IRAS).*

Children under 18	N/A
Those with learning disability	N/A
Those who are severely ill or have a terminal illness	N/A
Those in emergency situations	N/A
Those with mental illness (particularly if detained under Mental Health Legislation)	N/A
People with dementia	N/A
Prisoners	N/A
Young offenders	N/A
Adults who are unable to consent for themselves	N/A
Those who could be considered to have a particularly dependent relationship with the investigator or gatekeeper, e.g. those in care homes	N/A
Other vulnerable groups (please specify) – discuss the issues this raises	N/A

If yes to any of the above, do you have Disclosure and Barring Service Clearance?

Yes/No

Describe the procedures you are using to gain (a) consent and/or (b) proxy consent if applicable

N/A

2.6. 'Sensitive' topics

During your study, will anyone discuss sensitive, embarrassing or upsetting topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use) or issues likely to disclose information requiring further action (e.g. criminal activity)? If so, please give details of the procedures in place to deal with these issues, including any support/advice (e.g. helpline numbers) to be offered to participants. Consider, too, the risks this may pose to the researcher. Note that where applicable, consent procedures should make it clear that if

something potentially or actually illegal is discovered in the course of a project, it may need to be disclosed to the proper authorities.

The research subject does not deal with topics that could be deemed sensitive

2.7 Covert research

If the research involves covert data gathering or deception of any kind, please explain and justify the deception. Specify what procedures (if any) will be used to debrief participants after the data have been collected.

N/A

2.8 Informed Consent

Please attach (1) the privacy notice/project information sheet to be given to all participants and (2) the informed consent form. In line with the University's Code of Practice on Research Integrity, participants and/or their representatives should be provided with details of a first point of contact through which any concerns can be raised: this should be your Head of Department (or if you *are* a Head then the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research).

i. If you are not seeking informed consent

It is usually the case that informed consent is required for research with human participants. If you do NOT intend to seek informed consent, please explain carefully why you believe this is not necessary for your project. You should explain this with reference to the research ethics guidelines for your discipline and cite other recent published research using your methodological approach or ethics discussions about this to support your case.

ii. Please confirm you have included the privacy notice/project information sheet to be given to all participants with your submission to ELMPS. If these have not been attached, please explain why this is the case.

I can confirm that the project information sheet will include the privacy notice

iii. Please confirm you have included all the relevant informed consent forms. If these have not been attached, please explain why this is the case.

I can confirm that I have included all relevant information as part of the consent form

iv. Are the results to be given as feedback or disseminated to your participants (if yes please specify when, in what form, and by what means). If no, why not?

Yes, I will inform participants they are permitted to read my completed thesis, if they wish to do so, and will email a link for access when the thesis is available.

2.9 Anonymity

In most instances the Committee expects that anonymity will be guaranteed to research participant. If anonymity cannot be guaranteed, then you must provide a rationale for this and make this explicitly clear in the information sheet to participants that they are consenting on that basis. Please set out below how you intend to ensure anonymity. If anonymity is not guaranteed) then this also has implications that you must address in Section 3 below.

Note: if you are using a transcriber or translator you must have a signed confidentiality agreement with them.

Anonymity will be guaranteed to all research participants by taking the following steps:

- Secure and confidential storage of participants personal data (following GDPR standards)
- Secure storage of collected data (double and fingerprint authentication and University of York secure server)
- Giving aliases to names of people, places, organisations and projects when mentioned, quoted in the final research report, and/or at any point of this research project
- Assuring the confidentiality and anonymity of participants' comments
- Aliases will be given during focus groups to people, organisations and projects (although these details won't be a necessary as part the focus groups exercises)
- Focus group participant will be selected from different organisations to avoid possible pre-existing relationships which might impact accidental disclosure of personal information
- All participants in focus groups will be briefed prior to the event about non-disclosure of personal information boundaries and ethical restrictions, as well as the role of Arup as a research participant, and a donor a of the 'collaboration space'.

2.10 Anticipated Risks or Ethical Problems

Please outline any anticipated risks or ethical problems that may adversely affect any of the participants, the researchers and/or the university, and the steps that will be taken to address them. (Note: all research involving human participants can have adverse effects.) Please also refer to the **University's Health, Safety and Welfare Policy Statement and associated Management Procedures**, as well as to any ethical guidelines you have consulted. **Where relevant, risk assessments should be carried out not only in relation to the researchers themselves, but also for those participating in the project or affected by its conduct, and in relation to any impact on the environment. Researchers should ensure that appropriate insurance is in place, liaising with the University's Insurance Officer as necessary (via standard departmental procedures where these exist).**

- i. Risks to participants (e.g. emotional distress, financial disclosure, physical harm, transfer of personal data, sensitive organisational information...)

Low risk to participants. There will be minimal risk to the participants. Wherever, there are details or stories shared, that could impact on personal reputation, individual's names, company names or project specific details will be anonymised to ensure full protection of participants.
ii. Risks to researchers (e.g. personal safety, physical harm, emotional distress, risk of accusation of harm/impropriety, conflict of interest...)
Low risk to the researcher. There is a low risk in terms of my personal safety as the interviewing process will be conducted online or at Arup collaboration space.
iii. University/institutional risks (e.g. adverse publicity, financial loss, data protection...)
Low risk to the University. The topic of this research does not raise any potential risks for the University of York.
iv. Financial conflicts of interest (e.g. perceived or actual with respect to direct payments, research funding, indirect sponsorship, board or organisational memberships, past associations, future potential benefits, other...) There are no financial or commercial aspects to this project.

2.11 Research outside the UK

If you are planning research overseas, you should also take account of the ethical standards and processes of the country/countries in question as well as those of the University. If the research is being conducted outside the UK please specify any local guidelines (e.g. from local professional associations/learned societies/universities) that exist and whether these involve any ethical stipulations beyond those usual in the UK. Also specify whether there are any specific ethical issues raised by the local context in which you are conducting research, for example, particular cultural sensitivities or vulnerabilities of participants. Although the research is UK based, LinkedIn is a global, social media platform with a global reach, therefore the questionnaires might be answered by participants from outside of UK. Since no geography-specific information will be obtained I will have no way of knowing who the questionnaires are answered by, and therefore will not knowingly breach ethical boundaries of other countries.

SECTION 3: General Data Protection Regulation

3.1 DATA PROTECTION

All [personal data \(e.g. names, contact details\)](#) must be collected and used in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) 2018, the UK Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018, the University's Data Protection Policy and the University's research data management (RDM) Policy.

Personal data which have undergone pseudonymisation (e.g. replacing names or other

identifiers which are easily attributed to individuals with a code) will still remain personal data and within the scope of the UK data protection law (particularly while the code can be tied back to the individual).

Before completing this section, please ensure that you have read the University's [data protection](#) and [research data management](#) guidance.

Does your project involve [personal data](#) as defined by the UK GDPR?

✓ Yes ☐ No

If you answered No, go to [next section].

Data categories and subjects	
What types of personal data will you be processing? Tick all that apply. • Personal data ✓ • Special category personal data ☐ • Criminal offence or conviction data ☐ • Data of children (under 18s) or of otherwise vulnerable individuals (e.g. elderly individuals or individuals with certain disabilities) ☐ • Pseudonymised data (e.g. an NHS Digital dataset) ☐ • Anonymised data where there is a risk of re-identification ☐	
Describe the nature of the personal or special category data you will be collecting or using (e.g. opinions, contact details, financial information, health data, information on beliefs)?	The questionnaire participants who wish to self-select for interviews and/or focus groups will be required to provide an email address so that they can be contacted and sent Zoom/Teams invitation.
If the data is from NHS Digital, a registry (e.g. Eurostat) or organisation, give the identifiers for the datasets and/or reference the sharing agreements.	N/A

Data protection by design and default	
Will you be collecting the minimum amount of personal data necessary for the specified research purpose e.g. gathering anonymised data at source if person-identifiable information is not needed and ensuring all data to be captured can be justified?	✓ Yes ☐ No
Will you use the data only for the purposes of this research project? If you plan to use the data for additional purposes, will you bring this to the attention of the research participants at point of data collection or, where this is not possible, the University's Data Protection Officer?	✓ Yes ☐ No
Will you anonymise personal data wherever and as soon as possible: either at point of data capture, collation, analysis or output?	✓ Yes ☐ No

Will you use pseudonymised data wherever possible in cases where information cannot be anonymised e.g. will you separate research participant contact details from the data to be analysed and/or remove identifiers e.g. specific date of birth and replace with age within a date range?	☒ Yes ☐ No
Confirm you will issue research participants with a GDPR compliant participant information sheet/privacy notice at the point of data collection if you are gathering personal data?	☒ Yes ☐ No
Will the research cause substantial damage or substantial distress to research participants?	☒ No – not likely ☐ Yes – likely
Will you process personal data to take ‘measures or decisions’ about particular individuals? [An exception can apply in the case of (NHS REC) approved medical research].	☒ No ☐ Yes
Where you are working collaboratively, will you document data flows between the various research partners (e.g. in a basic data flow diagram) and retain a copy of this document with your ethics application?	☒ Yes ☐ No
Where you are working collaboratively, will you ensure the Research and Knowledge Exchange Contracts Team are consulted before any data is gathered or shared to ensure appropriate contracts and/or data sharing arrangements are in place?	☒ Yes ☐ No
Where you are looking to engage third party services such as a transcription service, will you ensure the Research and Knowledge Exchange Contracts Team are consulted before any data is gathered or shared to ensure appropriate contracts and/or data sharing arrangements are in place?	☒ Yes ☐ No
Where you are working collaboratively, will you ensure data transfers to the collaborators are undertaken in accordance with IT guidance ?	☒ Yes ☐ No
Will data subjects be identifiable in the final research output / data publication(s)? E.g. Publication of direct quotations from respondents, publication of data that might allow the identification of individuals.	☐ Yes ☒ No
Where you have answered ‘no’ to any of the questions above or ‘yes’ to the questions around causing substantial damage or distress or using data to take ‘measures or decisions’, please confirm that you have consulted the University’s Data Protection Officer and obtained any necessary approval.	☐ Yes

3.2 Data Security

How will the data be collected and stored electronically?	The data will be collected and stored electronically (when offline) on a triple authentication Apple MacBook Air

	(finger print, password protection, encryption, with further double authentication access to Cloud using Duo Mobile). It will then be transferred to University of York server when the machine is in the “online” mode.
Please detail who will have control of, and act as custodian(s) for, data generated by the study.	Myself (The researcher)
Will you use University approved software ?	☒ Yes ☐ No (if no, please provide further details and consult IT Services before proceeding)
Will you use University approved file storage (Google Drive, University networked storage , research computing)?	☒ Yes ☐ No (if no, please provide further details)
Will you store personal or confidential data on laptop(s) with appropriate device encryption ?	☒ Yes ☐ No (if no, please provide further details)
If capturing audio, will you use an encrypted device for recording (e.g. an Apple iOS device or encrypted voice recorder)?	☒ Yes ☐ No (if no, please provide further details)
Where data is held on an encrypted portable device (e.g. laptop, tablet) will you back it up to a University approved service as soon as possible and perform periodic checks to ensure data is being backed up appropriately?	☒ Yes ☐ No ☐ N/A
Will you ensure confidential information is encrypted before it is transmitted/shared digitally?	☒ Yes ☐ No
Please detail what other protections will be used for digital data (e.g. access/edit permissions, procedural safeguards re downloads/making copies, remote access via VDS/VPN, 2 factor authentication)?	All digital content will be stored on Apple MacBook (fingerprint + password access and encryption) using University Google

	Cloud with further 2 factor authentication access. Any remote access will be facilitated through university VPN.
Confirm you have reviewed the user commitments under the Policy for the safe use of University information on devices. Detail anything in the user commitments that will pose a challenge in carrying out your proposed research.	☒ Yes ☐ No No identified challenges
How will hard copy/analogue data (e.g. in paper form) be collected, sent and stored?	There will be no analogue data. When notes will be taken, they will be recorded on the project laptop and stored as specified above.
Will you ensure that personal data or confidential data held on paper are stored in a lockable filing cabinet or container, and/or a locked room in secure premises?	☐ Yes ☒ N/A (will not create/hold paper copies personal or confidential data) ☐ No (if no, please provide further details)
How will devices be physically protected (e.g. in transit, when not in use or left unattended)?	Fingerprint and password protection
Will you ensure the device(s), accounts, or storage area(s) used to store data are not accessible to any unauthorised parties?	☒ Yes ☐ No
Set out any other measures or procedures for maintaining the confidentiality of information about the participant and information that the participant shares (e.g. other methods of anonymisation).	All participants will be given aliases along with any company or project names.

3.3 Data Retention

How long will you keep personal data after the project, in what form and for what reason? https://www.york.ac.uk/library/info-for/researchers/data/sharing/ [Data retention may be set by University policy, a data sharing agreement/data provider, be based on professional guidelines, or be approved by a York ethics committee. If the data is not going to be destroyed within a set time-scale please include a justification for this. The University's Research Data Management (RDM) policy applies to research undertaken by postgraduate research students and research staff only. This recommends retaining important data for a period of 10 years. Taught postgraduates should retain such data until their degree is awarded].	All data will be safely and securely stored for the period of 10 years.

When will the research data be destroyed, by whom, and how? https://www.york.ac.uk/library/info-for/researchers/data/sharing/#tab-2	After 10 years all data will be erased from the research laptop and the cloud.
Will any personal or special category data (i.e. data that is not truly and irrevocably anonymised) be deposited in an archive or external repository? https://www.york.ac.uk/library/info-for/researchers/data/sharing/#tab-4	☐ Yes ☐ No ☒ N/A
Where personal data are to be transferred to an archive or repository, please confirm that your information sheet or privacy notice will: (i) cover the archiving and reuse of any personal data and participant agreement to this, (ii) explain to participants the benefits of any data sharing, (iii) indicate where possible whether research data will be deposited in a named, recognised repository (e.g. Archaeology Data Service, UK Data Service, York's institutional repository, etc.)	☐ Yes ☐ No ☒ N/A [Text]
Where you have special category personal data or criminal data, will it be destroyed in line with an agreed retention policy (set by the University, the data provider, or approved by this ethics committee)?	☒ Yes ☐ No
Where will results that include/may include personal data be reported and disseminated (e.g. reference data output, research publication)?	N/A

3.4. DPIA Screening Questions (Data Protection Impact Assessment)

A DPIA should be undertaken for data processing likely to be high risk under the GDPR. The Regulation does not define ‘high risk’, but the Information Commissioner’s Office has produced a checklist for determining when assessments should be undertaken. This is available on the ELMPS website [DIPA Screening Questions \(MS Word !\[\]\(529949c2c3dadbaa4e538e8c643454bc_img.jpg\), 15kb\)](#).

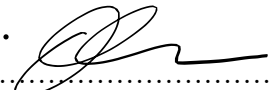
Please consult the University of York’s guidance on DPIAs prior to completing the declaration below. This is available at: <https://www.york.ac.uk/records-management/dp/dataprivacyimpactassessments/>

It is your responsibility to ensure that a DPIA is undertaken if it is required for your research project. Please tick **ONE** appropriate statement below:

Declaration	Agreement
1. I have completed the DPIA screening questionnaire and consider that a DPIA <u>is not required</u> as the data collected is not ‘high risk.’	☒
2. I have completed the DPIA screening questionnaire and consider that a DPIA <u>is required</u> as the data collected is likely to be ‘high risk.’ I have submitted the completed assessment to the University of York’s Data Protection Officer for review and <u>am awaiting a decision on approval.</u>	☐
3. I have completed the DPIA screening questionnaire and consider that a DPIA <u>is required</u> as the data collected is likely to be ‘high risk.’ The completed assessment is attached to this application and <u>has been approved</u> by the University of York’s Data Protection Officer.	☐

SECTION 4: SIGNED UNDERTAKING

In submitting this application, I hereby confirm that I undertake to ensure that the above-named research project will meet the University's Code of Practice on Research Integrity <https://www.york.ac.uk/staff/research/governance/policies/research-code/>.

.......... (Signed Lead Researcher/Principal Investigator)

...10/01/2023.. (Date)

PhD Supervisor (for all PhD applications)...I confirm I have carefully read and approved this application

(Electronic signature required)

.....

(Date)

Submission Checklist for Applicants

One signed electronic copy (including attachments) in **one pdf file** to: elmps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk

☒

ELMPS Application form

☒

Consent form for participants

☒

GDPR compliant participant information sheet

☒

ELMPS Compliance form

Appendix 2: Research Participants Interviews- Leaders

Alias	Age group	Gender	Role
India	45-54	Female	User Research Principal in a global technology company
Fina	35-44	Female	Sustainability leader in a global consultancy company
Jack	35-44	Male	Head of Digital Construction in a global construction company
Amber	35-44	Identifies as Female	The Environmental Sustainability Business Partner in a global construction company
Arden	45-54	Female	CEO of a worldwide recruitment company
Sam	55-64	Male	Works Superintendent for a global construction company
Jude	45-54	Female	User Experience Leader at a global engineering company
James	45-54	Male	Quality Systems Lead for a global engineering company
Sylvia	25-34	Female	Innovation Director for the local government
Harper	25-34	Female	Sustainability director in a global estate company
John	55-64	Male	Lead in restoration and heritage working in the public sector
Freya	55-64	Female	Major Projects Director for a major infrastructure project in the UK
Anya	25-34	Female	Associate at a global consultancy

Paulina	55-64	Female	Business Development Director in a technology company
Erik	35-44	Male	Head of improvement and innovation in a UK construction company
Elena	25-34	Female	Human-Centred Innovation Lead for the UK research and innovation agency
Sophia	35-44	Female	CEO of a digital design company
Pryia	55-64	Female	Director in a global engineering company
Zoe	45-54	Female	Digital entrepreneur and strategist, independent consultancy owner

Alias	Age group	Gender	Role
Stephan	55-64	Male	Chief Data Officer for a global consultancy company
Julia	55-64	Female	Director in a motorsport's organisation
Hanna	45-54	Female	Executive Chair in a higher education institution
Maria	45-54	Female	Director and co-founder of a leadership consultancy
Mark	45-54	Male	Chief Digital Officer for a global engineering company

Appendix 3: Research Participants Interviews- PAs

Alias	Age group	Gender	Role
Ashley	35-44	Female	PA to a CEO in a global construction company
Ari	25-34	Female	PA to three group directors in a engineering consultancy
Sage	55-64	Female	PA to a group director in a global consultancy
Jesse	35-44	Female	PA to the CEO in a global construction company
Kai	45-54	Female	PA to a group director in a global engineering conslutancy
Alex	35-44	Female	PA to a director and team coordinator for a global concultancy

Appendix 4: Immersive Research Lab Participants

Alias	Age group	Gender	Role
Jack	35-44	Male	Head of Digital Construction in a global construction company
Jordan	35-44	Male	Director of a city innovation centre
Blake	35-44	Female	Freelance Strategic Director and Educator
Heide	35-44	Female	Creative Director at a media startup
Anya	25-34	Female	Associate at a global consultancy
Paulina	55-64	Female	Business Development Director in a technology company
Kieran	35-44	Male	Head of Innovation and Improvement for a public sector institution

Appendix 5: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Background

The University of York would like to invite you to take part in the following research project, “We don’t need another hero; exploring the emergent landscape of inclusivity, digital and sustainable development through the lens of leadership identity.”

Before agreeing to take part, please read this information sheet carefully and let us know if anything is unclear or you would like further information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The study is designed to explore the emergent landscape of inclusivity, digital and sustainable development through the lens of leadership identity. What does an inclusive, digital and sustainable leader look like? How does the singular identity formation impact the practice? Is this new kind of leadership a person or a leadership space?

The purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of the leadership individual and organisational identity in the context of inclusivity, digital/data and sustainability.

Research topic language definitions

This research acknowledges the often arbitrary nature of language and its limitations when describing complexities, and the ever-shifting boundaries of the topic. Therefore, the single word descriptions (inclusivity, digital, sustainability) act here as a thematic grouping that invites a broader understanding rather than a limited one, as described below:

Inclusivity explores the work of equity and equality, diversity and inclusion.

Digital explores the current and emergent digital technology to include data science

Sustainability explores the work around the climate crisis, circular economy and degrowth, sustainable development and ESG

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part because you have expressed interest in the research topic and wish to contribute to this research through your participation.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation is optional. If you do decide to take part, you will be given a copy of this information sheet for your records and will be asked to complete a participant information form. If you change your mind at any point during the study, you will be able to withdraw your participation without having to provide a reason.

On what basis will you process my data?

Under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the University has to identify a legal basis for processing personal data and, where appropriate, an additional condition for processing special category data.

In line with our charter which states that we advance learning and knowledge by teaching and research, the University processes personal data for research purposes under Article 6 (1) (e) of the GDPR:

Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest

Special category data is processed under Article 9 (2) (j):

Processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes

Research will only be undertaken where ethical approval has been obtained, where there is a clear public interest and where appropriate safeguards have been put in place to protect data.

In line with ethical expectations and in order to comply with common law duty of confidentiality, we will seek your consent to participate where appropriate. This consent will not, however, be our legal basis for processing your data under the GDPR.

How will you use my data?

Data will be processed for the purposes outlined in this notice.

Will you share my data with 3rd parties?

No. Data will be accessible to the project team at the University of York only.

How will you keep my data secure?

The University will put in place appropriate technical and organisational measures to protect your personal data and/or special category data.

Information will be treated confidentiality and shared on a need-to-know basis only. The University is committed to the principle of data protection by design and default and will collect the minimum amount of data necessary for the project. In addition, we will anonymise or pseudonymise data wherever possible.

Will you transfer my data internationally?

No. Data will be held within the European Economic Area in full compliance with data protection legislation.

Will I be identified in any research outputs?

No. All personal information such as names, names of the companies and projects will be anonymised.

How long will you keep my data?

Data will be retained in line with legal requirements or where there is a business need. Retention timeframes will be determined in line with the University's Records Retention Schedule.

What rights do I have in relation to my data?

Under the GDPR, you have a general right of access to your data, a right to rectification, erasure, restriction, objection or portability. You also have a right to withdrawal. Please note, not all rights apply where data is processed purely for research purposes. For further information see, <https://www.york.ac.uk/records-management/generaldataprotectionregulation/individualsrights/>.

Privacy and confidentiality (Focus Group Participants)

Please be advised that although the researcher will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others. All information shared by the researcher or participants during the focus group is private and confidential.

Questions or concerns

If you have any questions about this participant information sheet or concerns about how your data is being processed, please contact xx in the first instance. If you are still dissatisfied, please contact the University's Acting Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@york.ac.uk.

Right to complain

If you are unhappy with the way in which the University has handled your personal data, you have a right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office. For information on reporting a concern to the Information Commissioner's Office, see www.ico.org.uk/concerns.

Appendix 6: Questionnaire Consent Form



Informed Consent

Consent form for the questionnaire participants

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the study. Please read and answer every question. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please contact the researcher at omg511@york.ac.uk.

Have you read, or has someone read to you, the 'Information Sheet' about this research study?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Do you understand what the research project is about

and what taking part involves?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Do you understand that should you take part in the research only your words might be used but you will not be identifiable in any way? A pseudonym will be used and no other identifying data will be included.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Do you know that if you decide to take part and later change your mind, you can leave the project up to one month after your participation without giving a reason?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Do you understand that this research is based in the UK?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Would you like to take part in part in this research project through the following? (you can participate in more than one)

- ☐ Questionnaire
- ☐ 1-2-1 Online Interview (30-45min)
- ☐ Hybrid focus group (Interactive Lab designed to test emerging theories)

Your Name

Date

Please sign below

SIGN HERE

[clear](#)

If you selected an interview/focus group option, please provide your email address in order to make further arrangements.

Powered by Qualtrics

Appendix 7: Questionnaire

Default Question Block

How would you describe your gender?

- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

What is your ethnic group?

- ☐ Black
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Mixed
- ☐ White
- ☐ Other

Are you a leader (or an aspiring leader)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Which of the disciplines do you work within (you can select more than one)?

- ☐ Inclusivity
- ☐ Digital
- ☐ Sustainability

Are you seeing that inclusivity, digital and sustainability are receiving equal focus in your organisation?

- ☐ Definitely yes
- ☐ Mostly yes
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Mostly not
- ☐ Definitely not

I feel like some processes and practices in my organisation are in conflict with promoting effective inclusivity.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

I feel like some processes and practices in my organisation are in conflict with promoting effective sustainability.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

I feel like some processes and practices in my organisation are in conflict with promoting effective application of digital.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

I think that inclusivity needs to be more integrated into the everyday practices of an organisation.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

I think that sustainability needs to be more integrated into the everyday practices of an organisation.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

I think that digital needs to be more integrated into the everyday practices of an organisation.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

What in your opinion are the driving values of digital in your organisation?

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
People	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Planet	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Profit	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Power	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Progress	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

What in your opinion are the driving values of inclusivity in your organisation?

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
People	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Planet	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Profit	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Power	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Progress	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

What in your opinion are the driving values of sustainability in your organisation?

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
People	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Planet	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Profit	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Power	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Progress	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Rate the importance of the following in your organisation:

	Not important	Important	Very important
Inclusivity	☐	☐	☐
Digital	☐	☐	☐
Sustainability	☐	☐	☐

Rate the importance of the following to you personally:

	Not important	Important	Very important
Inclusivity	☐	☐	☐
Digital	☐	☐	☐

	Not important	Important	Very important
Sustainability	☐	☐	☐

Should modern leaders be equally focused on inclusivity, digital and sustainability?

- ☐ Definitely yes
- ☐ Probably yes
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ Probably not
- ☐ Definitely not

We are experiencing a leadership crisis in:

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Values	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Identity	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Diversity	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inclusivity	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Understanding complexity	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

We need a new definition of who leaders 'are' and what leaders 'do', in order to effectively address the rising challenges in digital, inclusivity and sustainability.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Somewhat agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Somewhat disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Appendix 8: Doodle pad

for any notes, thoughts, feelings and doodles

Perspective matters. focus. distant.
 Direction people face relative to observer
 experience + quality varies.

! I assumed male conductor //

focus on self emotion.

Move from traditional leadership

focus on people. Humble, compassion, empathy
 communication
 Dark haired women.

for any notes, thoughts, feelings and doodles

1. BBC STUDIO

Nice architecture, it glitters, felt like a video game - but passive.

A. Felt like a space demo.

B. didn't focus on sound - visuals continued: like a camera shot broadcast of the 'event'

2. PERSONA

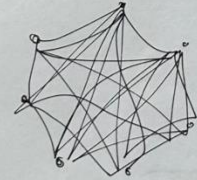
Some quotes make sense, some seem disingenuous (trying to sound correct)

safe - unsure about connection to images - but made me look at suit cases.

- NO MEN? Sounds like a template script.

3. RED THREAD EXPERIMENT

tension + connection



MAKE
 ENTANGLEMENT
 VISIBLE,
 FELT,
 EXPERIENCED,
 EMBODIED

BLAKE

for any notes, thoughts, feelings and doodles

connection
 integration
 interaction

create a web!

for any notes, thoughts, feelings and doodles

① How to lead while appreciating context

② Empowering others is the greatest power of all

③ Digital Inclusivity Sustainability

How to communicate tensions in an inclusive way

for any notes, thoughts, feelings and doodles

IS A CONDUCTOR A LEADER OR A MANAGER??

CAN'T FIT THE VOICE TO A FACE...

BUZZWORDS

LEADERSHIP?

JORDAN

Appendix 9: Immersive Research Design

Immersive Research Lab Design Flow and Script

Context of the Immersive Research Lab

I'm thrilled that you have agreed to participate in the Immersive Research Lab. This Lab is an experimental part of my doctoral research that Explores the mystery of the 'New leader type' and the leadership identity crisis in the emergent landscape of digital, inclusivity and sustainability. What does an inclusive, digital and sustainable leader look like? How does the singular identity formation impact the practice? Is this new kind of leadership a person or a leadership space? (my questions)

What to expect from the practical perspective

This is a 90 min interactive session that is designed to test some of the data that has emerged from my research so far using immersive technology, AI, and other creative methods.

- there will be no testing of your knowledge in any specific discipline. We won't be discussing your organisation or any specific projects you might be involved in - it's simply about capturing your experiences, your thoughts and perceptions. To protect the identity and confidentiality of all participants you will be encouraged not to share what has been discussed here once you leave this experience.

This part of the research WILL NOT be recorded I will however take notes. Myself or XYZ might take photos of the experiences making sure your faces aren't captured in them. This is for recording the activities rather than the participants.

I recognise that we process and communicate information in different ways so I have provided you with a clipboard that you can use for note-taking, doodling or writing down questions. I will however keep these at the end of the lab as part of your contribution.

The first two experiences will be held in this room, followed by a 10min toilet and refreshment break at 14:00 before we move to our final exercise in another location. There are no fire alarm tests scheduled for today so if we hear one we will follow the evacuation procedures and assemble outside by Fitzroy Square.

You're welcome to stay for a chat and refreshments afterwards and for a tour of our other building - this however won't be part of the research so you can go back to use your own names etc. Do you have any questions before we begin and talk shop?

Exercise 1 Impact of viewpoints, perspectives

In a minute I'll ask you to put on these 3D glasses in order to take part in an immersive experience that is taken place in a BBC studio for the philharmonic orchestra. You will all be taken through a 90sec sequence after which we will have a short discussion prompted by some questions.

Context: This exercise was inspired by Questionnaire and interviews data leaders need to understand complexity.

"The inclusivity is about helping people nurturing humanity rather than controlling it." Nurturing humanity by recognizing that you have a place in this world, and other people have a place too and that you all might have different perspectives depending on your where you are."

Purpose: A mental palate cleanser and get us into a space of experiencing It's designed to open our imagination to different viewpoints, experiences and perspectives.

Questions:

What are your initial thoughts? How did it make you feel? What did it feel/look like to be in the position of conductor/ the audience/ or the orchestra member? What impact did different positions/changing positions have on you? The visibility of the conductor and conductor facing the orchestra rather than the audience?

Part 2

Now, we are going to go through this sequence again but this time focus on the sound, does what you hear change based on your perspective and viewpoint?

"When you are dealing with a complex challenge you have to recognize that Everybody's got their own little bit of understanding and their own knowledge about the situation."

Questions:

Did your experience change this time when you focused on the sound?
What are your thoughts on Polyphony of perspectives heard at the same time?

Exercise 2:

Leadership as self- identity (the emergent leadership identity) Ai discourse/ dominating narrative

In a minute you will hear a script based on the actual quotes of over 30 participants that had taken part in the interviews. These participants represented different genders, ethnicities, geographies and professional backgrounds. The quotes have not been modified and only linking words have been added to create a flow of the script. The voices you will hear are of two volunteers who agreed to read the script (they didn't themselves take part in the interviews).

The description then was used using Large Language Models to generate an image with an additional prompt to "close up, editorial, professional portrait photograph,

smart clothing”.

Context: This exercise was designed by synthesising the interview participants’ descriptions of what a modern leader is and the type of leadership that is required in the context of digital, inclusivity and sustainability.

Questions:

As you listen focus on the descriptions, do they resonate with your reality of a modern leader, how do they make you feel, do they inspire you in any way?
What strikes you about the image generated by Ai, think of diversity, do you relate to what you see? How does it make you feel? Is there anything that surprised you?
Make notes

Exercise 3:

Context: Leadership as a (dynamic) space marked by connections and tensions.

Quote:

The most valuable thing about digital is the CONNECTION with others!

"We integrate our own **systems. But we also integrate our values, and we integrate the way that we** look at the world and the lenses that we have."“Without trust, you just don't have anything. because trust is **the foundation of all of our interactions.**"

We are now going to shift from digital to analogue. Using this red-thread we will try to map out when we feel tension and when we feel connection between self and others working in the context of digital, inclusivity and /or sustainability.

Purpose: The purpose of this exercise is to have a bit of fun and with it focus on the space between us and outside of ourselves that is made out of connections and tensions.

XYZ and i will now demonstrate the exercise...

Outcome:

I feel tension when... (I’m witnessing superficial problem-solving that lacks understanding of a context and a bigger picture, in a presence of ego and power)

I feel connection when...(people from different disciplines come together to find a solution, when someone in the room says: me too!)

Digital

I feel tension when trying to introduce digital process automation to a paper-based team.

I feel tension when I’m the only digital lead in the room.

I feel tension when challenged on the short-term commercial value of a long-term innovation investment.

I feel connection when a team/client asks for my help
 I feel connection when I speak with other leaders who have struggled with digital adoption.
 I feel connection when people from different disciplines come together to solve a problem.

Inclusivity

I feel tension when I'm the only person of my gender/ ethnicity in the room
 I feel tension when trying to find the right language when speaking to a person from LGBTQ+ community.
 I feel tension when I witness someone being excluded on the basis of their gender/ethnicity and I'm the only one noticing it.
 I feel a connection when I can be vulnerable about my fears of failure
 I feel a connection when someone else in the room has experienced the same challenges as me
 I feel a connection when I'm in a room full of diverse people focus on solving Problems

Sustainability

I feel tension when I'm asked about the ROI of a sustainability intervention I'm introducing targets sustainability.
 I feel tension when I witness a lack of follow-through on sustainability ambitions and
 I feel tension when we apply commercial approaches to measuring value to
 I feel a connection when I don't have to explain the benefits of introducing a sustainable solution to my clients/ stakeholders...
 I feel a connection when we all work together towards the same sustainable goal.
 I feel connection when i don't have to explain why it matters
 Digital: think of the speed of technological advancements, adoption, automation, Ai, competition,
 Inclusivity: language, diversity, gender, ethnicity, justice and equity, patriarchy, relationality, other leaders
 Sustainability: bottom line, shareholders value, profit, nature,

Summarising:

The point is: Tension and connection exist together and makes up this leadership space. As we experience these we find ourselves in the entanglement of our experiences, CONNECTIONS AND TENSIONS of our own and others...
 Shared tensions create connections
 Thanking...
 What's next in my research...
 Take the red thread and wrap it round your wrist

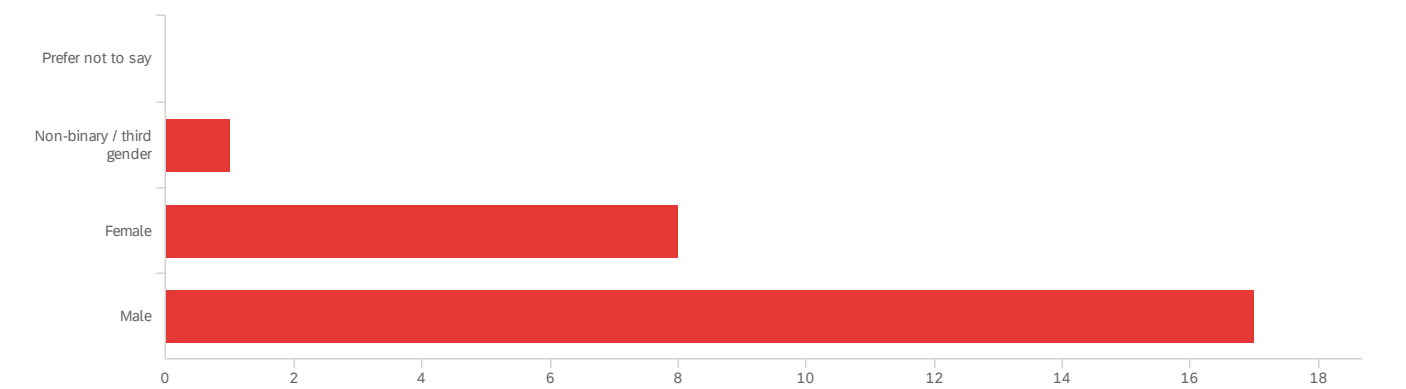
Appendix 10: Questionnaire data results

Default Report

Research Questionnaire

15 July 2025 16:01 BST

Q1 - How would you describe your gender?



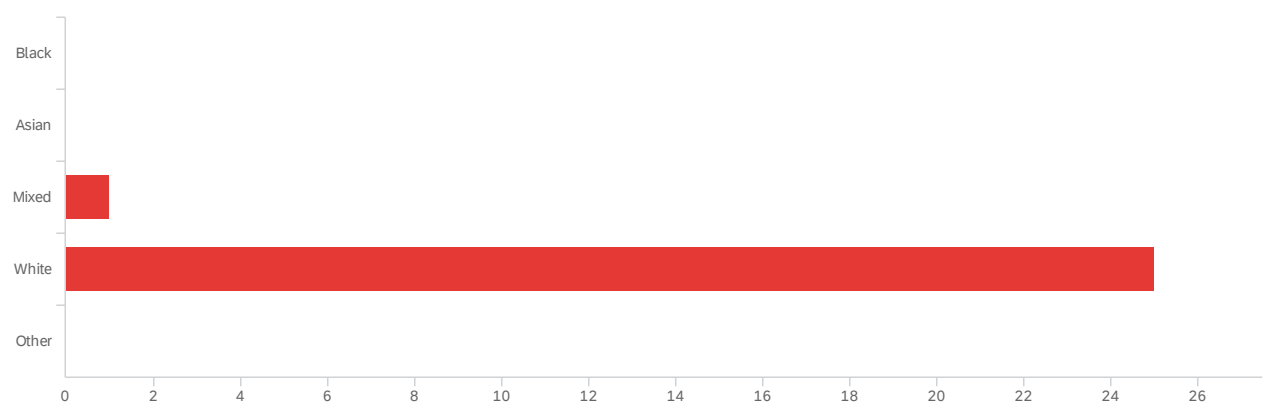
#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	How would you describe your gender?	2.00	4.00	3.62	0.56	0.31	26

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Prefer not to say	0.00% 0
2	Non-binary / third gender	3.85% 1
3	Female	30.77% 8
4	Male	65.38% 17

26

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Q2 - What is your ethnic group?

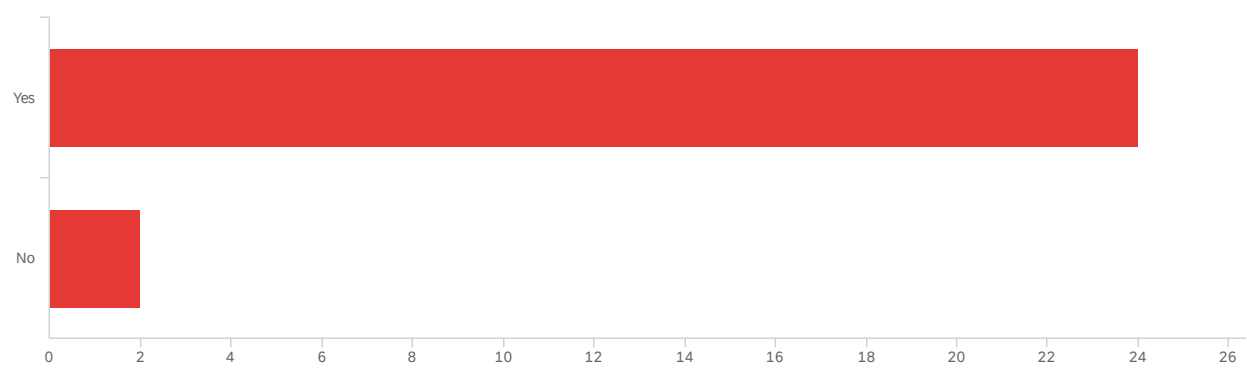


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	What is your ethnic group?	3.00	4.00	3.96	0.19	0.04	26

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Black	0.00% 0
2	Asian	0.00% 0
3	Mixed	3.85% 1
4	White	96.15% 25
5	Other	0.00% 0
		26

Showing rows 1 - 6 of 6

Q3 - Are you a leader (or an aspiring leader)?



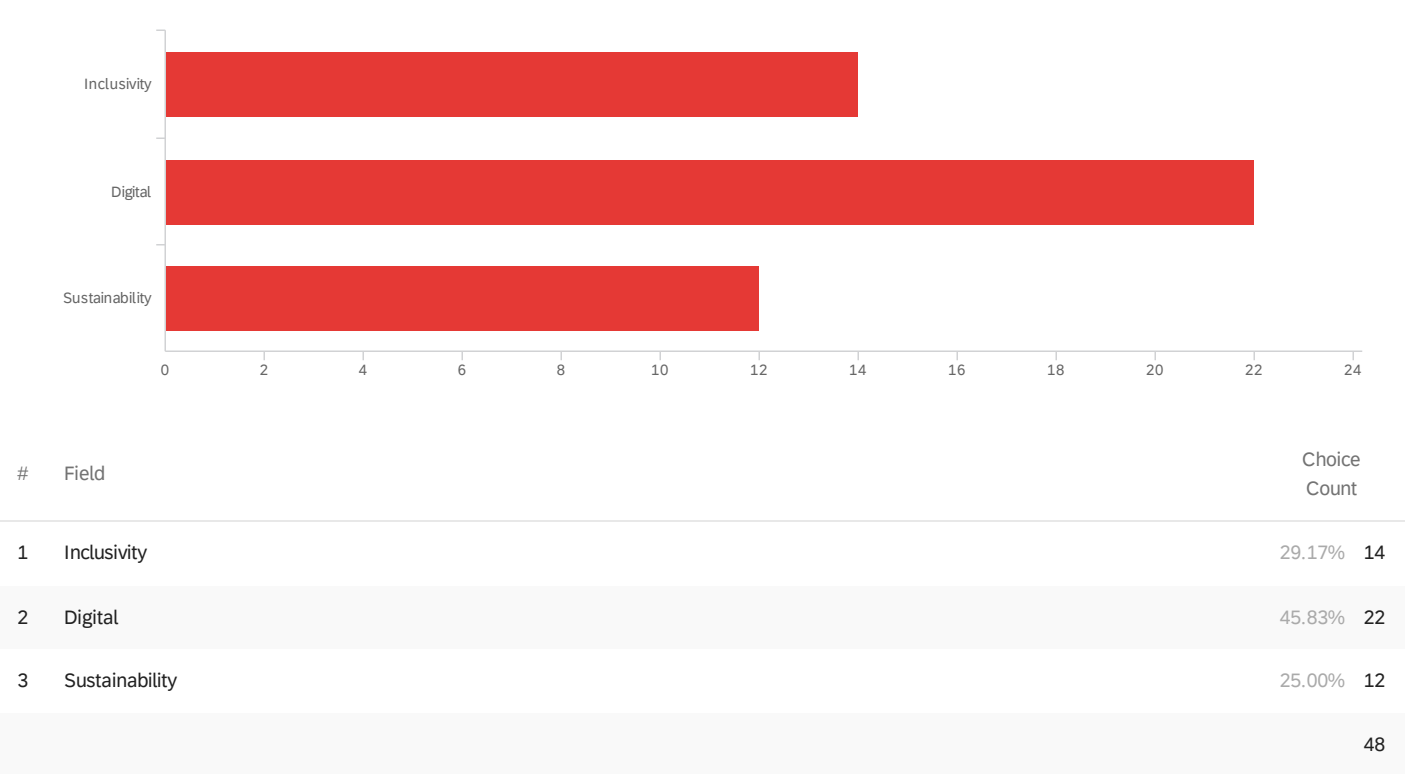
#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Are you a leader (or an aspiring leader)?	1.00	2.00	1.08	0.27	0.07	26

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Yes	92.31% 24
2	No	7.69% 2

26

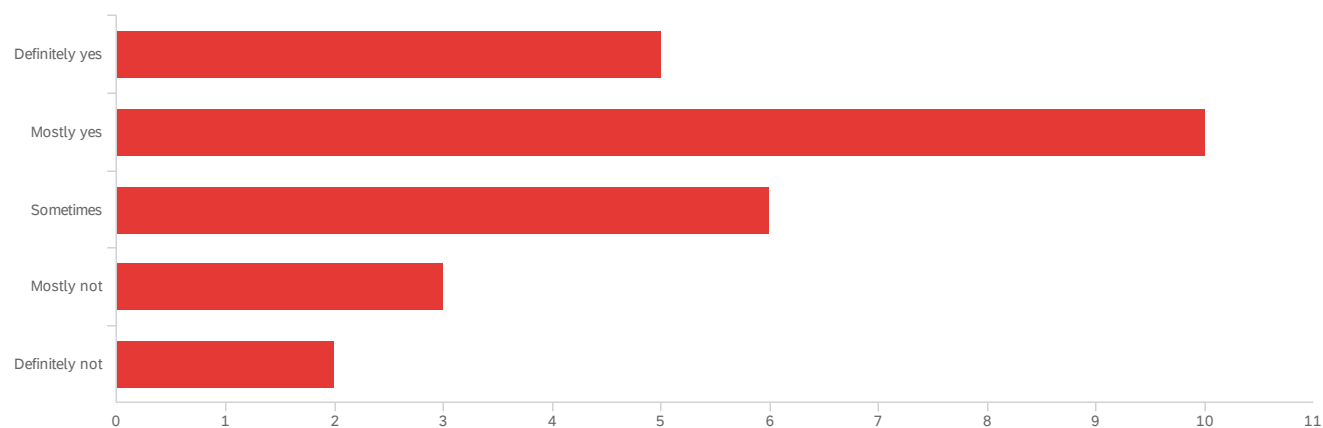
Showing rows 1 - 3 of 3

Q4 - Which of the disciplines do you work within (you can select more than one)?



Showing rows 1 - 4 of 4

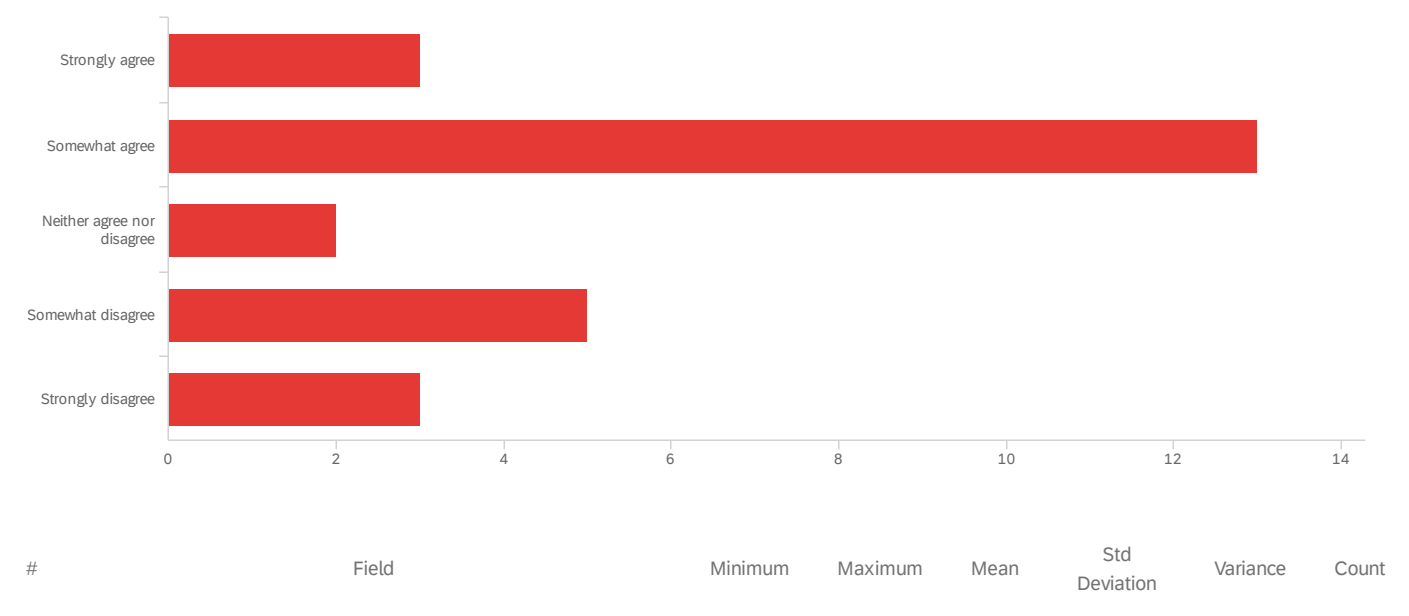
Q5 - Are you seeing that inclusivity, digital and sustainability are receiving equal focus in your organisation?



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Are you seeing that inclusivity, digital and sustainability are receiving equal focus in your organisation?	1.00	5.00	2.50	1.15	1.33	26

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Definitely yes	19.23% 5
2	Mostly yes	38.46% 10
3	Sometimes	23.08% 6
4	Mostly not	11.54% 3
5	Definitely not	7.69% 2
		26

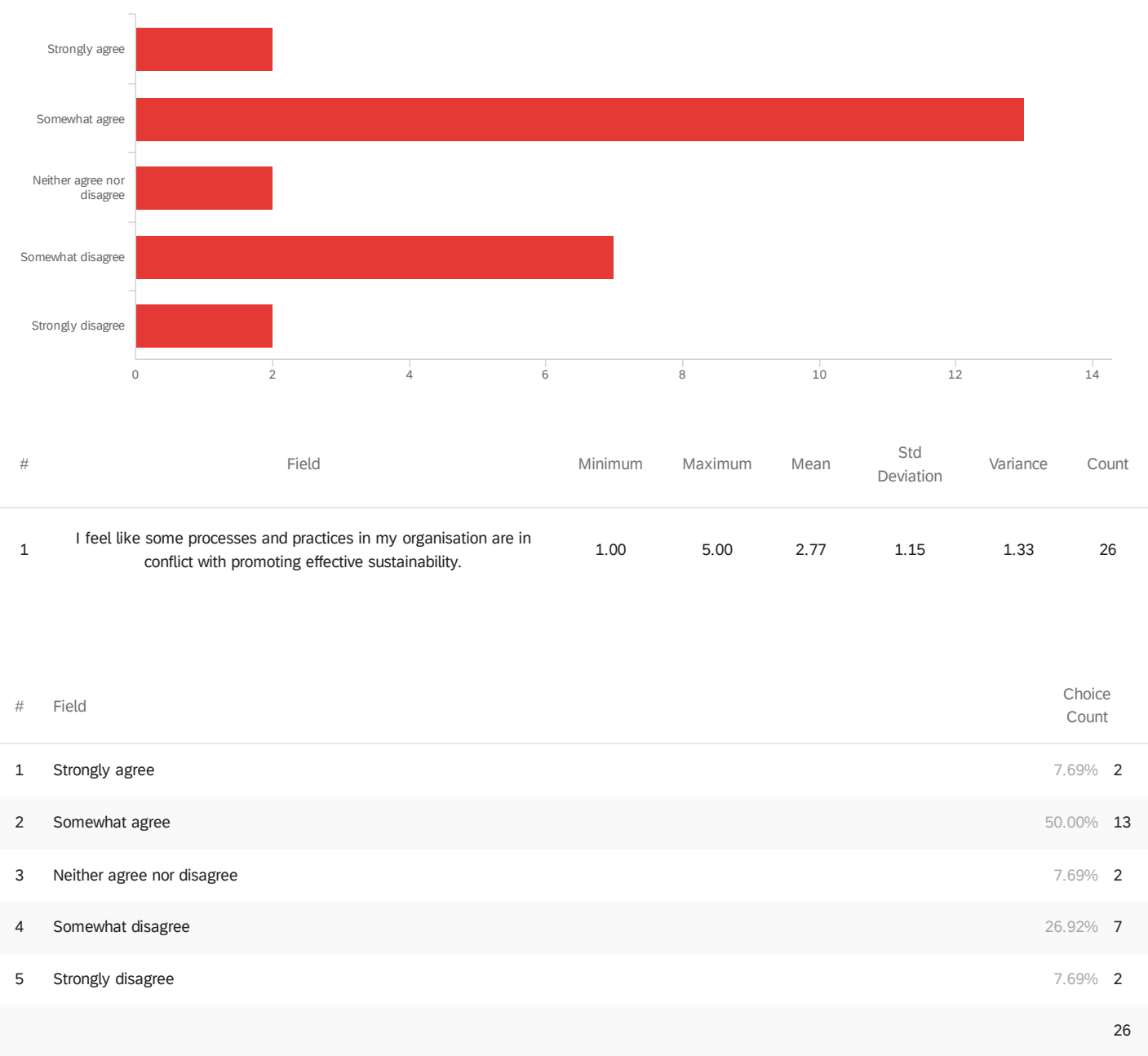
Q6 - I feel like some processes and practices in my organisation are in conflict with promoting effective inclusivity.



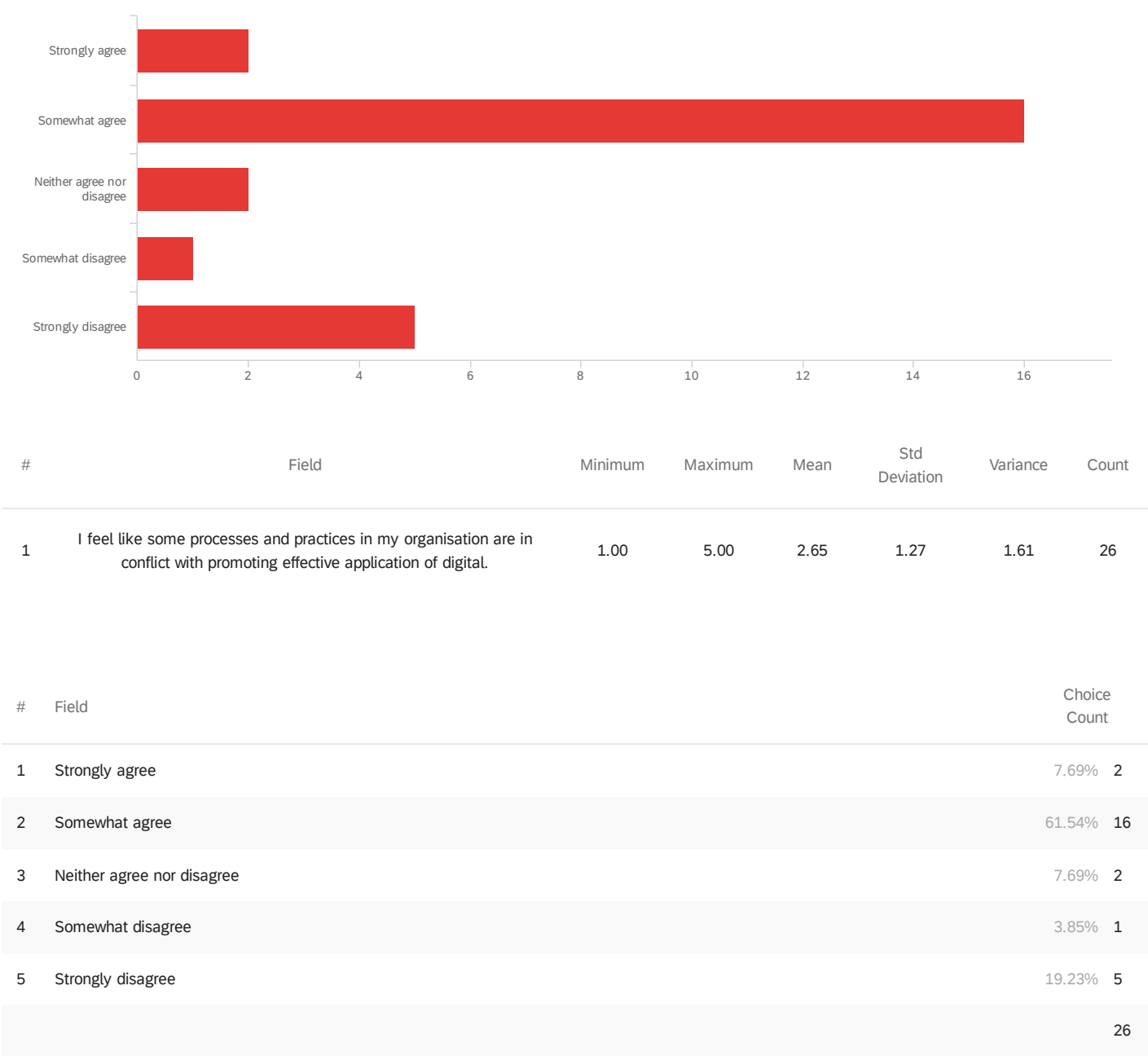
#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	I feel like some processes and practices in my organisation are in conflict with promoting effective inclusivity.	1.00	5.00	2.69	1.23	1.52	26

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Strongly agree	11.54% 3
2	Somewhat agree	50.00% 13
3	Neither agree nor disagree	7.69% 2
4	Somewhat disagree	19.23% 5
5	Strongly disagree	11.54% 3
		26

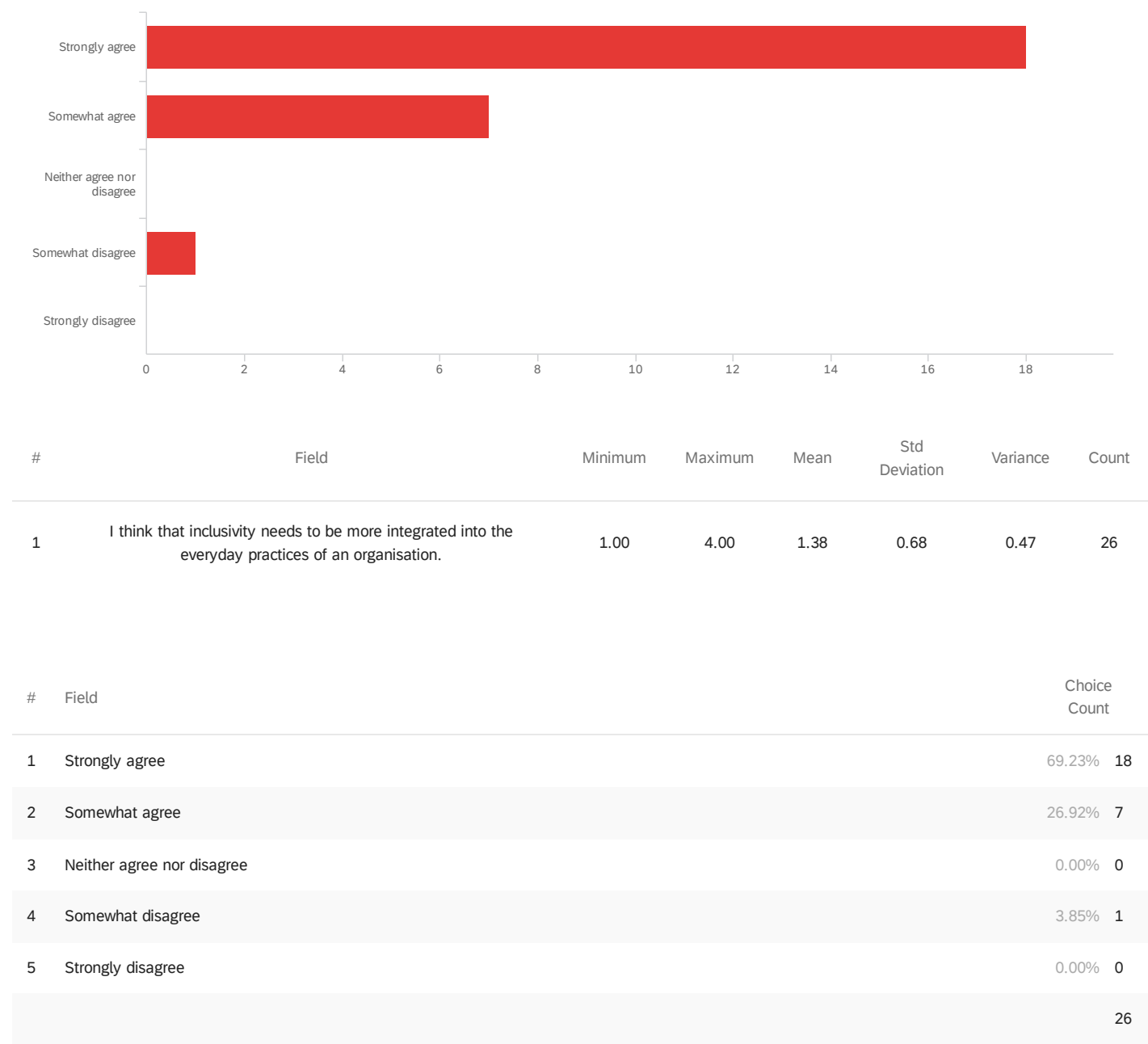
Q7 - I feel like some processes and practices in my organisation are in conflict with promoting effective sustainability.



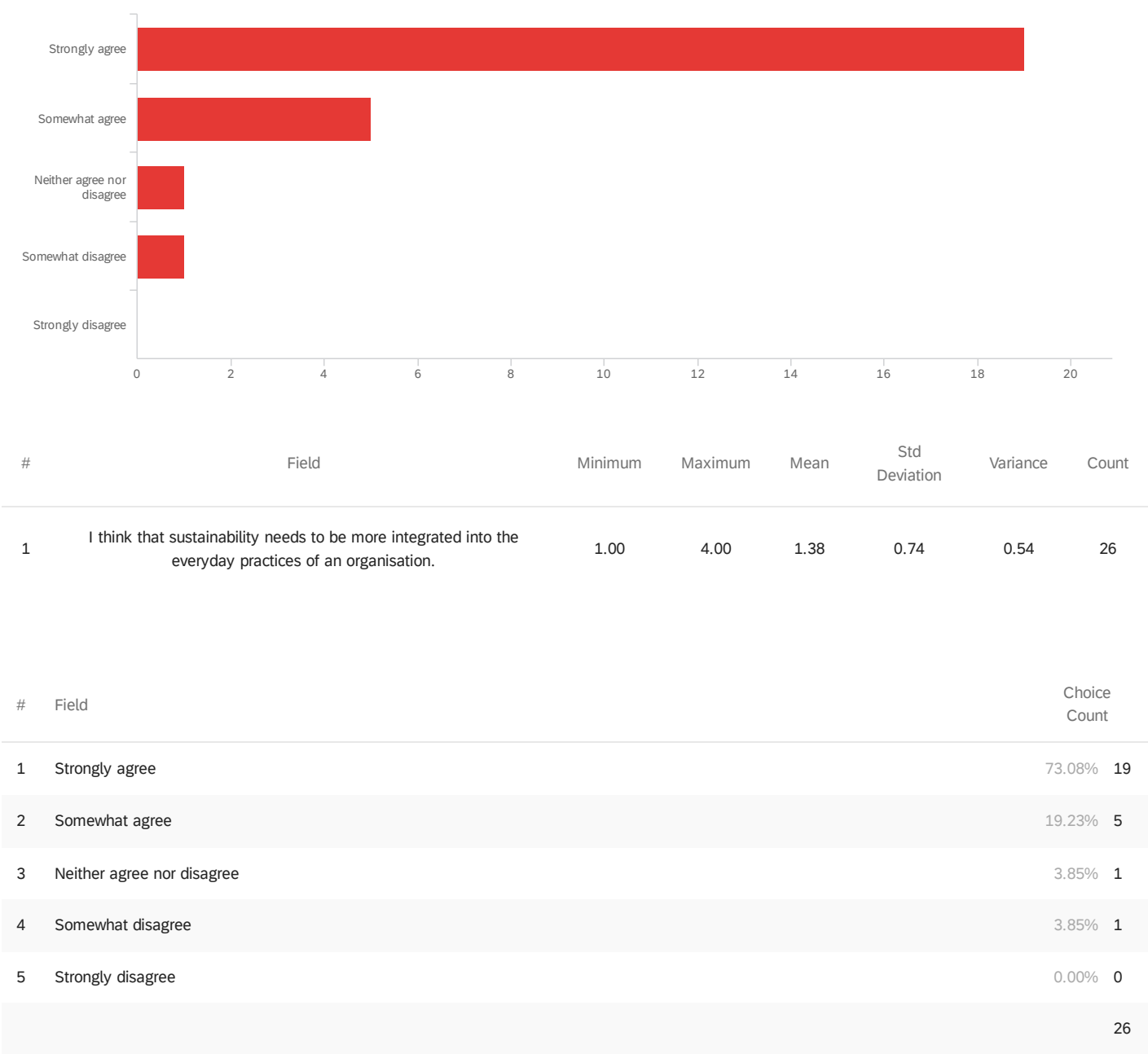
Q8 - I feel like some processes and practices in my organisation are in conflict with promoting effective application of digital.



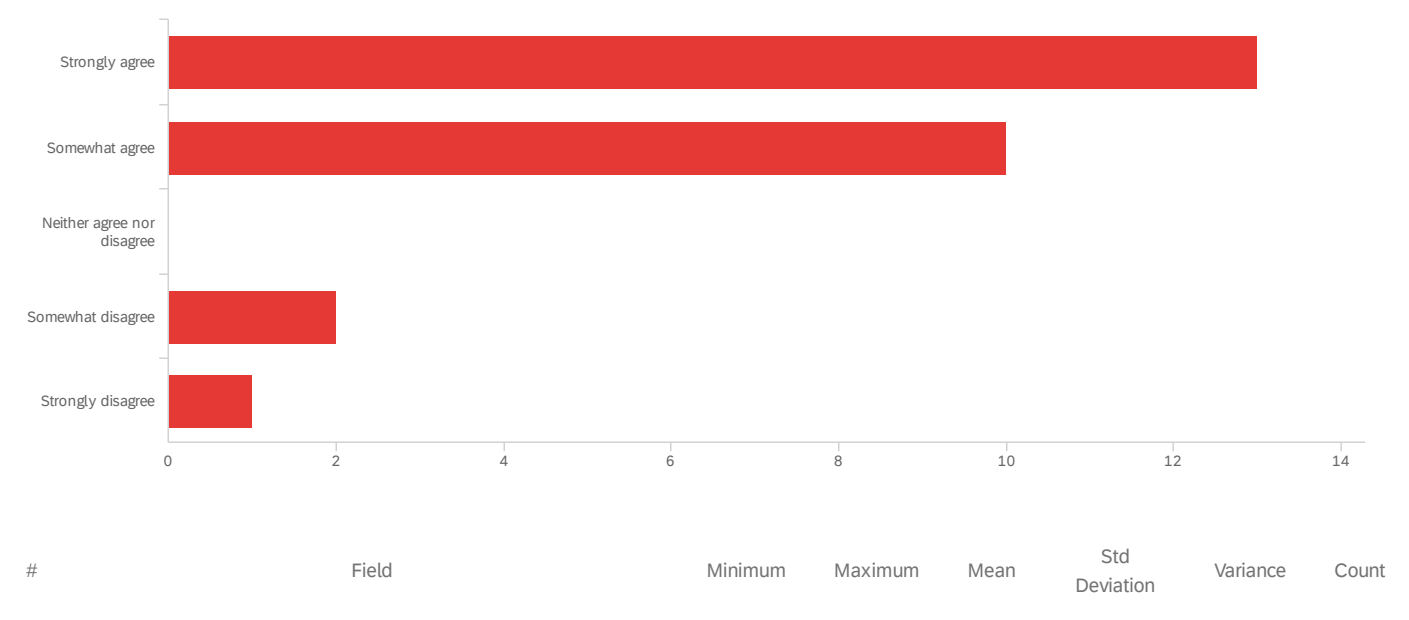
Q9 - I think that inclusivity needs to be more integrated into the everyday practices of an organisation.



Q10 - I think that sustainability needs to be more integrated into the everyday practices of an organisation.



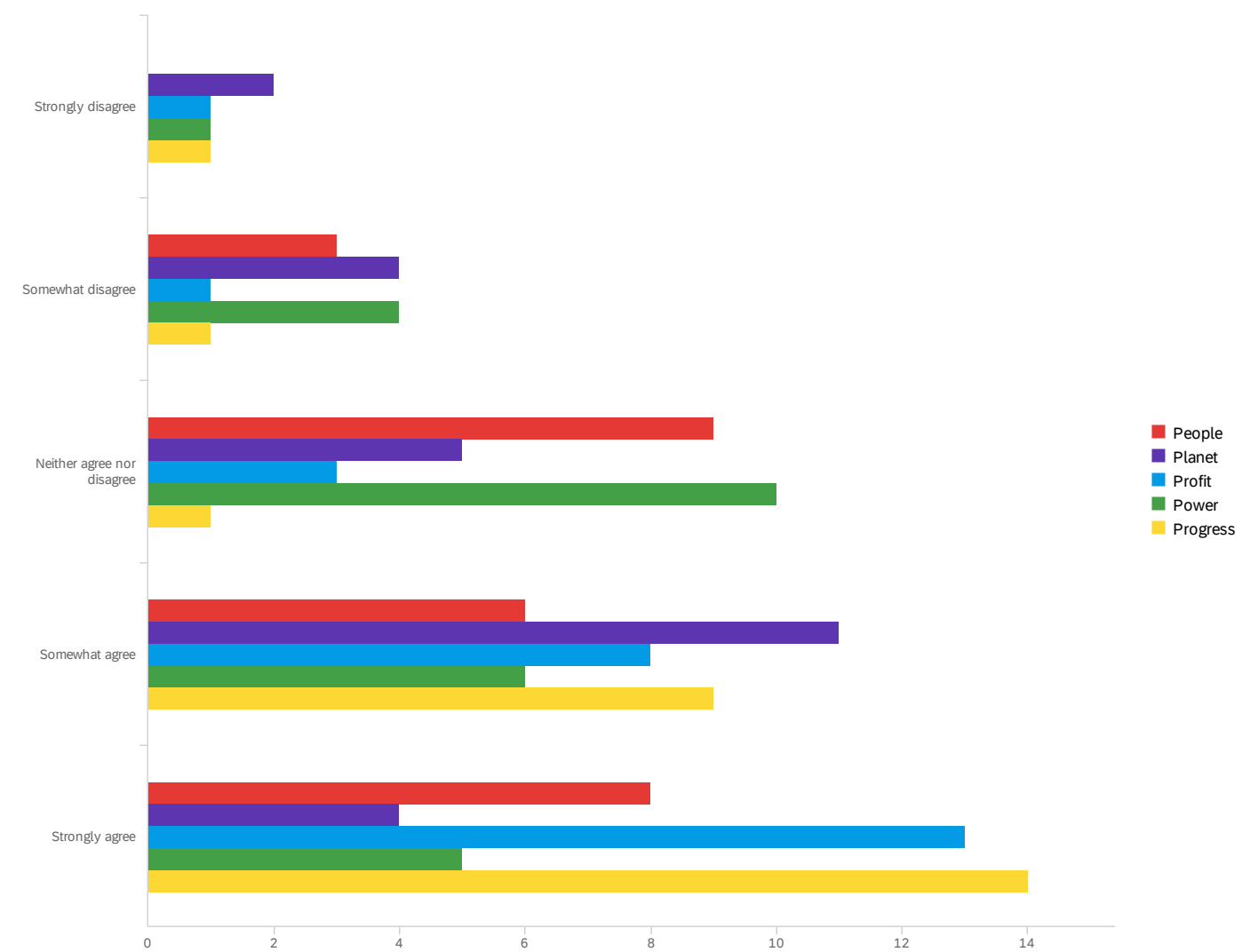
Q11 - I think that digital needs to be more integrated into the everyday practices of an organisation.



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	I think that digital needs to be more integrated into the everyday practices of an organisation.	1.00	5.00	1.77	1.05	1.10	26

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Strongly agree	50.00% 13
2	Somewhat agree	38.46% 10
3	Neither agree nor disagree	0.00% 0
4	Somewhat disagree	7.69% 2
5	Strongly disagree	3.85% 1
		26

Q12 - What in your opinion are the driving values of digital in your organisation?

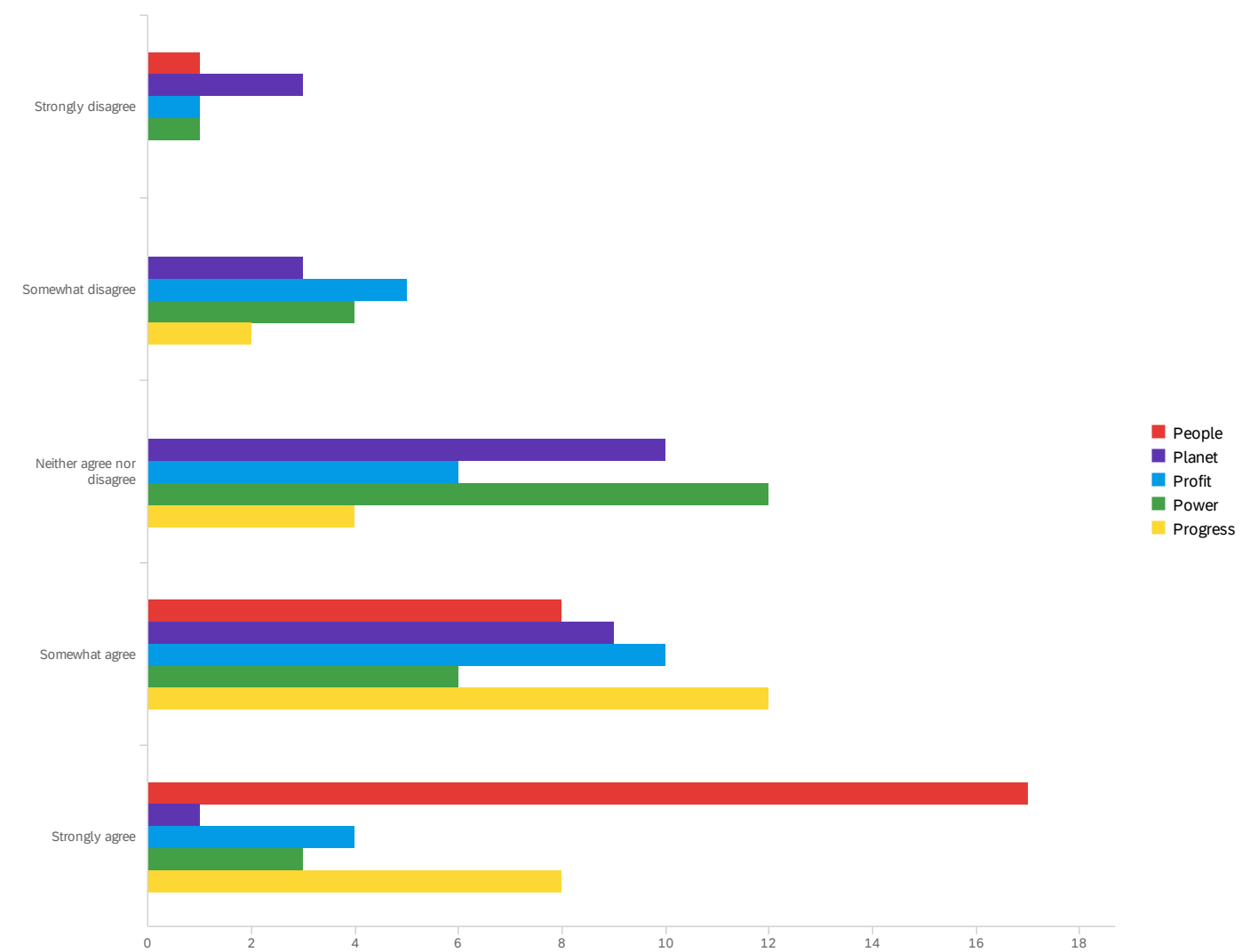


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	People	2.00	5.00	3.73	1.02	1.04	26
2	Planet	1.00	5.00	3.42	1.15	1.32	26
3	Profit	1.00	5.00	4.19	1.04	1.08	26
4	Power	1.00	5.00	3.38	1.08	1.16	26
5	Progress	1.00	5.00	4.31	0.99	0.98	26

#	Field	Strongly disagree		Somewhat disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat agree		Strongly agree		Total
1	People	0.00%	0	11.54%	3	34.62%	9	23.08%	6	30.77%	8	26
2	Planet	7.69%	2	15.38%	4	19.23%	5	42.31%	11	15.38%	4	26
3	Profit	3.85%	1	3.85%	1	11.54%	3	30.77%	8	50.00%	13	26
4	Power	3.85%	1	15.38%	4	38.46%	10	23.08%	6	19.23%	5	26
5	Progress	3.85%	1	3.85%	1	3.85%	1	34.62%	9	53.85%	14	26

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Q13 - What in your opinion are the driving values of inclusivity in your organisation?

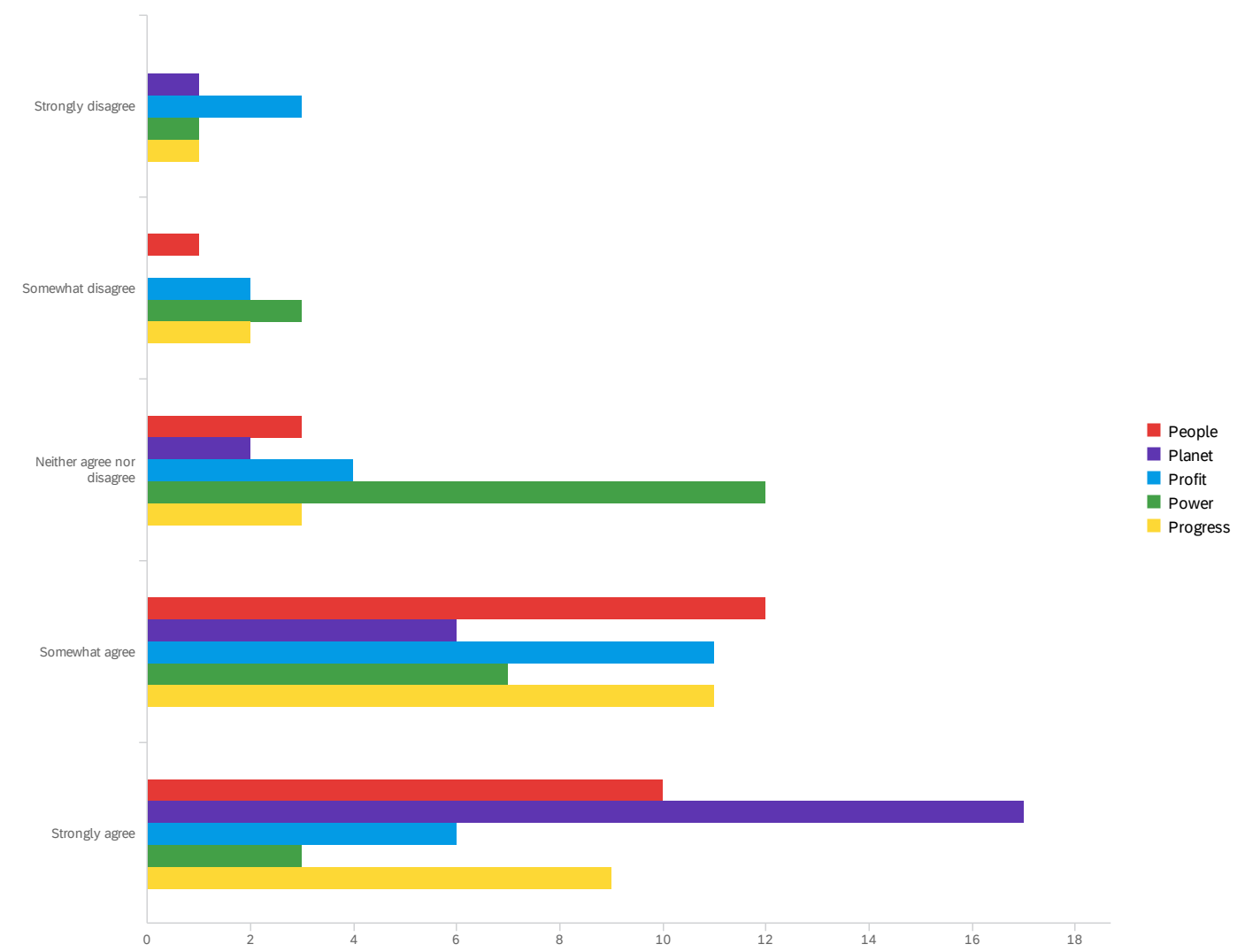


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	People	1.00	5.00	4.54	0.84	0.71	26
2	Planet	1.00	5.00	3.08	1.03	1.07	26
3	Profit	1.00	5.00	3.42	1.08	1.17	26
4	Power	1.00	5.00	3.23	0.97	0.95	26
5	Progress	2.00	5.00	4.00	0.88	0.77	26

#	Field	Strongly disagree		Somewhat disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat agree		Strongly agree		Total
1	People	3.85%	1	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	30.77%	8	65.38%	17	26
2	Planet	11.54%	3	11.54%	3	38.46%	10	34.62%	9	3.85%	1	26
3	Profit	3.85%	1	19.23%	5	23.08%	6	38.46%	10	15.38%	4	26
4	Power	3.85%	1	15.38%	4	46.15%	12	23.08%	6	11.54%	3	26
5	Progress	0.00%	0	7.69%	2	15.38%	4	46.15%	12	30.77%	8	26

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Q14 - What in your opinion are the driving values of sustainability in your organisation?

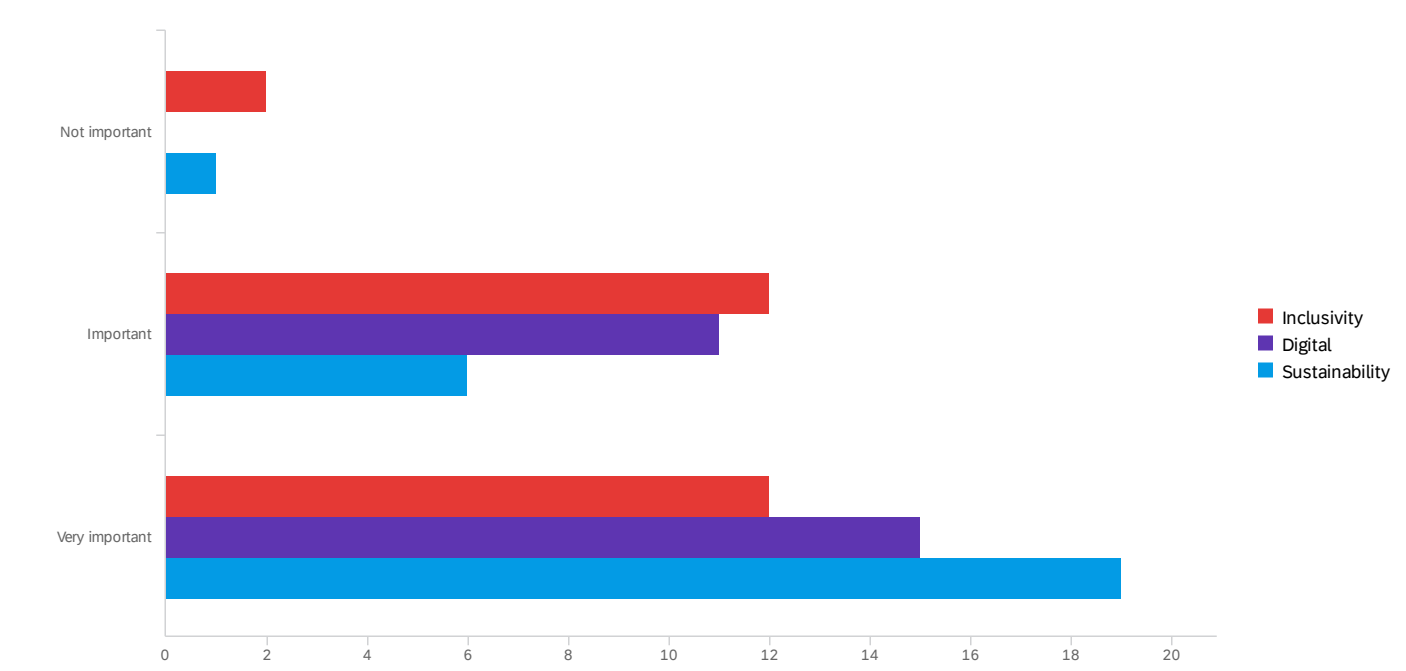


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	People	2.00	5.00	4.19	0.79	0.62	26
2	Planet	1.00	5.00	4.46	0.93	0.86	26
3	Profit	1.00	5.00	3.58	1.25	1.55	26
4	Power	1.00	5.00	3.31	0.95	0.91	26
5	Progress	1.00	5.00	3.96	1.06	1.11	26

#	Field	Strongly disagree		Somewhat disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Somewhat agree		Strongly agree		Total
1	People	0.00%	0	3.85%	1	11.54%	3	46.15%	12	38.46%	10	26
2	Planet	3.85%	1	0.00%	0	7.69%	2	23.08%	6	65.38%	17	26
3	Profit	11.54%	3	7.69%	2	15.38%	4	42.31%	11	23.08%	6	26
4	Power	3.85%	1	11.54%	3	46.15%	12	26.92%	7	11.54%	3	26
5	Progress	3.85%	1	7.69%	2	11.54%	3	42.31%	11	34.62%	9	26

Showing rows 1 - 5 of 5

Q15 - Rate the importance of the following in your organisation:

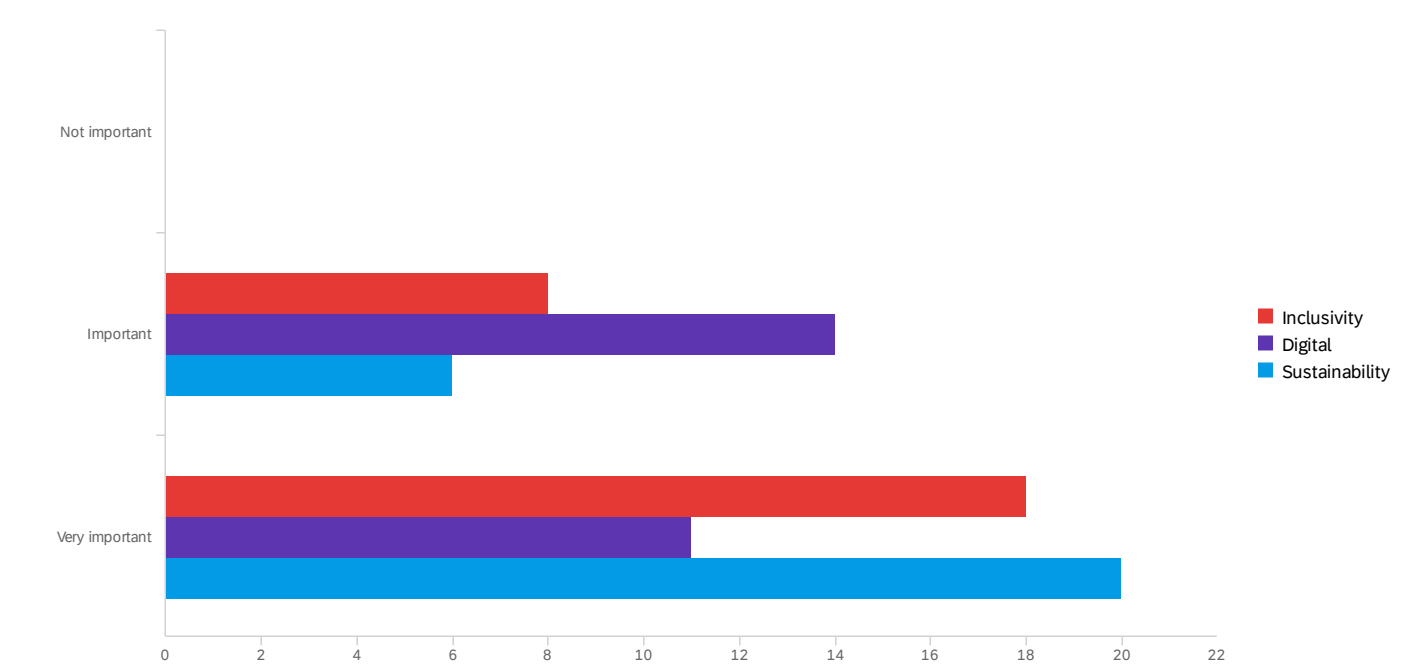


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Inclusivity	1.00	3.00	2.38	0.62	0.39	26
2	Digital	2.00	3.00	2.58	0.49	0.24	26
3	Sustainability	1.00	3.00	2.69	0.54	0.29	26

#	Field	Not important		Important		Very important		Total
1	Inclusivity	7.69%	2	46.15%	12	46.15%	12	26
2	Digital	0.00%	0	42.31%	11	57.69%	15	26
3	Sustainability	3.85%	1	23.08%	6	73.08%	19	26

Showing rows 1 - 3 of 3

Q16 - Rate the importance of the following to you personally:

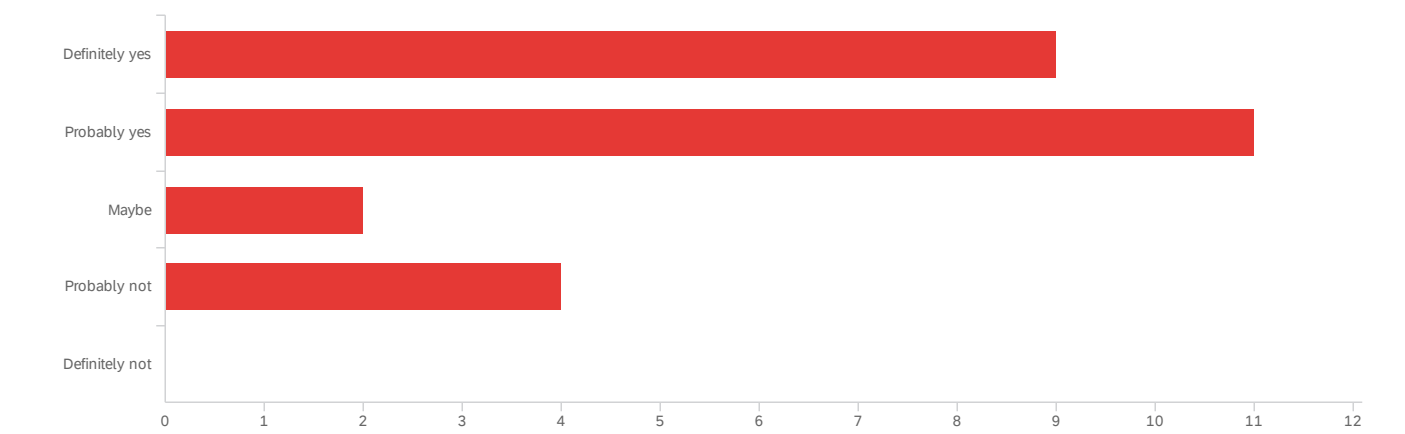


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Inclusivity	2.00	3.00	2.69	0.46	0.21	26
2	Digital	2.00	3.00	2.44	0.50	0.25	25
3	Sustainability	2.00	3.00	2.77	0.42	0.18	26

#	Field	Not important		Important		Very important		Total
1	Inclusivity	0.00%	0	30.77%	8	69.23%	18	26
2	Digital	0.00%	0	56.00%	14	44.00%	11	25
3	Sustainability	0.00%	0	23.08%	6	76.92%	20	26

Showing rows 1 - 3 of 3

Q17 - Should modern leaders be equally focused on inclusivity, digital and sustainability?

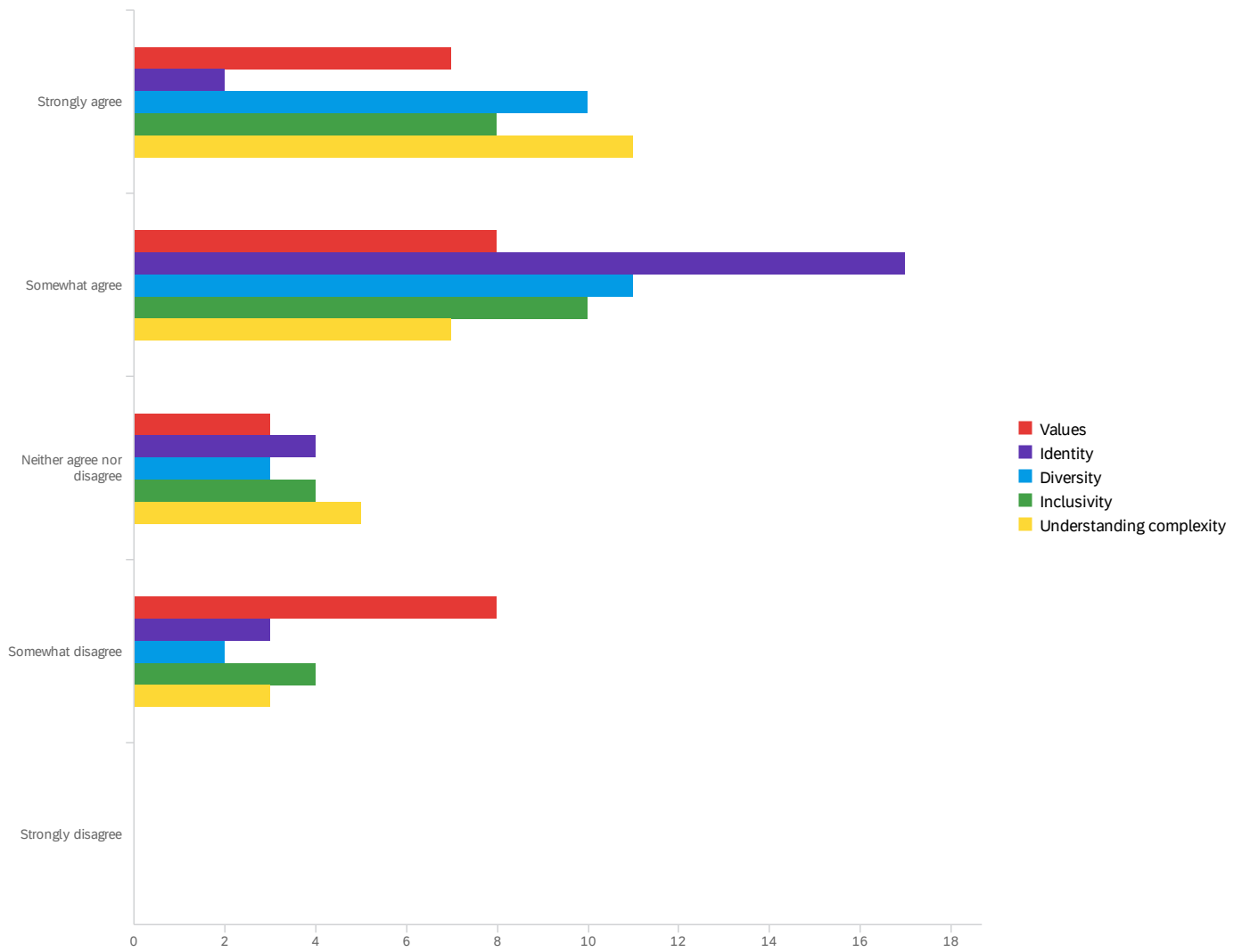


#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Should modern leaders be equally focused on inclusivity, digital and sustainability?	1.00	4.00	2.04	1.02	1.04	26

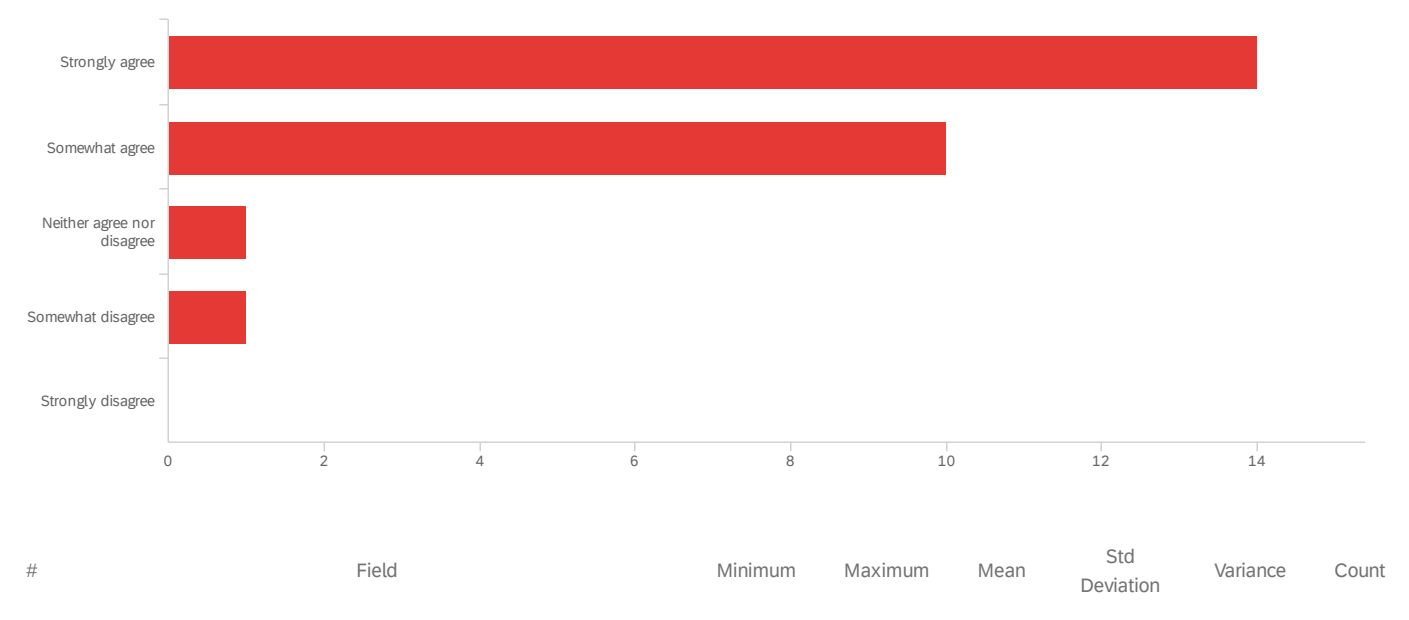
#	Field	Choice Count
1	Definitely yes	34.62% 9
2	Probably yes	42.31% 11
3	Maybe	7.69% 2
4	Probably not	15.38% 4
5	Definitely not	0.00% 0
		26

Showing rows 1 - 6 of 6

Q18 - We are experiencing a leadership crisis in:



Q19 - We need a new definition of who leaders 'are' and what leaders 'do', in order to effectively address the rising challenges in digital, inclusivity and sustainability.



#	Field	Choice Count
1	Strongly agree	53.85% 14
2	Somewhat agree	38.46% 10
3	Neither agree nor disagree	3.85% 1
4	Somewhat disagree	3.85% 1
5	Strongly disagree	0.00% 0
		26

Showing rows 1 - 6 of 6

End of Report

Appendix 11: Millanote in-vivo coding

Appendix 12: MSc Research Project Overview

Does leadership in construction need to be deconstructed?



A study of gender imbalance in leadership and
its impact on innovation and sustainability in the
UK construction industry.

Ola Gwozdz

Abstract

The construction industry, which is the third fastest growing sector in the UK but with one of the lowest productivity performances, is now looking towards technology adoption and innovation as a way to reinvent itself. This historically male-dominated industry is also under a lot of pressure to adopt a more relevant understanding towards gender diversity and leadership. This research explores the relationship between poor performance in innovation, long-term sustainability, and the lack of gender diversity at the leadership level. This study further looks at the current leadership and innovation models adopted by the industry, in order to deconstruct them and propose an alternative fit for a modern organisation. By applying a multi-method interpretive, inductive approach through extensive literature review, an online survey and qualitative interviews from the viewpoint of female leaders, this research reveals the underlying gender dynamics that govern the industry. It identifies key reasons behind the under-representation and low retention of female leaders in the industry and its following impact on the mental health crisis and sustainability within Construction. This study contributes to literature by expanding our existing knowledge beyond binary gender concepts within leadership.

Keywords: Gender Diversity, Leadership, Innovation, Sustainability, Action Bias, Innovation Theatre

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