



## MODELLING OF LENIENCY IN LEADERSHIP IN THE FACE OF HARDSHIPS

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This study evaluates the hardships that are experienced when engaging in leadership activities. It explores how especially middle managers employ self-leadership and express self-compassion when facing work-related hardship events. The empirical data consists of seven interviews of middle managers, which were analyzed using the grounded theory method. The study shows how middle managers generate leniency in leadership by beginning with emotional distress and ending with restored peace of mind. The results identify the self-leadership strategies employed to endure the experienced hardships. Work context and principles of acting regulate the formation of leniency in leadership. The outcome is featured by putting one's mind to rest and learning from the experience. The means to lead oneself and to be kind to oneself interconnect in leniency in leadership, which is theorized as the interface of self-leadership strategies and self-compassion as a special form of self-directive behavior.

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**I**nsecurity has increased in the labor market due to factors such as global competition, economic crisis, downsizing, and changes in work. For example Caughron and Mumford (2012) observe that those remaining at work must take on a greater burden. Moreover, the nature of work is becoming more intensive and temporary, creating a “survival game” atmosphere. Any successful phenomenon in work life, contrasted to the overall challenges, seems especially interesting in this situation. For example, research in the fields of positive psychology and positive

organizational behavior (POB) has revealed the sources of employee well-being at work and successful work processes. According to Froman (2010), applying the principles of positive scholarships to work life helps employees to adapt to insecurity and retain self-confidence by promoting joy, gratitude, hope and interest. The organizational research in the fields of leadership, change and psychology highlights the importance of focusing on affirmative aspects such as improvements, strengths, resources, optimism and capabilities—essentially, the need for people to hold both positive and possibility-based outlooks (Spreitzer, 2006; Youssef & Luthans, 2007). However, the majority of the research concerning organizations still concentrates on eliminating the problems (Roberts, 2006), rather than on recognizing the potential of strengths and capacities to enhance work life (Luthans, 2002; Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007).

Most people assume that any person in the midst of pressures in life, including work, develops the positive means of leading himself or herself through the hardships. This study explores the constructive methods of middle managers' leading acts, which we consider as formulating and communicating change ideas. We believe producing and communicating change ideas is available for anyone who possesses relevant proficiency, although it is the managers' responsibility to implement these change ideas. We are interested in how middle managers, in the face of hardships, perceive self-leadership and self-compassion in their works as managers when engaging in leading acts, and how they encourage their subordinates to use their proficiency to create change ideas.

Middle managers represent an important group in organizations and work societies, because they occupy a critical role between strategic and front-line management. For example, as organizations compete, change or learn, they tend to delegate broader sets of responsibilities down to middle managers (Currie & Procter, 2001). In addition, these managers are exposed to situations that are complex in nature, yet very little is known about how these issues are dealt with. DeChurch, Hiller, Murase, Doty and Salas (2010) found that only a minority of organizational research over the previous decades has focused on middle managers. As organizations become more flattened and geographically dispersed, the role of middle managers' is elevating as they are in charge of connecting the strategic and operational levels of the organization (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Kanter, 1982). However, it seems that whatever causes the change or challenge setting the conditions for leading acts, middle managers are challenged to formulate and communicate change ideas.

Quy (2001) identifies four unique characteristics of middle managers: entrepreneur, communicator, therapist, and tightrope artist. As entrepreneurs, middle managers envisage and communicate change using their insight of the operative surface, as well as encourage employees to produce change ideas. As communicators, middle managers customize the top management messages to audiences utilizing their large networks when information and action is needed. As therapists, leaders offer support and sincere caring to their staff and communicate with them in a straightforward manner. As tightrope artists, middle managers balance between change and continuity by being aware of the consequences of change that is either too rapid or too slow (Quy, 2001).

This study explores middle managers' work through the theoretical lenses of self-leadership and self-compassion as the compounded experiential phenomena. Following a phenomenological formulation, a phenomenon is considered experiential if it is structured by a personal conscious way of giving meaning to a life situation to which a person is related (Perttula, 2008). Hence, in the authors' view, being experiential phenomena, self-leadership and self-compassion have a conscious subject, the middle manager, who is intentionally directed to

himself or herself and to the actual leadership settings as intentional objects. In those experiential relations, the intentional objects are understood by a middle manager as a conscious subject (Perttula, 2008). Consequently, through the concepts of self-leadership and self-compassion, it is possible to gain both self- and situation-related knowledge about middle managers leading acts in experienced hardships. Empirically, the study is open to discovering all self- and situation-related hardships that middle managers face at work, if those hardships appear experientially significant to them. The term “leniency in leadership” is used to reflect the totality of successful living through the hardships.

### **Self-leadership and Self-compassion Compounded**

Self-leadership refers to personal strategies that anyone can apply. These strategies are often divided into three groups: behavior-focused, natural reward, and constructive thought (Manz & Sims, 2001; Neck & Houghton, 2006). First, as behavior-focused strategies, self-leadership guides the processes in which individuals affect themselves to be motivated and oriented to perform, while constantly giving themselves feedback on their performance; these processes include self-observation, self-goal setting, self-reward, self-punishment, and self-cueing (Houghton, Dowley & DiLiello, 2012; Neck & Houghton, 2006). Behavior-focused strategies orient their consciousness to control the direction of their acts. Furthermore, they set goals for their action and consider the possibility of rewards or sanctions while trying to reduce ineffective behavior (Neck & Manz, 2010). Second, as natural reward strategies, self-leadership helps people to find the task more enjoyable, either by building more pleasant aspects into the task or by focusing on the pleasant features of the task (Houghton et al., 2012). Third, as constructive thought strategies, self-leadership includes reshaping mental images to have a positive impact on performance by removing dysfunctional beliefs and engaging in positive self-talk (Manz & Sims, 2001; Neck & Houghton, 2006).

Froman (2010) differentiates self-leadership as a personal trait and as an organizational resource to create self-directive, productive and creative employees. The core of self-leadership is often seen as self-directive emotional intelligence and consciously directing oneself to strive for meaningful goals (D’Intino et al., 2007). At the organizational level, self-leadership stresses the vitality to create settings in which the employee’s abilities are noticed and development is encouraged (Carson & King, 2005, as cited in Wilson, 2011). Either way, self-leadership capitalizes on self-awareness and self-reflection. According to Avolio, Griffith, Wernsing and Walumbwa (2010), being self-reflective is a state of awareness of what is going on, interpreting it, and considering the lessons learned. Self-reflection is a tool for finding meaningfulness at work and making improvements to the work climate (Avolio et al., 2010). It implies curiosity and honesty toward oneself, as well as an urge to learn from oneself without any initial judgment. Self-reflection is adaptive if it enhances personal success and helps others to succeed. On the contrary, high self-awareness in lack of authenticity may lead to harmful anxiety (Avolio et al., 2010).

Neck and Houghton (2006) regard self-leadership as a normative model instead of a descriptive model. The presented models of self-leadership as strategies depict what are understood as self-based intentional acts, i.e. the experientially grounded strategies to lead people including oneself as a leader. In this research, self-leadership refers to the experiential strategies utilized in leadership dilemmas. The concept of self-leadership covers a person’s

awareness that all the strategic means to cope with the hardships in work settings are bound to intentional relations of “the experiencing self” and “the leadership situation to be experienced.”

The concept that is fruitfully associated with self-leadership is self-compassion; a healthy way of relating to one's suffering (Neff, 2003a). Self-compassion originates in Eastern philosophy and Buddha psychology, where being imperfect is part of a spiritual living (Neff, 2003a; Gilbert, 2010). This study's authors agree with Neff (2003b) that many psychological theories display individuals as self-centered in an egoistic manner, but in reality, people tend to be more critical toward themselves than toward other people. Similarly, Gilbert (2010) observes that people are apt to think more about how they treat the people around them than about themselves. Neff (2003a) points out that the same way people relate to other people's misery with understanding, being self-compassionate implies being tuned into one's own suffering and responding to it with kindness.

Self-compassion has three dimensions: (1) treating oneself kindly in the face of distress by engaging in soothing and comforting oneself; (2) recognizing that suffering is a natural part of life, which builds up a sense of belonging; and (3) mindfully confronting one's painful emotions (Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts & Chen, 2009; Neff, 2003a). These dimensions form three dichotomies: self-kindness vs. self-criticism, common humanity vs. isolation, and mindfulness vs. over-identification (Neff, 2003a). Self-kindness refers to an open-heartedness toward one's own suffering while reducing self-criticism and judgment of one's mistakes (Neff, Kirkpatrick & Rude, 2007a). Common humanity signifies the human life as imperfect and helps to mindfully confront unpleasant emotions instead of pushing them away or being melodramatic in one's suffering. Mindfulness promotes finding distance from the personal emotions and thus controlling them (Neff, 2003a; Neff et al., 2007a).

Self-compassion is not bound to a personality structure, even though it appears evident that some people are more resilient than others in dealing with hardships (Bonanno, 2004). Self-compassion is the capability to find meaningfulness, sense of belonging, hope and calmness during hard times (Neff et al., 2007b). It is about not continuing to live in the shadows of one's misfortunes and failures, but being productive and satisfied with life (Birnie et al., 2010; Leary et al., 2007).

Unlike in self-leadership, the focus of self-compassion is on the negative life occasions, e.g. hardships, difficulties, sufferings and losses. Hence, self-compassion is featured by the distinctive, positive ways to be directed to oneself in or after the harmful life situations. By considering the concepts of self-leadership and self-compassion simultaneously, the focus is set on the constructive experiential strategies used when engaging in leading acts, in order to manage hurtful situations in such a way that people learn to appreciate themselves in a more positive or “life-sustainable” fashion. Therefore, “leniency in leadership” is the process in which self-leadership and self-compassion are compounded.

## Methods

### Research Strategy

Since the research for this study involved the real-life experiences of self-leadership and self-compassion, it followed the strategy of inductive-deductive grounded theory. Much of the self-leadership research (see Houghton & Neck, 2002) and self-compassion research (e.g. Neff, 2003ab) has been built on the tradition of measuring attributes. As Suddaby (2006) states,

grounded theory is not meant to ignore the existing research, but to be aware of its influence in generating new knowledge. Our aim is to explore, according to qualitative research logic, how middle managers' experiences manifest the phenomena of self-leadership and self-compassion when they were called upon to formulate and successfully communicate their own situationally determined change ideas. This study associates the real-life experiences of self-compassion with the self-leadership strategies to interpret the leading acts in these challenging situations.

## Sample

The study participants were required to have at least one year of work experience as a middle manager and at least two subordinates. The middle managers operated within the organizational structure at least one hierarchical level up from the employees and one level down from the top management (e.g. CEO, executives). The abbreviation "MM" is used for middle managers throughout this paper. Interviewees were sought using snowball sampling and a motivation letter. The interviewees worked in public-sector, private-sector and non-profit organizations. The seven interviewees, managers engaged in leading acts, had at least two years' experience; the number of direct reports ranged from 4 to 300. All participants had responsibilities upward in the organizational hierarchy. Four of them had previously performed tasks belonging to a lower position within the same organization; one still did so alongside the present position. Two participants had recently resigned from their middle manager tasks; therefore, their interviews focused on their former employment.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews (Patton, 1990) that contained two main themes: (1) self-leadership strategies the MMs use in their work and expressing self-kindness in work settings, and (2) everyday work situations that had been experienced as difficulties, failures or hardships. The interviewees were asked to describe the work situations in detail, tell about the emotions and thoughts awakened by the situations, and describe how they set their minds to rest after these situations. To obtain the optimal data variation needed in grounded theory research, positive incidents in everyday work situations were also solicited using the same three-step logic. These incidents were the key elements that connected the MMs' thoughts, emotions, reactions and perceptions covering the whole time sphere of the perceived hardships or failures to the antecedents of experiential self-leadership and self-compassionate behavior. The interviews were flexible in order to focus on the areas that were significant to each interviewee.

## Procedures

The grounded theory method formulated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) was followed in the analysis, with certain deviations. Selective sampling was applied in lieu of theoretical sampling, due to geographical distances and time limits. In selective sampling, data collection is limited to a certain time period, and subjects are decided beforehand (Backmann & Kyngäs, 1999; Sandelowski, 1995). On that account, data analysis and data collection were not simultaneous. While the selectivity challenges the saturation and theoretical form of the research, this method fits the exploratory goals of this research. Moreover, the snowball sampling method offered the needed variety in the sample. Furthermore, the interviewees themselves may contribute to completing the emerging theory (Strauss, 1987). For example, during data

collection the first interviewee brought up the importance of leisure-time activities; hence, the theme of the leisure time was added to the interview guide.

The analysis progressed by the level of abstractness from open coding to selective coding. In the first stage, the data was examined chapter by chapter and a headline was assigned to each of the contents. Open coding proceeded by asking questions from the data, and searching for different occasions, actions, relations, contexts, effects and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Theoretical memo writing supports the emergence of categories by widening the perspective for interpreting the data, as well as supporting the constant comparative analysis where the findings are continuously compared by identifying the commonalities and causality chains. An example of the open coding memo includes descriptive concepts as “self-soothing effects,” “communicative practices,” and “defensive attitude,” that depict MMs' experiences when engaged in leading acts.

The axial coding proceeded by listing emerging concepts and forming the first categories. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), axial coding involves rearranging data by interconnections uncovered in open coding. Discovered occasions, actions, contexts, relations, effects and consequences guide the categorizing process. In this stage, the data was approached by looking how the formulation and successful communication of change ideas was related to the hardship situations, and the experience of the middle manager. It was becoming evident that the data reflected the ways MMs act in highly different work situations.

As Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Suddaby (2006) note, selective coding and axial coding often interact, as the analysis is nonlinear. While reorganizing the categories and reviewing the data, it appeared that the MMs interpret their work through the work context and their personal principles. However, these categories alone did not sufficiently explain the relationship between interpreting the hardships and acting in them. As selective coding continued to identify the salient points of the entire data to become the core category, the analysis continued to focus on encountering hardships in a more specific illustration of living through the hardships. It became evident that MMs, as our example, manage these troublesome situations by using the strategies figured out in action, which help them to get through the hard times and reach peace of mind. This discovery contributed to form a model of leniency in leadership, which bridges together the hardships in work situations and the related experiential orientation to themselves.

## Results

Following the grounded theory (GT) procedure, the results of this study are conceptualized and presented in the hierarchy of two supportive categories and the core category. First, the theoretical concepts that emerged from the data are presented, as the GT procedure implies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990); second, these concepts are narrowed down to the discussion of the existing concepts of self-leadership and self-compassion. The results presentation begins with the supportive categories of managers work context, and principles of acting in which we introduce the two different threads; of how MMs themselves engage in leading acts and how they encourage their followers to produce change ideas. The results section concludes with the core category of leniency in leadership, in which the hardship process and generation of leniency is examined. Figure 1 presents the findings of the grounded theory analysis as the core category, two supporting categories and the specified themes they covered.

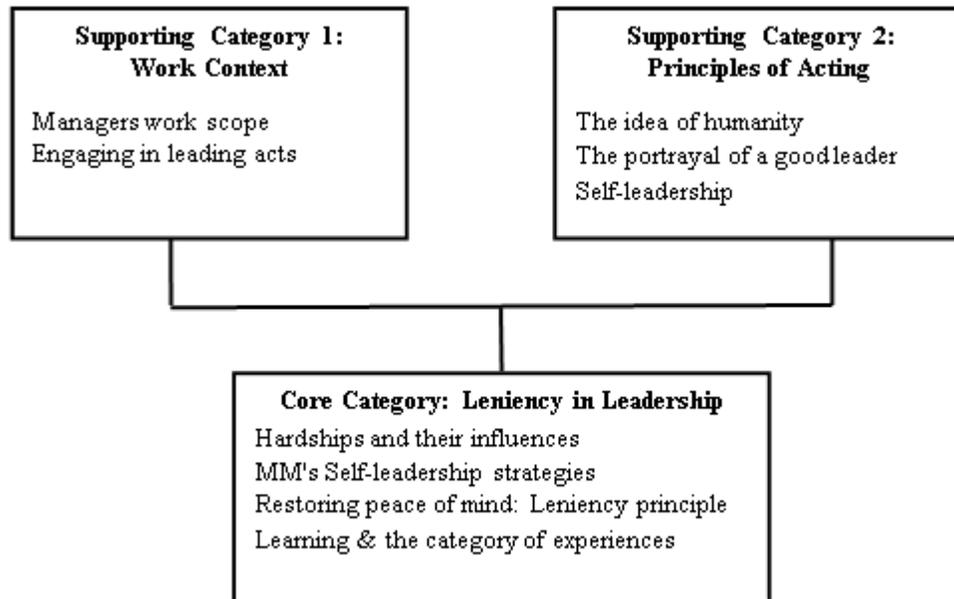


Figure 1: Hierarchy of the resulting categories

### Supporting category 1: Work Context

**Managers Work Scope** defines what management and leading acts MMs are expected to perform, and what the MM's included in their role as middle managers. The targeted MMs had limited authority, but vast responsibilities, ranging from supporting the implementation of basic work tasks to being accountable for the productivity of a particular group of employees. All supervisors are accountable for helping and guiding leaders defined in advance or anyone who is or may become engaged in leading acts. The MMs' task is to supervise the personnel in the organizational unit by the means of human resource management, which in their perspective creates a dichotomy of personnel management and other administration. The results maintain that, without exception, the work-related needs of the staff are the priority for the MMs. They perceive themselves as team players who act in a certain position for the team. In their experience, they have a double duty concerning their staff: to motivate them and to protect them from organizational conflict.

*To be conscious about one's power and responsibilities, that I have this kind of job, that I have to behave in certain way. And also, that to be capable of doing the work I have to stick to my own position, which is the job as the supervisor.... So I have to concretize my role and responsibilities and power. (MM 6)*

Due to their role, MMs are also required to take part in executive meetings. Caughron and Mumford (2012) observe that executives can have a substantial impact of MM's management style, e.g. they feel threatened if their superiors practise a management style that is more coercive than supportive. At best, MMs are equal members of the executive boards and their concerns are heard. According to data, MMs experience that the organizational culture is

being formed by the decisions and actions the executive board makes and takes. A bureaucratic and authoritarian culture is perceived to be a difficult operational environment to support staff's self-direction, which is the major issue in MM's work.

One of the worst scenarios in the MMs' work is the lack of resources, which may lead to subordinates' exhaustion and frustration. MMs feel that the executives lack understanding and interest, and issue more demands on them to do more with less. This study reveals that MMs tend to reflect their expectations and behavior in relation to their supervisor. They describe a good relationship with their supervisor as having a mentor. In the majority of cases there appeared harmful relations, where the MMs' supervisor behaves arrogantly or immorally, avoids taking responsibility, delegates his or her own work to the MM, or is dishonest and untrustworthy. In the extreme case, it may become the experiential reason for the MM to resign. The relationship between the MMs and their superiors appears highly significant.

MMs describe colleagues as those who share the same fate. When MMs determine their sphere of responsibilities and freedom, cooperative activities must be included. Cooperation is to some extent tied to work context, but supportive interaction and sharing information are common between the managers with similar responsibilities. Colleagues understand what the others are going through because they feel equal. In colleague relations, MMs can speak freely without sensing the need to protect the staff from hearing the most difficult issues of executive policies.

**Engaging in Leading Acts.** This dimension of work context shows that, on the operative surface, MMs are willing to formulate change ideas and to promote their employees to do so, too. However, the leading acts are tied to their experienced role as MMs. According to the MMs' experience, they find themselves influential in constructing the work culture. The "rules of behavior" belonging to work culture are often implicit guidelines that are shaped by management actions. MMs believe that their staff must be able to trust that they are willing to act in their best interest. Trust includes evaluating whether the MM is capable, fair and loyal to the staff. However, when engaging in leading acts such as formulating change ideas and communicating them, the evaluation concerns the MMs' proficiency. A great example of this is the managers' duty of making decisions, just like Quy (2001) notes that the operative surface manager translates the administrative language to employees by shaping the organizational policies into concrete work actions. When these policies are planned in the executive levels, MMs must now take them into action by shaping and communicating them to the employees. It is also possible that MMs engage in formulating these change ideas in the executive meetings, depending on their status. It seems that in the MMs work scope it is unavoidable to formulate and communicate change ideas to make idea implementations possible.

Another dimension in decision making is how MMs claim to ground their decision-making and change idea implementing in both the formal authority of their position and the self-control of their work. They often brought up using and reinforcing employee self-direction as a tactic to control their own work amount and to support the emergence of change ideas. Naturally, MMs in their manager role feel obligated to draw the lines between possible and impossible solutions when encouraging their employees to formulate change ideas. When decision-making is related to plain implementation activities, MMs experience it as problematic as they do not always feel that they have the best knowledge and information to make decisions, or know the resulting effects of each decision. Yet the MMs' major interest in decision-making is how it will affect their staff's work. However, after they make a decision, they are prepared and willing to keep it.

By supporting employee self-direction, MMs enable the idea formulation and communication to emerge among employees. A major issue for MMs is to sustain the interaction in face-to-face communication with employees, enabling cooperation between staff and colleagues, and establishing the policies for interaction. These actions pave the way for information flow throughout the department and the entire organization, so that the MMs may have better knowledge of the needs of their employees, and be armed with the best available information to decide whether to implement the change or not.

One interesting aspect of managers engaging in leading acts is the division of the roles. According to our data, when it comes to implement changes, MMs consider it their duty to support the staff when they are confronting personal emotions - especially anger, disappointment and frustration - so that issues can be handled in a more constructive manner. One possible explanation for this emergence of non-constructive reactions is that the employees have not participated in the change idea formulation or communication has not been successful. As managers, MMs are responsible for change implementation, whether the employees are prepared or not. So interestingly it seems that rather than engaging in re-formulating and re-communicating the change idea, MMs may hide behind the supervisory nature of their work by explaining the management actions by maintaining one's professionalism:

*There are situations in which you have to be able to hold on to your professional status and your strengths and your position as a supervisor.... You can't be like those who... start to raise hell with the crowd, rather, in my opinion, as a supervisor you need to stand above it and be able to...somehow to cut off the situation.... (MM3)*

## **Supporting Category 2: Principles of Acting**

Principles of acting emerged from the data as work-contextual ideas. They are not bound to certain management or leading acts, rather being simple ideas of treating people including oneself and appearing as guidelines when adjusting to one's work role. Simultaneously, these principles emerged from MMs' insights about treating people with dignity, respect, compassion and caring.

**The Idea of Humanity.** This dimension of the principles of acting depicts that MMs are after all persons adjusted to their manager role. They emphasize optimism and hopefulness, holistic perceiving, being humane and trustworthy toward people, and the importance of continuous learning and self-development. For these MMs, the staff are personalities whom they want to know better rather than just "objects for better productivity of the organization".

The study reveals that MMs use self-directive methods also for managing their own workload and to be one step ahead of possible troubles. According to the data, MMs are willing to engage in leading acts by using shared leadership and dialogic decision-making to encourage their staff to anticipate problems and to solve them independently; in doing so, they signal that every employee matters and every voice is heard. This way, the MMs reduce complaints and rarely oversee how the work is done—there are no resources or need for that. By acting in a humane way, MMs think they instil trustworthiness and demonstrate how they themselves wish to be treated.

**The Portrayal of a Good Leader.** This dimension of the principles of acting displays the MMs' perceived importance of self-awareness and its role in identifying one's strengths and weaknesses. By knowing themselves, MMs admit their mistakes and are honest in their imperfection. MMs may use self-reflection non-purposefully, whereas some of them use it as a determined tool in minimizing the burden caused by work. While it appears important to stand behind one's words, reflection is a tool to explore their own emotions, thoughts and resources. Especially when they disagree with the executive decisions, MMs need to take time to form their own conception before acting. Avolio et al. (2010) refer to these moments as trigger events, when something induces a state of self-focused attention and may prepare the ground for self-development.

*How easy it is when you admit your mistakes, it is easy to get approval, as, you're appreciated more as a leader when you know your good and bad sides and what you can't do, and so you utilize your followers' skills.... But if you pretend to be omniscient, you will be despised by your personnel, as you get into stupid situations when you can't admit that you're wrong, but rather make excuses and lies to keep pretending you are omniscient. (MM5)*

MMs perceive that a good supervisor is trustworthy, fair and easy to approach. Staff will provide feedback only if they do not fear being punished for it. MMs consider their own behavior sets an example for employees to follow. Learning never ends; therefore, MMs develop themselves by reading, studying and networking. Through continuous learning they handle insecurity, and combined with feedback, they get to know what they need to learn more.

**Self-leadership.** This dimension of the principles of acting refers to the MMs' perception of self-leadership as a precious, learned way of taking care of themselves. In their experience, leading oneself is related to well-being, emotions, self-knowledge, doing one's work well, and dissection of one's actions. Together with general attitudes toward life, these aspects situate the MM to the work role where a hopeful life attitude helps to prioritize work tasks and diminish the stress about issues one cannot control. By expressing optimism, the MMs are constructing a work culture where challenges are anticipated and instruments for solving problems are provided to the employees. In MMs' opinion, personality factors of integrity, openness and extraversion help to build up trust.

MMs brought up that taking care of oneself includes enjoyable social and physical activities outside the work. Interacting with friends, family and social networks outside the work context are a source for respiration, thus saying things out loud helps to analyse problems and recognize that hardships are common to everyone. Sports and exercise help to "inhale" as well: yoga, meditation and therapy develop self-leadership abilities such as self-understanding, needs recognition, and attention directing. Self-awareness aids noticing the alarm signals of too much work, for example, waking in the middle of night and ruminating.

According to the data, MMs' self-leadership is illustrated in two ways: organizing one's work, and leading one's intellectual world. The former means taking care of schedules, being systematic and able to prioritize and anticipate; the latter means being in control of one's emotions and roles, and maintaining sufficient self-awareness to act in accordance with one's values and ideals. Self-leadership is about finding the balance between experiential sincerity and organizational obligations while accepting what one can and cannot do. When MMs succeed in

maintaining a balance between experiential and organizational needs without splitting the motivation, they perceive their work as worthwhile and satisfactory.

*[T]o what kind of a supervisor I want to be, that question I have given a lot of thoughts, and that's what self-leadership is about—its core, as how I like to be and is it realistic, and if one day I couldn't be like that, you have to learn to think that am I good enough.  
(MM 6)*

### **The Core Category: Leniency in Leadership**

In the final analysis, we focused on interpreting how MMs live through hardship events. As the supporting categories depict, MMs engage in leading acts that are bound to their experienced role. Our interest lies in how self-leadership and self-compassion emerge in the MMs' hardship experiences that are related to the experienced manager role, including engaging in leading acts. First we present a short description of this abstracted process of living through the hardship event. We perceived that the MMs' hardship experiences emerge in two levels, depending on whether they are experienced only individually (Figure 2) or shared by a work community (Figure 3).

An individual process of leniency in leadership begins when the MMs confront work-related events that awaken (negative) emotions that disturbingly insist on conscious attention. Then the MMs reflect on the expectations (work scope) they feel they are being measured against, and consider where they can find support. They are responsible for the fluency of the operative actions, and therefore there are organizational rules to follow—but how? The bottom line in the abstracted individual process of generating leniency in leadership implies finding the space in which the MMs can employ their self-leadership strategies to end the rumination. As the result, the MMs' peace of mind is restored and the event is transformed into a learning experience that enriches their experiential world.

When the MMs interpret that the hardship affects their subordinates, generating leniency in leadership takes place in two differentiated levels (Figure 3). MMs evaluate that the event is then more severe because they reflect on their ability to fulfil the expectations aimed at them as managers. In their experience, community-level hardships cause a widespread emotional flush among the staff that can be imminent to their well-being and disturb the operative actions. In the sequel to the incident, MMs often perceive that the emotions of the staff are muddled up with their own ones. For the MMs, it is vital to handle the event alone at first. After they have restored their personal peace of mind, they are able to bring the event back to the community, where it is then accepted more easily by the MMs' example. The resulting learning experience is shared, thus reinforcing the self-perceptions of the MM as capable and trustworthy.



Figure 2: Individual process of generating leniency in leadership

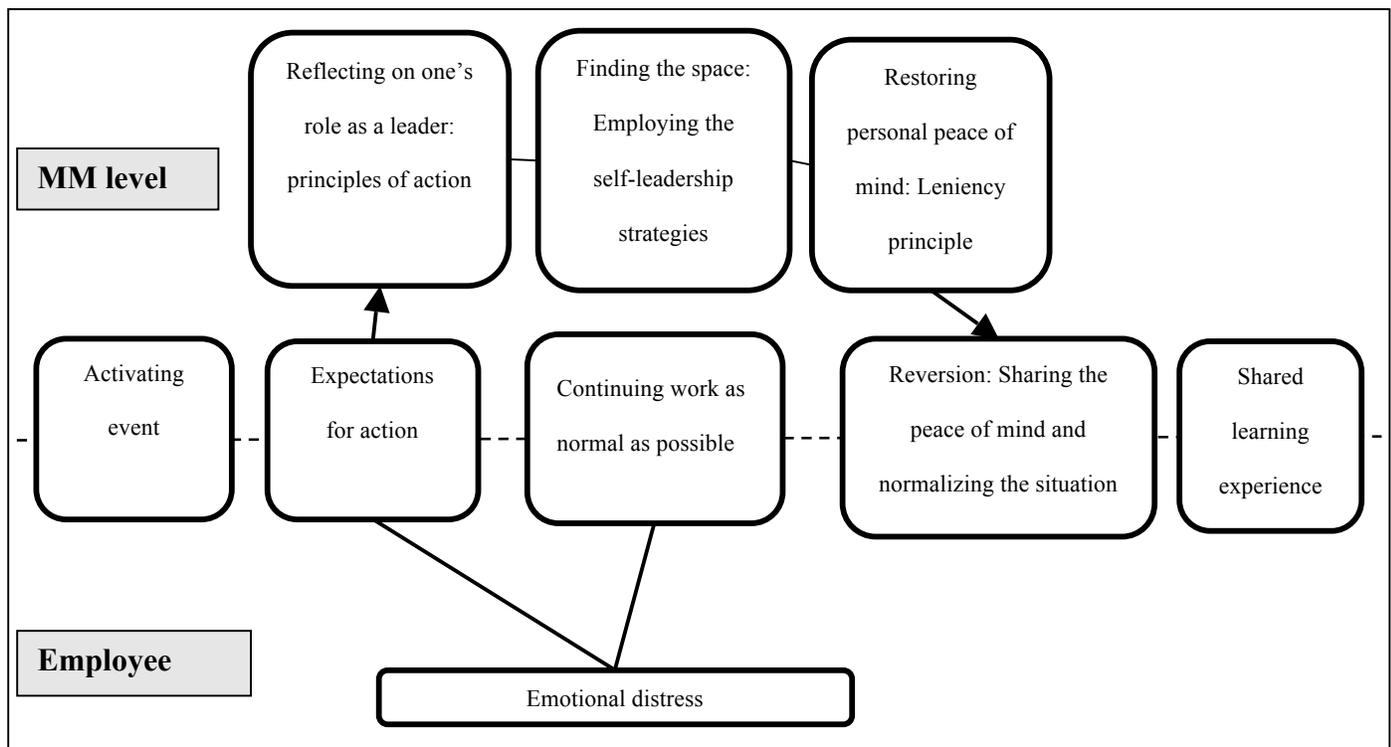


Figure 3: Community level process of generating leniency in leadership

### Constituents of the Leniency in Leadership

**Hardships and Their Influences.** This dimension of generating leniency in leadership implies three kinds of hardship events: (1) having problems with staff; (2) having difficulties in cooperative activities; and (3) representing organizational demands.

Staff hardships that trigger negative emotions for the MMs are about unpleasant confrontations with an employee, leading change, and conflicts of interest. Unpleasant confrontations with employees include events such as firing an employee, giving reprimands and taking disciplinary actions. The other two aspects, leading change and conflicts of interest, depict how MMs experience being called to lead. With leading change, problems occur when the MMs

think they have prepared the ground for change through discussions and information sharing, but the staff's emotional turmoil has not yet settled down. This leads to MMs' frustration since they feel incompetent when things are not progressing. If the executives instruct them to carry on despite the discomfort, they may lack the courage to stand up for their staff.

Some employee hardships affect guilt and upset for the work community, such as an employee's substance abuse or severe illness that remained unnoticed among colleagues, an employee who has been mistreated, conflicts between employees, and negative feedback from the executive level. Here too, the MMs must catch hold of change idea formulation, even not knowing what to do or how to improve the situation. Besides personal upset and the concern over the employee in question, the MMs must cope with the other employees' (work community) emotions. The MMs, according to the data, beware of showing their personal, negative emotional states at work, even though the event bothers their minds.

Besides direct employee-related hardships, the MMs' individual process of generating leniency in leadership is also triggered by cooperative and organizational hardships, due to their management role. Co-operative hardships comprise prolonged network projects and betrayal by colleagues who avoid taking responsibility. The former causes anger, lack of confidence and cynicism; the latter complicates cooperation and arouses frustration, disappointment and guilt. Organizational difficulties entail the MMs being harassed, being urged to defend the staff from immoral behavior, and disagreeing with the executives. As organizational representatives, they may become targets of violent behavior by outsiders, which generates fears and frustration if the organization takes no corrective actions. These MMs brought up to have a strong urge to serve as the guardians of the staff. When employees are mistreated, it contradicts the MMs' principles of humanity and equity, and thereby causes anger and bitterness. Disagreements with executives are critical: MMs are either heroes to the staff and "disloyal nuisances" to the executives, or they allow the mistreatment to continue, which affects to subordinates' evaluation of the MM and the fluency of the work. MMs are pondering which one counts more, and then decide either to act in accordance with their own principles or to succumb to organizational pressure.

**MMs' Self-leadership Strategies.** This dimension of generating leniency in leadership shows that the MMs do not have time to worry about hardships during the work time, but off-work they find it difficult to avoid rumination, especially when the negative emotions are often strengthening. Entering the stage of "finding the space" in the process of generating leniency in leadership implies making the decision to end the rumination and activate the self-leadership strategies. As we stated in the supportive category of principles of acting, MMs' self-leadership is being illustrated by forming systematic work routines and by leading one's intellectual world. At this point, MMs focus on their intellectual world and emotional experience.

Finding the actual solution begins by rationalizing the hardship as the actual fact. MMs are reflecting on whether their emotions are private or absorbed from the staff. Basically, at this point they are asking themselves, "Did I do the right thing?" Then, the MMs have an urge to seek support for themselves by sharing the experienced hardship with someone inside or outside the organization; with someone whom they feel able to show themselves as vulnerable. Making the experience explicit by sharing it is especially vital in the process and advances recovery from rumination, as the MMs enrich their perspectives of the hardship. They may also conclude that they lack the resources to overcome the hardship, so they outsource it. It is peculiar to MMs to close the problematic case rationally by transferring responsibility to their supervisor:

*I have been learning this attitude, that what I can't change, it is. And what I can, and everything I could change, I don't have enough energy. (MM4)*

MMs also try to perceive the big picture of hardships related to the staff if they feel the hardships was caused of the lack of information. Making excuses belongs to the holistic view, since one cannot know other people's motives. As a self-leadership strategy, MMs invent all sorts of reasons why the hardship occurred. Acknowledging that they have done their best soothes their feelings of anxiety and guilt. In addition to making excuses, the image of professionalism provides a cognitive protection to MMs for making decisions when the real picture of the whole is fragile.

**Restoring Peace of Mind: The Leniency Principle.** This dimension of generating leniency in leadership implies that, by considering their own actions, the MMs reflect on their behavior during the process and estimate how much they acted in accordance with their principles of acting, and how these principles affected the onset and the consequences of the hardship. For the MMs, it is important to have faith in one's principles of acting, since they use them to prioritize their work. The high demands and fear of mistakes are common. By deepening their self-awareness, MMs learn to regulate their standards and turn their compassion inward. The leniency principle depicts how they gradually recognize that to be humane to others requires being humane to themselves:

*If you're too harsh towards yourself, and you don't admit your mistakes at least out loud... you can't accept other people as they are, you stretch other people and you're not accepting humanity. (MM5)*

The result of successfully generating leniency in leadership is putting one's "mind in rest" by silencing the feelings of concern, guilt and helplessness. MMs are also able to help their staff to rationalize the hardships, thus communicating the occurred change. According to the study, all the MMs are able to restore their peace of mind. They find it difficult to break down the realistic view of themselves, despite their commitment to continuous learning. However, the hardship may leave a mark, when the MMs feel mistreated or betrayed either by other people or by their presumed strengths that are later knocked down by their unrealistic self-concept.

**Learning and the Category of Experiences.** This dimension of leniency in leadership depicts how hardships are perceived optimistically as they enable learning. It is impossible to predict the future, no matter how highly developed the work practices are. In the face of hardship, MMs automatically hark back to their category of experiences and search for resemblances between the present and the past. When experiences accumulate, MMs develop their self-leadership strategies by adapting the new patterns of behavior and to confirm the existing ones. By perceiving the hardship as a lesson that is situated in time, the MMs realize that hardships do not last forever and are not their entire life:

*I feel that I am stronger, I feel that I'm more lenient... These experiences, these last two years have been all learning, so that it helps me to know how things don't have to be like. (MM3)*

The activating events as positive challenges play a role in deepening the MMs' self-awareness and professionalism. Positive challenges include organizing the work and being active in finishing issues. Organizing work is about controlling the staff's workload and helping them to choose another, more suitable job. The category of experiences guides the MMs to use effective self-leadership strategies, which are then reinforced and completed time after time. Thus, their work experiences enhance their ability to cope. The study suggests that the MMs spend their first year in the position adjusting to the job description, learning how to balance between the management role and the leading acts, and shaping their own principles of acting. Accumulating experiences educates the MMs to recognize the vitality of finding compassion toward themselves, too, and to avoid becoming exhausted. Hardships are the work events that help them to become more conscious of their actions, thoughts and emotions. By developing sufficient self-leadership capabilities, the MMs can adjust to their work without sacrificing their well-being. Leading self while turning compassion inward is the core of leniency in leadership.

### Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how MMs experientially master their work tasks in the multi-level network of human relations. In addition to their management role, the MMs also engage in leading acts, when formulating and communicating change ideas and supporting the employees to independently produce and communicate change ideas. This study focused on MMs' experience of hardships in order to identify the approaches of acting and relating to themselves, thus their use of self-leadership and self-compassion in everyday work and inevitable hardship events.

To start with, the MMs manifested the urge to engage in leading acts in addition to their managerial duties, since, in the operative surface, they are responsible for the fluency of employee performance. MMs are willing to formulate change ideas and to promote their employees to do so in order to enhance overall performance and to declare that the employees are important experts of their work who often hold a better proficiency about the matter in hand than the MM him- or herself. For example, MMs are called upon to lead when new policies are to be taken into action. It seems that to be successful, change implementation as a management duty includes MMs' willingness to interact about the change idea. MMs prepare the ground for change by first trying to make sense of the policies themselves, and then giving the subordinates opportunities for participation in decision making as formulating the change idea to fit the units' performance goals.

The data also showed that the MMs encourage their employees to be self-directive and to solve operative problems with their own expertise. This leading act is done in order to ease the MMs' work load and enhancing the atmosphere of trust and sense of value of the subordinates. The data depicts that the MMs are greatly interested in the employees' well-being and sense of worthiness, and so forth the MMs to develop an inner guidebook of principles of acting; a sort of identity expression they use when engaging in management and leading acts. These principles included continuous learning, self-leadership, supporting employee self-direction, as well as ideas about treating others and behaving as a manager. In addition, these principles guide the everyday work actions and become especially significant when MMs confront hardship situations.

Focusing on our main research interest of MM's living through the hardships, we concluded that self-leadership and self-compassion in MMs' hardship experiences constitute

"leniency in leadership", which is about MMs leading themselves through the hardships while addressing their emotions, thoughts and expectations, employing different strategies to ease one's burden, and striving to put their minds at rest. Emerging from the data, MMs' self-leadership strategies in the face of hardships consist of sharing the experience and rationalizing it by searching for support for analysing their own behavior. Manager role is developed to be consistent, while adjusting to both the predetermined work scope and to the MMs' own principles of acting. Self-leadership is also an essential tool in their work for organizing tasks and schedules and foreseeing possible blind spots.

When it comes to self-leadership theory, the behavioral perspective of self-leadership strategies highlights self-observation. Manz and Sims (2001) emphasize the ability to find natural rewards from one's surroundings and use different strategies for learning to behave in a more satisfactory manner. D'Intino et al. (2007) emphasize thinking rather than controlling emotions, while Sydänmaanlakka (2006) stresses learning and reflecting to gain better self-knowledge and realistic self-confidence. The results of this study contribute to each of these perspectives. MMs lead themselves to develop their work and adapt their way of thinking and behaving to their work role, which is a collection of self-leadership strategies helping to maintain the fluency of everyday operative work. In addition, the work role is a comprehensive manner of self-reflecting, evaluating one's principles, and finding a balance between personal strengths and weaknesses. Self-leadership is not merely bound to transient situations; rather, it is continuously balancing with one's needs and will. On the other hand, self-compassion is emphasized in negative events the MMs encounter, as was theoretically assumed, but also later while approaching a new hardship—harking back to learned experiences and applying a caring attitude towards oneself.

Self-leadership manifests itself as regulating one's emotions, and strengthens the ability to understand and know the emotions of others and self. Thus, it is also important to pay attention to aspects that might offer either limitations or potentials to self-knowledge (Wilson & Dunn, 2004). It is the strategic means both to act efficiently by being aware of personal needs, expectations and fears, and to utilize this knowledge. The data shows that the MMs interpret and evaluate their work input through their principles of acting, while being sensitive to feedback that either reinforces their self-leadership strategies or changes them. Compassion toward oneself means keeping emotions at arm's length, which enhances the conscious appraisal of successes or failures. According to Neff et al. (2007b), this psychological distance promotes life satisfaction. The MMs express overall life satisfaction through their optimistic attitudes and will to prioritize things. In the abstracted model of leniency in leadership, the psychological distance is visualized in the stage of finding the space; when differentiating the source of disturbing emotions and confronting them. This space becomes a place for leniency to be generated; where puzzles are solved, humanity and caring are turned inwards and peace of mind is ultimately restored.

In self-leadership research, negative emotions such as depression and unhappiness are caused by dysfunctional beliefs and unrealistic expectations (Houghton, Wu, Godwin, Neck & Manz, 2011). People tend to compare themselves constantly to other people and to linger on bygone negative experiences and guilt. Not much focus has been placed on how to guide self-awareness in order to prevent these effects, although it is often repeated that too much self-awareness, especially when negatively biased, leads to harmful consequences (Manz & Sims, 2001; Neck & Houghton, 2006). According to this, negative emotions should be confronted authentically and uncritically, opening one's mind to the emotions to be able to handle them, analyse them, and finally let them go. What is named in this study as leniency, expressed as

compassion toward self in self-leadership means, is emphasized in experienced hardships, since one must turn the principle of humanity inward and accept one's sufficiency. Germer and Neff (2013) refer to this as a "Self-compassion Break". Our study confirms that self-compassionate behavior includes taking time to think and feel, reaching out for support instead of isolation, and reflecting on one's life goals and principles of living a good life instead of getting stuck with misfortunes and hardships. This is exactly what self-compassion is about, and what the MMs live through when they generate leniency in leadership. The data analysis reveals that a moment of mindfulness is indeed reflection, when the MMs try to attain causality chains.

When generating leniency in leadership, MMs try to strip off unrealistic expectations as they use constructive thought pattern strategies of self-leadership. Emotional over-identification is restrained by attaching emotions to the context, thus making self-reflection vital for the learning experience. This sheds some light on how the MMs reinforce positively framed, self-correcting feedback after hardships to avoid excessive self-punishment (Manz & Sims, 2001; Neck & Houghton, 2006). These hardships as lessons learned are later recalled from the category of experiences, and the constructive self-leadership strategies are repeatedly reinforced and employed.

Self-compassion also promotes understanding that one is responsible for his or her actions, instead of outsourcing the causes to enhance one's self-image (Leary et al., 2007). As Neff (2003a) claims, self-compassion promotes calmness during hardships and fairness toward oneself when analysing one's actions. This occurs when the MMs try to rationalize the hardship more objectively (seeking perspectives, differentiating emotions and causality chains) during the process. Even though the MMs used excuses as a self-leadership strategy, they did not underestimate their responsibility in the hardships; rather, they compared their existing resources to the perceived need of resources for handling the hardship. The MMs continuously learn from their work, their roles in it, and the hardships they confront as part of their duty. They adjust themselves to the organizational duties without losing their authentic voice, comprising individual dispositions, their view of life, ideals and values. In the context of academic failure, self-compassion and emotion-focused processes such as acceptance and personal growth, were positively associated. The studies suggest that failures offer grounds for growth and development (Breines & Chen, 2012; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005) In the MMs case, the aspect of personal growth was emphasized in finding positivity in hardships as a way to develop the leaders' professional identities and principles of action.

## Conclusion

This research grasped the specific means of leniency in leadership, and interpreted these means through the concepts of self-leadership and self-compassion. The resulting model of leniency in leadership is the grounded theory-type simplified representation from a rich experience of the MMs. The contribution of this research is to offer the inductive-deductive conceptual abstraction of the lived experiences related to managing challenging work situations. To some degree, we grasped insights of the MMs' experienced work role, in which they are willing to be both manage and lead, while adjusting to their work role with the help of their principles of acting. As the MMs described, the "leniency principle" emerges and develops through experience, thus it can be considered as a skill of thinking and acting in the supervisory role. The MMs seem to derive their leniency principle from the idea of treating subordinates

humanely and with dignity, and by adjusting to their role and learning from hardships and their own suffering, they turn the leniency principle inwards.

At the same time, the MMs aspire towards authentic leadership. Authentic leaders are "those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character" (Avolio, Luthans & Walumbwa, 2004; cited in Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Combined with this perspective, self-leadership with the ability to be self-compassionate buffers MMs from depleting their personal resources and helps to bounce back to their manager role, while holding on of their self-awareness and personal principles of acting. Also, the "leniency principle" could work further in developing and examining the forgiveness in work (Grant, 2008) and development of forgiving and caring organizations (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012; Syväjärvi, Uusiautti, Perttula, Stenvall & Määttä 2014). Conflicts and mistakes are an inevitable part of organizational reality. However, by increasing understanding about restoring personal resources and the insights of being and working as a middle manager, it is possible to support the positive means of leadership, compassion and justice.

The limitations of this research are that in real work situations, emotions, expectations and actions are not as distinct and linear as visualized here. Moreover, the individual-level leniency in leadership is open to other motives than those related to the work role. At this point, the leniency in leadership is merely a perspective that needs to further developed. For future research, the model of leniency in leadership could be completed by richer theoretical sampling, more precisely in timespan and related to the particular self-leadership strategies. In addition, the concept of leniency in leadership needs conceptual analysis compared to the concept of coping or coping styles widely used in psychological research. These concepts were excluded because of the exploratory research design of the study. For the same reason, the theoretical understanding of self-leadership and self-compassion was not based on the standardized scales largely applied. In addition, the leniency as a leadership construct is waiting to be conceptually elaborated.

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