

Reframing Leadership in Organizations: Formal Leaders' Perceptions and Utilization of Informal Leadership in the Technology Sector

Tiina Leino, Laura Urrila, Omar Veledar, Margherita Volpe, Georg Macher and Jane Morton

Abstract

This study examines how formal leaders perceive and utilize informal leadership in their daily work. It draws on qualitative content analysis of 22 semi-structured interviews with formal

Tiina Leino is a Doctoral Researcher at the University of Vaasa, Finland.

Laura Urrila is an Assistant Professor at the University of Vaasa, Finland.

Omar Veledar is a Postdoctoral Researcher and a Managing Director at Beevadoo e.U., Austria.

Margherita Volpe is an R&D&I Consultant at Zabala Innovation, Brussels, Belgium.

Georg Macher, Ph.D., is a Senior Scientist at Graz University of Technology, Austria.

Jane Morton is a Managing Director at Jane Morton, London, U.K.

leaders in technology sector organizations across 11 European countries. The findings show how formal leaders view informal leadership to benefit both their own work and broader organizational functioning. Formal leaders often engage in co-leadership practices with informal leaders and consider informal leadership as a long-term, expertise-driven process enacted by individuals with deep subject-matter knowledge. We offer practical recommendations for recognizing and supporting informal leadership, and outline directions for future research. Overall, this study contributes to reframing organizational leadership by highlighting the influence of informal leadership on formal leadership and collective work practices.

Keywords

Informal leadership; Influence; Leadership; Management; Organization; Power

1. Introduction

Collective forms of leadership, i.e., the shared, distributed, pooled, and relational aspects of leadership, offer an alternative theoretical framing for understanding leadership in organizations (Ospina et al., 2020). In these, leadership is conceptualized as a collective practice rather than the responsibility of a single formally appointed leader or manager (Gjerald et al., 2025; Svensson, 2026). Formal and informal forms of leadership are understood to coexist in a “hybridized leadership configuration” (Gronn, 2009), and interact (White et al., 2016; Yammarino et al., 2012). Friedrich et al. (2009) define collective leadership as a dynamic process in which an appointed leader, or group of leaders, selectively utilizes the diverse skills, competences, and expertise of members within a network as needs arise in organizations. In contemporary organizations that enable collective leadership, employees are allowed and encouraged to take responsibility and influence the collective work, even without holding a formal leadership position, rather than merely expecting visions, strategies and direction to flow down the organizational hierarchy. As a specific area of interest within collective leadership for both researchers and practitioners, *informal leadership* (IL) — i.e., the influence and leadership status an individual employee exerts without a formally appointed leadership role (Chiu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020) — has become a critical, yet understudied enabler of organizational functioning. Therefore, as informal leadership is a distinctive part of collective leadership and operates without hierarchical pressures, it can act as a vitalizing element in the collective leadership equation.

Reflecting a broader shift in leadership research from formal, heroic and hierarchical models towards relational and collective leadership approaches (see e.g., Boira Lopez & Connelly, 2025; Eva et al., 2021; Gjerald et al., 2025), growing attention is being directed towards non-designated, informal leaders within organizations. Although leadership research has traditionally mainly focused on formal power-positioned leadership (Banks et al., 2022; Liden et al., 2025), the current shift in leadership thinking toward relational, multi-level, and interactional perspectives (Gjerald et al., 2026) highlights the need to advance theory and practice on informal leadership. This reframing involves an intentional reassessment of roles, responsibilities, and power structures to support relevant forms of leadership to address the increasingly complex, abrupt and persisting challenges facing work in contemporary organizations across all levels. In this development, the traditional siloed practices and hierarchical leadership structures are

no longer sufficient for maintaining organizational competitiveness (Day et al., 2021). Consequently, organizations must integrate the competencies of all members to advance their strategic aims (Eva et al., 2021).

Informal leadership is a key component of this non-traditional, relational and collective way of organizing and leading, as it facilitates organizational functioning by fostering positive team interactions and collaborative work practices (Badura et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2025). At the same time, while it is acknowledged that formal leaders play a significant role in supporting or suppressing informal leadership actions (Nouman & Luria, 2025; Van De Mierop et al., 2020; White et al., 2016) their voice is largely absent from existing research (Svensson, 2026; Qiu et al., 2026). Given the growing call for more inclusive leadership development that integrates formal and informal leadership to understand how leadership occurs both individually and collectively (Boira Lopez & Connelly, 2025; Chiu et al., 2021; Day et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2026), how informal leadership influences formal leadership remains largely unexplored.

Moreover, surprisingly little attention has been paid to how supervisors perceive and respond to informal leadership (Qiu et al., 2026). Hence, the co-existence of formal and informal leadership highlights the need for an empirical investigation that focuses specifically on formal leaders. In this co-existence, a central issue of power sharing also warrants investigation (Boira Lopez & Connelly, 2025; Svensson et al., 2025), as it inevitably affects the development and extent of collective leadership.

Using collective leadership as a theoretical lens (Ospina et al., 2020) and building on the premise that leadership and related influencing reside in both hierarchical and collective settings as hybridized leadership configurations (Gronn, 2009), we conduct an inductive qualitative inquiry and examine the following research question: *how formal leaders perceive and utilize informal leadership within their organizations*. We present findings from interviews conducted in 2022–2023 with 22 formal leaders working in technology sector organizations. In this study, we use the term “formal leader” in reference to our informants; i.e. formal leaders who hold higher-level formal positions in their organizations with responsibilities such as strategic decision-making, oversight of functions or units, and organizational performance. Technology sector organizations provide a particularly suitable context for examining informal leadership, because organizations in this industry employ experts whose working is driven by competence rather than formal authority (Larsson et al., 2011). Moreover, the flat organizations and distributed team arrangements that are typical for expert-driven tech companies require individual employees to take initiative and influence others beyond formal leadership roles. Our findings unveil how participants understand and utilize informal leadership, while simultaneously uncovering the lack of recognition and the taken-for-granted nature of this constructive form of behaviour in organizations.

Our study contributes to the collective and informal leadership literature by suggesting that formal leadership benefits from informal leadership under conditions that support collaboration. First, this research extends understanding of the role of informal leadership in collective leadership (e.g., Day et al., 2021; Ospina et al., 2020). We provide a thematic framework (Figure 1) that illustrates how formal and informal leadership interact, and how informal leadership behaviours influence formal leadership and collective work. Second, we debate power-sharing in collective leadership (e.g., Boira Lopez & Connelly, 2025) and argue that hierarchical power-sharing is often taken for granted despite co-leadership or a delegation of leadership work. Third, we propose that informal leadership does not predict individuals' willingness to assume formal leadership positions, because in essence, informal leadership is

primarily a competence-based phenomenon, and informal leadership capacity is directly connected to this expertise (e.g., Briker et al., 2021; Chiu et al., 2021; Eva et al., 2021).

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Influence and power as key elements in collective leadership

Leadership is often associated with formal leadership positions (see e.g., Banks et al., 2022), even if it exists in both formal and informal forms. Antonakis and Day (2018, p. 5) define leadership as “a formal or informal contextually rooted and goal-influencing process that occurs between a leader and a follower, groups of followers, or institutions”. Hence, the specific distinction of the two styles of leadership – formal and informal – might be incorrectly understood to consist of the same ingredients. However, when we look at the fundamental elements of these forms of leadership contributing to collective leadership, it is evident that they are significantly different when considering the issues of influence and power they are associated with.

Informal leadership is a naturally occurring form of leadership in organizations and emerges at all levels (Denis et al., 2012; White et al., 2016) that takes place in interactions in formal structures, informal networks, and relationships between people (Badura et al., 2022; Yammarino et al., 2012). Informal leadership arises as perceived social status which displays the amount of a leadership role granted by peers without formal authority (Chiu et al., 2021). The granted leadership role refers to how informal leaders emerge through the intricate processes of role taking and peer perceptions that determine who becomes leader, resulting in influence over others (Badura et al., 2022; Neubert & Taggar, 2004). Hence, informal leadership status cannot be claimed, but is given by others. Consequently, occupying a formal leadership position does not automatically guarantee influence, but it is earned through social interaction. Usually, informal leadership is defined as being only lateral (see e.g., Chiu et al., 2021; Hanna et al., 2021; Neubert & Taggar 2004), although some leave room for vertical influence (see e.g., Zhang et al., 2020). Through this influence, informal leadership affects individuals and teams – i.e. close or remote colleagues or superiors (Chiu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2012). This difference in basis for influencing sets these two roles in fundamentally different positions. Accordingly, the level of collaboration and mutual understanding between informal and formal leaders is significant.

Organizational power structures in collectivistic organizational settings are often bypassed and understudied (Boira Lopez & Connelly, 2025; Yammarino et al., 2012). This promotes the importance of collaboration between informal and formal leaders, and as organizational power is placed in positions of formal leadership and hierarchical structures, informal leadership needs access to formal leadership through influence in order to have access to e.g., organizational resources or decision-making. The moments when informal leadership emerges are critical inflection points, where the response of formal authority either facilitates or obstructs the transition toward collective leadership (see e.g., Chiu et al., 2021; Larsson et al., 2025; van Baarle et al., 2024). In this, positional power is decisive.

Differing from informal leaders who hold only personal power, formal leaders by default possess positional power tied to their socially created responsibility and their rights to move and change organizational issues (Liden et al., 2025; Wilson, 2023). This positional authority grants formal leaders ‘power-over’ others, which they can then transform into ‘power-to-act’ for their teams. This transition is achieved through enabling power, the strategic use of lan-

guage to shape action, the cultivation of community, and the fostering of safety and trust (van Baarle et al., 2024). Furthermore, with regard to the use of and orientation to power, socialized leaders with a collective power orientation display higher levels of collective leadership behaviours than personalized leaders, who have self-serving power orientations, further resulting in a resistance to power sharing and supporting informal leadership (Boira Lopez & Connelly, 2025). Thus, the operating principles of formal and informal leadership vary due to power issues, and it is therefore essential to recognize formal leaders' approaches to both power sharing and being influenced, which impact organizational leadership.

2.2 Co-existence of informal and formal leadership

Informal leadership and formal leadership are both components of collective leadership, in which "multiple individuals interact, through a variety of formal and informal structures, broadly defined, and take on a variety of leadership roles, both formally and informally, over time" (Yammarino et al., 2012, p. 384; see also e.g., Badura et al., 2022; Eva et al., 2021; White et al., 2016). Building on this, formal and informal leadership not only co-exist, but may also co-function at all levels of an organization, either operating independently or interacting with one another, intentionally or unintentionally. How this co-existence evolves is guided by a complex process of interaction (see e.g., Briker et al., 2021; Friedrich et al., 2009; Holm & Fairhurst, 2018; Van de Mierop et al., 2020).

Informal leadership is enacted by its foundations of competence – knowledge, skills, and ability (Briker et al., 2021; He et al., 2021; Stincelli & Baghurst, 2014). To complement their deep subject matter knowledge, informal leaders possess considerable knowledge of the issues affecting the organization (see e.g., Johannessen et al., 2015; Larsson et al., 2011; Nouman & Luria, 2025) which are conveyed through shared visions (Pan et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2012). Overall, informal leaders can be considered as drivers of change who engage in creating innovative approaches to address unmet needs, stimulating cultural and knowledge exchanges, and creating partnerships and systems to enable organizational procedures and increase participation (Nouman & Luria, 2025). Informal leadership manifests in volunteering to lead, and elementally informal leaders are keen to exercise leadership (Briker et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2016; Muijs et al., 2013), despite the interpersonal risks of taking charge (Liu et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2020) and being abandoned due to a lack of formal leadership support (Chiu et al., 2021). This proactive approach generates development ideas that impact the collective, and form a practice where collaboration with formal leaders becomes meaningful.

In collective leadership, the turning points unfold in the everyday flows of invitation, exploration, and affirmation, creating the co-action in leadership (Sklaveniti, 2020). In these moments of leadership, new understandings of arising situations are negotiated by the participants themselves (Larsson et al., 2025), leading to a continuous negotiation of informal and formal leadership in creating the collective leadership, where formal leaders' perceptions and their responses to informal leadership lead the way (Qiu et al., 2026). Doing leadership between formal and informal leaders is shared and negotiated through various subtle forms of communication (Van De Mierop et al., 2020), where both time and timing are essential (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018; Kalish & Luria, 2021). This communication unravels over time in social interaction, and the formal leaders either allow or deny informal leadership attempts (Van De Mierop et al., 2020). When allowed, informal leaders may also convey strategic values and priorities in various arenas of the organization by leveraging informality, information-based

authority and information brokering, while contributing to task structuring through sense-making and with formal leaders contributing to structure and expectations (Larsson et al., 2011). Here, the competence and knowledge of the informal leader is allowed to advance the work at hand, while the formal leader focuses on the guidelines of the work in a collaboration. However, in cases of disruptive events beyond the formal leader's capability, competent informal leaders may emerge to lead – or take over – without any explicit delegation of power (Johannessen et al., 2015). Here, the informal leader's competence sort of brushes aside the formal leader who lacks the specific skills to resolve the situation.

As informal leadership is beneficial for teams and organizational productivity (see e.g., He et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2016), it should generally be valued by formal leaders (Qiu et al., 2026). Informal leadership can be seen positively by formal leaders (Muijs et al., 2013; Nouman & Luria, 2025; Zhang et al., 2012), but this is not always the case. Qiu et al. (2026) suggest that a highly competent informal leader may arouse supervisor downward jealousy due to them seeing informal leaders as rivals due to their position in the group and the guidance, validation, and decision-making they offer to others. This causes the formal leader to fear losing relationships with other subordinates and create “feelings of insecurity, worry, loss of control and diminished influence” (Qiu et al., 2026, p. 5), leading to jealousy. While peers may be more receptive to informal leadership (White et al., 2016), they may also see competence as a threat, which can lead them to refrain from helping the informal leader (Liu et al., 2024). Hence (and paradoxically), when seen as the core of informal leadership, superior knowledge and competence may be a source of both positive and negative consequences. To be receptive to informal leadership, one therefore needs to welcome the knowledge and competence of others. When welcomed, informal leadership affects teams and mutually is heavily impacted by formal leadership. This co-existence and interaction of informal and formal leadership in organizations will increase its importance in the contemporary working life with deepening competencies and complexity, which subsequently necessitates reframing leadership in organizations to unchain progress at the locations of knowledge.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

We conducted a qualitative study comprising semi-structured interviews to investigate formal leaders' perceptions and utilization of informal leadership in organizations. This study complements the predominant prior research on informal leadership that has relied on quantitative methods (e.g., Briker et al., 2021; Chiu et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2026; White et al., 2016). The qualitative lens enables a nuanced understanding of the influence of informal leadership in organizations, as viewed through the experiences of formal leaders. This approach provides rich empirical evidence on how formal leaders perceive and respond to informal leadership (Qiu et al., 2026), and how they utilize it in their everyday leadership work.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study comprised 22 formal leaders in 11 European countries, across different technology sector organizations, including energy (6), automotive (4), consultancy (4), and other (8). We use the term “formal leader” to refer to our informants, as they held

formal leadership positions in their organizations. On average, they had 20 years of work experience, of which 11 years had been spent in management positions. Seven interviewees were board members, ten were one hierarchy level below the board, and five were two levels below the board. At the time of the interviews, the participants had an average of 16 subordinates. Twelve interviewees worked in large multinational companies with thousands of employees, and ten of the interviewees worked in organizations with fewer than 450 employees. The interviewees represented different European nationalities: Austria (5), Finland (5), Germany (3), Croatia (2), Belgium (1), Czech Republic (1), France (1), Hungary (1), Italy (1), Romania (1), and the U.K. (1). Thirteen participants were male, and nine were female.

To obtain our sample, we first identified suitable candidates within the researchers' networks, and then recruited additional participants using a snowballing technique based on recommendations. We contacted the candidates via email or telephone. Most of the individuals we invited to participate in the informal leadership study agreed to be interviewed. We obtained informed consent from all participants prior to data collection.

3.3 Data collection

The interviews were conducted between October 2022 and March 2023. They were designed to explore the everyday interactions and patterns of influence between the participants and informal leadership actors, and a prior understanding of informal leadership was not expected. At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked background questions about their work, position, and tenure. The concept of informal leadership was introduced by inviting interviewees to reflect on whether they had observed employees taking initiative in coordinating joint tasks or leading colleagues informally. Informal leadership was explained as leadership influence that is exercised without a formal leadership position, and often demonstrated through voluntary extra-role behaviours, taking responsibility, and organizing collective work. This introduction was important, as it framed the remainder of the interview and influenced how participants made sense of the concept and the stories they shared with the researchers.

The subsequent questions aimed to explore participants' general perceptions of informal leadership, their views on what triggers informal leadership behaviours, and their reflections on how such actions influence both the group's work and their own. In addition, we inquired about issues of trust, focusing on the role that trust plays in informal leadership, and the ways in which it develops between formal and informal leaders, as well as between colleagues and informal leaders. The final questions focused on issues of conflict, where we asked how managers addressed disagreements or obstacles that arose in their interactions with informal leaders. In addition, we asked about the boundaries of power and how managers handled unwanted informal leadership behaviour. Finally, we addressed the issue of managerial not-knowing by inquiring how managers handle instances in which informal leadership is tied to expertise that the manager themselves may not possess.

The semi-structured format allowed for follow-up questions, clarifications, and examples beyond the interview guide. The interviews were conducted both online and in-person, and their average duration was 34 minutes (range: 19-60 minutes). Altogether, the interviews provided rich data about the participants' understandings of informal leadership. While all of the interviewees shared their views on informal leadership, the content of the interviews varied in depth (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The participants differed in how articulately and deeply they spoke about their experiences (Hill & Knox, 2021, p. 9), and while some interviewees were

more familiar with the theoretical concept and the natural occurrence of informal leadership in organizations, some had experienced it more personally than others, which might have influenced how extensively they discussed it in the interviews.

3.4 Data analysis

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized to identify patterns across the transcripts. We used qualitative content analysis (e.g., Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim et al., 2017; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023) to systematically organize and interpret the data. The analysis process led by the lead author was iterative, moving from an initial review of the data to the development of dominant thematic categories. Research memoranda were used to document emerging insights throughout the preparation, interviewing, organising, and analysis phases. Each interview provided an initial understanding of the topic, which was then further developed through close reading of the interview transcripts. The transcripts were imported into the Nvivo qualitative data analysis software platform which was used to support the coding process. Each interview transcript was coded individually. After coding all of the 22 transcripts, the resulting codes were reviewed. Finally, the findings were organized into three main themes. The aim was to develop themes that represented the informants' accounts and views of informal leadership. To effectively present our findings, we followed the guidelines established by Gioia et al. (2013). Figure 1 shows a thematic framework of the analysis, presenting the different levels of analysis, codes closely tied to the data, and themes and sub-themes reflecting our interpretation of the dominant patterns in the data (see Bengtsson, 2016; Gioia et al., 2013).

It is noteworthy that although the interview questions focused on informal leadership as a concept, the formal leaders' responses addressed both the phenomenon of informal leadership and the individuals enacting it. This observation is, however, unsurprising, as once the formal leaders began to reflect on specific situations, their accounts naturally shifted from an abstract, conceptual level to the practical level of discussing particular informal leaders.

4. Findings

Our analysis of the interviews detected three main themes: *Informal leadership supporting formal leaders* (with subthemes of Benefiting the formal leader and Benefiting the collective work), *Informal leadership as a work approach of specific individuals* (with subthemes of Leading by doing and Leading the collective work), and *Informal leadership fostered through openness and a shallow hierarchy* (with subthemes of Being open to influencing and Low resourcing to power and hierarchy).

The formal leaders saw informal leadership as benefiting them and supporting their work. They also viewed informal leadership behaviour as supportive of other organizational stakeholders such as peers and customers. Notably, the formal leaders were even willing to co-lead with informal leaders in situations characterized by shared competence and mutual trust. Here, informal leaders were permitted and motivated to lead groups, but leadership was preferably exercised under some form of supervision by formal leaders, whether due to budgetary concerns, customer requirements, or by oversight of the 'big picture'. Despite this, there was a desire to give space to the expert knowledge of informal leaders, for example in managing the work of others. However, granting free rein or a delegation of power was not explicitly addressed, even when issues related to power were mentioned. In discussions of power, over-

stepping responsibility boundaries was evaluated negatively, despite the absence of specific definitions of such boundaries, as these leaders' comments reflect:

"There are some people who want more power, and then they overstep their authority in certain matters. This has come up a few times, and I've had to point out who is in charge of finances and so on. But this hasn't happened very often, it's only when someone wants to take on too much leadership that we have to rein them in." (Formal leader 3)

"Ultimately, the decision might be such that you have to try to soften [the overstepping], on both sides. So that we can move forward and it's just one issue among others, so that we can somehow salvage the cooperative spirit in that situation and keep moving forward. These things happen every now and then. It is a kind of small-scale dictatorship where things are just done a certain way." (Formal leader 9)

However, informal leadership was mainly viewed as positive, and its benefits for initiative-taking and problem solving were seen to outweigh its potential drawbacks, as illustrated by the following example:

"People are thinking more on their own, outside of the box, and are solution driven." (Formal leader 16)

Interestingly, the occasional overstep did not prevent formal leaders from delegating responsibilities such as leading a group to informal leaders, even though such tasks also lay outside established responsibility boundaries. Hence, overstepping was accepted at some points, while at others it was not. Overall, formal leaders did not perceive that they handed too much responsibility or work to informal leaders, although they admitted that they did delegate, and specifically to those 'who can handle it'. However, the interviewees did not seem to perceive any contradictions in their own accounts, nor did they seem to regard this form of delegating to specific individuals as unfair or biased.

On the introduction of the concept of informal leadership in the interviews, the participants' initial comments and associations of informal leadership intertwine three aspects: informal leadership as a naturally occurring approach in some individuals, supporting personality without specific details being mentioned, and professional experience accumulated as expertise. Overall, the participants recognized the occurrence of informal leadership in their organizations, and stated that these individuals are easily identifiable and included in planning. Yet, it was articulated that the question was difficult, and that the issue had not been discussed within the organization. This is how the formal leaders described informal leadership:

"You can tell from each person whether they can do it [informal leadership] or not. [...] There are some guys who are naturally capable of it. In fact, I can say about every guy that I have, who can do it and who can't. Let's just say that I've noticed. It's a pretty difficult question." (Formal leader 3)

"Absolutely, yes, there are individuals who perhaps naturally take on that kind of role, sometimes for good and sometimes for bad." (Formal leader 5)

“I don’t think it has been talked about in those terms, but the managers definitely know those people. They are the ones who are always contacted or who you want to be involved when thinking about the goals for the next year. They are the people who you grab into groups, in which all levels of the organization are represented. So, they are sort of recognized, but they are not talked about like that or in those terms.” (Formal leader 8)

“Yes, yes, there are people like that, perhaps not in my current organization, but I’ve come across some along the way – it’s maybe a personality thing, that some people want to take a little more and others a little less [informal leadership responsibilities].” (Formal leader 9)

Notably, most of the interviewed formal leaders admitted that they had not previously considered informal leadership in a structured way. Their responses indicate an immediate recognition of informal leadership in practice, albeit with a limited ability to conceptualize or verbalize it. This suggests that informal leadership has not been explicitly addressed within their organizations. Moreover, it reflects a continuing emphasis on hierarchical leadership and a neglect of collective forms of leadership, which would necessitate rethinking established roles and power structures.

4.1 Informal leadership supporting formal leaders

Formal leaders consistently described informal leadership as alleviating their individual managerial workload, while contributing to collective work at both group and organizational levels.

4.1.1 Benefiting the formal leader

Giving responsibility to informal leaders was easier when individuals were seen as competent and proactive, and this practice was understood as a way to signal trust, make use of skills and provide autonomy, which made letting go of managerial control and allowing informal leadership easier, as reflected by one formal leader:

“It makes my life easy! People use their brains. People simply take responsibility and ownership. So, I do not need to know the details of what they do, which is especially helpful if they are experts in something that I am not an expert in. They come up with brilliant suggestions.” (Formal leader 6)

Generated trust was understood as an essential and relational element in the collaboration between formal and informal leaders. For such trust to emerge, there needed to be reciprocal understanding, a respect for the other’s knowledge and skills, shared experiences, ‘speaking the same language’, and a shared direction concerning work. Formal leaders stated that trust formed the foundation of their collaboration with informal leaders, and that once established, trust made it easier to let go of managerial control. This was described as beneficial for formal leaders, allowing them to shift the focus of their work, as illustrated by the following example:

“I get more time for strategic decision-making and focus on strategy development. I get to do more macro-effects and top-level relationship building, which I would otherwise not

be able to do. Even if they do additional stuff, I know that they would do it carefully, so I do not need to control. My life is a lot easier, as a lot of time is saved.” (Formal leader 15)

Open communication was seen as key to collaboration, facilitating the sharing of ideas and the addressing of problems. The ability to reciprocate and engage in dialogue was viewed to help attain a mutual understanding and shared goals. Secrecy or confidentiality were not mentioned in the interviews, suggesting that formal leaders may not have considered them to be relevant in relation to informal leadership. This further emphasizes that informal leadership is enabled through trust, openness, and shared competence rather than controlled access to information. Importantly, open communication was seen as fluent even in conflict, as this formal leader noted:

“As there is a lot of familiarity between us [the interviewee and informal leader(s)], conflicts are easier to solve than those with the formal managers – it is done through communication.” (Formal leader 10)

Formal leaders acknowledged that guiding work toward informal leaders required **allowing individual thinking and creativity**. Letting go of leadership control was associated with an acknowledgment by formal leaders of the need to allow freedom in developing solutions. Also, they clearly understood that their time and knowledge were not sufficient to solve issues concerning deep-knowledge levels, and hence, they allowed individual thinking and suggesting solutions outside of their own scope. In addition, they understood it as a way to steer their own work, and as one formal leader said:

“I strive that not everything goes in my direction, so I give them the tasks and responsibility, so that tasks are solved on the level where they appear. I do not want to micromanage everything. The group solves the problem if they have one goal. Then they get good results without me interfering and telling them what to do. For me, it is good that someone takes initiative. If you are in a meeting and show tasks, it is so much more effective when people volunteer to do things. You don’t want to tell them to do stuff and give them timelines. It is easier if they suggest and do it.” (Formal leader 17)

4.1.2 Benefiting the collective work

Formal leaders understood informal leadership also as a willingness to improve work and achieve results, which they described as purpose-led. This **goal-orientation** became visible in utilizing the accumulated knowledge and skills, which led to expanded views in which goal-orientation became part of the way of working. This ability for development can be counted as an ‘expertise’, as illustrated by the following account:

“From what I’ve seen through experience, a lot of it comes down to how people grow over time, you know – it’s the knowledge they build and their independent attitude and how they start leading somehow. Usually, the people who really understand the big picture [and] also the client or the purpose of the project are the ones who step into informal leadership roles. They tend to take initiative, but they also understand when they need support. So, they ask for help, they look for resources, and they try to bring others in to

collaborate, all with the goal of turning that vision for the client or the project into something real.” (Formal leader 21)

Formal leaders linked informal leadership to strong **customer-orientation**, grounded in the informal leaders’ vast knowledge and experience. This enabled informal leaders to understand customer needs and contribute to solving them, often independently. Formal leaders valued this holistic contribution, as illustrated below:

“In many cases, informal leaders bring good input to the table, they have good ideas about different ways the work could be carried out, like approaches that might work better or more efficiently. And quite often, they have a good understanding of the client and what they really need and how things might evolve, and then they have ideas that can be offered to the client.” (Formal leader 20)

4.2 Informal leadership as a work approach of specific individuals

Formal leaders viewed informal leadership as a long-term, individual-level process and phenomenon involving specific individuals’ continuous contribution to both personal and collective work. Rather than emerging in specific situations for short periods, informal leadership was understood as a more stable work approach.

4.2.1 Leading by doing

Participants perceived informal leadership in an intertwined manner **based on subject matter expertise and personality**. The knowledge that individuals possessed was seen as the foundation of informal leadership behaviour, with knowledge sharing between peers and leaders. Another, equally important and intertwined condition was personality. However, personality was not described in detail, but only as an innate tendency to lead and the ability to support a group, as formulated by one formal leader:

“Yes, there are definitely people who... to whom the responsibility just naturally flows. We have a few people who are very capable and knowledgeable, and they naturally accrue more responsibilities and work.” (Formal leader 2)

Participants reported that most informal leaders were **usually content in the informal role** and did not seek formal managerial positions, but instead wished to utilize their expertise through leadership in practice, although some were interested in advancing within the organizational hierarchy. Formal leaders recognized this tension between assuming broad informal leadership responsibilities and not aspiring to formal promotion, as exemplified in this quote:

“Sure there are those who are ambitious and want to climb the organizational ladder. But then there are the experienced ones – they are not interested in organizational power, which you gain in the organizational chart positions, but are content in their expert positions.” (Formal leader 4)

The views of formal leaders reflected that informal leadership was **taken for granted**, even though it was clearly valued. Accordingly, leaders did not pay attention to the informal leaders' workload as such, despite delegating work. Issues like compensation were not mentioned. Nonetheless, the formal leaders appreciated the informal leaders input and acknowledged delegating work, as formulated by one of the participants:

"And it's precisely those who exercise that informal leadership who are competent, and I trust them and have partly delegated that responsibility to them. Perhaps unintentionally or accidentally, or because it's easier for me that way. I trust them completely, and I don't need to monitor or supervise them." (Formal leader 3)

4.2.2 Leading the collective work

Informal leadership in collaboration with the formal leader consisted of degrees of consulting, collaboration, delegating, or even co-leading. In this collaboration, informal leaders were given responsibilities of leading tasks and people in an informal manner. Correspondingly, as most formal leaders understood that informal leaders have certain knowledge they lack, in a trusting collaboration, even guiding the manager was accepted. In a collaborative setting, informal leaders focused on advancing the group's work related to content and targets, while also coordinating the overall effort. Meanwhile, the formal leader stepped back to focus on administrative matters. One formal leader explains this:

"Initially, the decision making was mostly centralized to me and the informal leader was requested to propose options on how to proceed. As responsible for the team, I remain in charge of the decisions on the allocation of assignments and definition of the teams for each assignment, and the person in charge takes over the assignment even without a formal manager role." (Formal leader 19)

Informal leadership as independent role-taking was seen as benefiting formal leaders, as the individuals taking informal leadership roles initiated action, which grew to include and motivate others in the group and impact the work, even creating new solutions. This interaction was described by a formal leader:

"Then there are people who feel that they can take on a bigger role than they have on paper or based on their title, and they want to move things forward and they are kind of promoters who get other employees on board. And of course it helps that they take on this kind of responsibility that is not actually assigned to them, but they take it on anyway." (Formal leader 5)

The formal leaders conveyed that **informal leadership was conducted willingly and voluntarily**. Formal leaders appreciated informal leadership that emerged, and utilized the knowledge informal leaders possessed to serve the purpose of the work and further development. This approach was also extended to include others, and is described by one formal leader:

"Somehow, I see that often those guys due to their interests in issues may also be the kind of people who pull the group along, and they start thinking together, if something is bothering [them] or could be improved. I see that as useful for development." (Formal leader 8)

Guiding and leading others was seen as a foundation of informal leadership, established on an independent, proactive attitude combined with content-related knowledge. Such a combination allowed both the team and the formal leader to follow the informal leader more easily. Their influence involved supervising, guiding, and mentoring others (particularly younger colleagues), and occasionally extended to customers. While this group-oriented leading often emerged naturally, it was sometimes explicitly delegated by the formal authority, a dynamic described by one leader:

“They are useful to me in a way because I can’t guide the younger designers myself. But I have a few guys who can do it, and they are happy to take it on. Usually, they are the most experienced guys who know they can do it.” (Formal leader 3)

4.3 Informal leadership fostered through openness and a shallow hierarchy

Formal leaders acknowledged the reciprocal relationship with informal leaders and their own role in supporting or suppressing informal leadership behaviour through accepting, influencing and generating openness.

4.3.1 Being open to influencing

Open to being influenced by informal leaders was an invitation for informal leaders to share their knowledge and perceptions, and gather information about work from various angles to bring forward relevant topics. In this dialogue, formal leaders put themselves on the same level as informal leaders, opened themselves to being influenced, and even asked for guidance on relevant issues. Through being open to influencing, formal leaders accepted others’ views and gained relevant information for decision-making, as described in the following quote:

“I have somebody to talk to and who can give me a good overview. Also, I can get guidance and I have someone to ask about the technical aspects and directions we should take.” (Formal leader 2)

Recognizing, accepting and utilizing were the tools mentioned to promote informal leadership. Although leaders varied in how they recognized, accepted, and utilized informal leadership, the majority accepted informal leadership proactivity among their employees and utilized it to serve the goals and organization. This utilization was sometimes planned, as described by one formal leader:

“We monitor who takes proactive actions, and when possible organize the newly formed entities around these informal leaders.” (Formal leader 7)

Formal leaders acknowledged the need to **support and empower** informal leadership, especially if they collaborated with the informal leader, and steered the collective work towards goals with and through informal leadership. They further understood their formal role in making things possible through their positional power. One formal leader even saw this form of support as an opportunity for changing structures:

"Aligning people and aligning information, getting consensus between different thinking models, different targets across the information – I think this is very much needed in the automotive industry because you usually work in the matrix." (Formal leader 13)

4.3.2 Low resourcing to power and hierarchy

Recognizing the boundaries of one's own knowledge was essential for allowing informal leadership to take place, as it simultaneously challenged the formal leaders' position and knowledge. Our participants said they accepted others' knowledge, and this willingness to recognize the limits of their own knowledge supported the utilization of informal leadership. As one formal leader observed:

"They are experts in something that I am not an expert in." (Formal leader 6)

Informal leadership was utilized either intentionally or unintentionally by formal leaders to support their work, and they had done so for a long time, even if the concept was descriptively new to most of them. Use occurred intentionally, for example, via delegation, and unintentionally through a larger and more responsible workload – including aspects defining the collective work – than others. This was described by one formal leader, who said:

"Maybe I also give them more workload because they can handle it better than others, who might get stress symptoms." (Formal leader 4)

Informal leadership was seen as **buffering organizational hierarchy** and mitigating silos. Also, being separate from the organizational hierarchy, informal leadership was seen to increase information flows in organizations and work across the silos at different levels of the organization. One formal leader described this in this way:

"Informal leadership helps you to have an impact beyond the bounds of your area of responsibility. And I think this is very necessary to bridge over silos to create followers and so on. So, I see informal leadership as a superset of formal leadership." (Formal leader 14)

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that formal leaders find informal leadership to be beneficial to both them and to the collective work. Informal leadership was seen to be an approach to work undertaken by specific individuals with high knowledge levels, and formal leaders fall within its sphere of influence. To illustrate our findings, we provide a thematic framework (Figure 1) of informal leadership as perceived and utilized by the formal leaders in the technology sector organizations featured in this study.

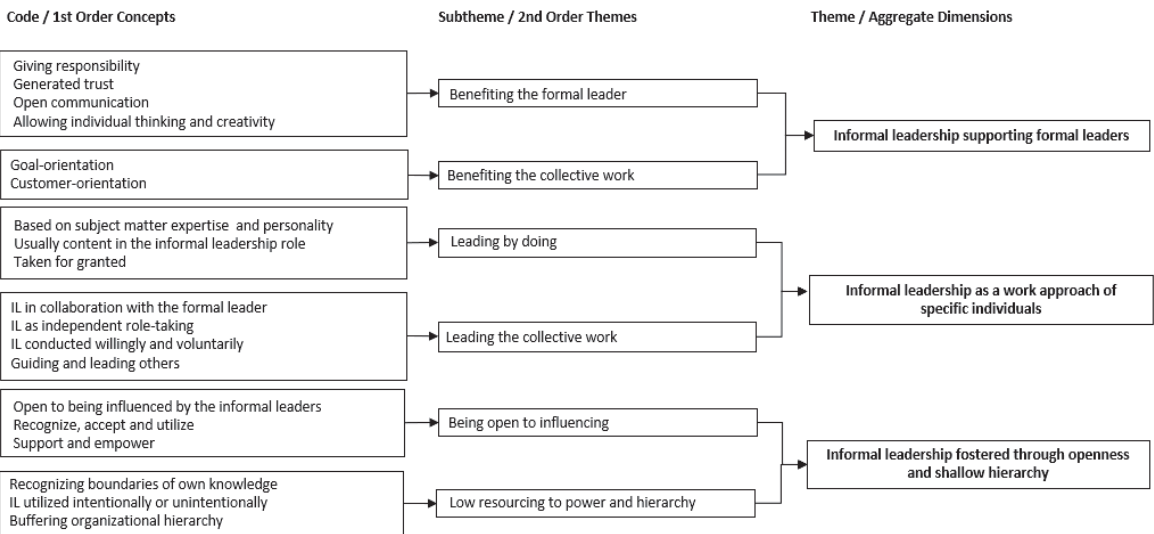


Figure 1. Thematic framework of informal leadership as perceived and utilized by formal leaders in technology sector organizations

5. Discussion

A lack of knowledge on the role of informal leadership in a hybridized leadership configuration (Gronn, 2009) led us to examine how informal leadership in contemporary organizations is experienced and utilized by formal leaders, which is a perspective largely absent from existing research (e.g., Nouman & Luria, 2025; Svensson, 2026; Qui et al., 2026). Drawing on 22 interviews with 22 formal leaders employed by technology sector organizations, this study demonstrates how informal leadership influences formal leadership and colleagues, group dynamics, customer interactions, and work outputs. The findings contribute to the notion that informal leadership is an influential component of leadership in organizations, and can have a role in reframing organizational leadership to ensure the utilization of deepening competencies and knowledge areas. Our analysis detected three main themes that demonstrate the ways in which formal and informal leadership interact in organizations: *Informal leadership supporting formal leaders*; *Informal leadership as a work approach of specific individuals*; *Informal leadership fostered through openness and shallow hierarchy*.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This research advances the research on a collective form of leadership known as informal leadership. Its contribution to the research on informal leadership is threefold. First, by approaching the study of informal leadership through a collective leadership lens, our research extends the understanding of the role of informal leadership in collective leadership, in particular where and how informal leadership resides and develops (Day et al., 2021; Gronn, 2009; Ospina et al., 2020). Our findings provide insights into “why, how, and when formal leaders respond

to informal leadership” (Qiu et al., 2026, p. 20). Our study supports Larsson et al. (2011) by showing that informal leaders operate across organizations and in collaboration with formal leaders through informality, information-based authority, and information brokering. We add further nuance by illustrating how this cooperation works in everyday organizational interaction. Based on our empirical findings, we developed a thematic framework (Figure 1) that uniquely illustrates how formal and informal leadership interact in organizations, and how cumulating informal leadership behaviours influence both individuals in formal leadership positions and collective work. Our findings indicate that in the context of collective leadership (Gronn, 2009; Ospina et al., 2020), informal leadership is experienced as influencing formal leadership, and at times merging with it to the extent of co-leadership. Challenging predominant views on informal leadership influence as being solely horizontal or lateral and limited to peer or within-group dynamics (see e.g., Chiu et al., 2021; Hanna et al., 2021; Neubert & Taggar, 2004), our research thus extends existing theory by showing how informal leadership also operates vertically, enabled by informal leaders’ deep subject matter expertise and a reciprocal relationship with formal leaders.

Second, our study contributes to debates on power-sharing in collective leadership, where hierarchical power-sharing is often taken for granted (Boira Lopez & Connelly, 2025; Qiu et al., 2026; Svensson et al., 2025). We advance current understanding by revealing how informal leadership often remains unrecognized and unarticulated in organizational discussions, despite its relevance to organizational power dynamics. Even though informal leadership is closely connected to practices such as delegation and co-leadership, our findings show that questions of positional power-sharing are rarely discussed in organizations. This pattern, where power-to-act is enabled but power-over is left unaddressed (van Baarle et al., 2024), points to the persistence of deeply embedded assumptions related to power in organizations.

Third, we advance the literature by proposing that informal leadership does not predict individuals’ willingness to assume formal leadership positions. Informal leadership is primarily a competence-based and group-oriented phenomenon (see e.g., Briker et al., 2021; Chiu et al., 2021; Eva et al., 2021). That informal leadership capacity is directly connected to expertise may explain why informal leaders often feel satisfied in their expert roles and are not necessarily motivated to pursue formal leadership positions, as our findings demonstrate. Moreover, given that competence functions as a key criterion for the acceptance of informal leadership by both peers and formal leaders (Liu et al., 2024; Qiu et al., 2026), we further suggest that formal leaders’ acceptance of informal leadership is also related to their own level of competence.

5.2 Limitations and future research

While this study has several strengths, it also has limitations that point to opportunities for further research. First, as the context of the present study is in technology sector organizations, future research could examine informal leadership in other sectors to assess the applicability of the findings more broadly. Second, while the qualitative analysis reached a saturation point and themes recurred across participants, future research could increase participant numbers and possibly broaden perspectives by using a wider range of participants and additional research methods. Although this study intentionally focused on formal leaders, future research could collect data from informal leaders or group members to mitigate potential self-source rating bias (De Haan et al., 2019). Self-reporting bias should also be considered, as the topic and research method may have encouraged formal leaders to provide socially and situation-

ally desirable responses on a sensitive issue, potentially leading to the underreporting of negative experiences and an overreporting of positive ones (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002). Observing informal leadership practices or using naturally occurring data could complement self-reported accounts and help mitigate potential self-source rating bias. Third, the long-term nature of informal leadership opens promising avenues for future research in collective and informal leadership research, particularly through longitudinal studies that can capture how the influence and impact of informal leadership evolve over time (Holm & Fairhurst, 2018). For instance, longitudinal research could examine how informal leadership is suppressed or utilized over time, offering insights into the evolving dynamics of collective leadership. Additionally, examining the issue of power motivation (Boira Lopez & Connelly, 2025) could provide deeper insights into the underlying drivers of informal leadership behaviour, helping to explain how and why such behaviours emerge.

5.3 Practical implications

This study offers several practical implications for organizations, HR professionals and leadership practice, and serves as guidance for formal leaders as well as experts who may act as, or become, informal leaders. From an organizational perspective, it is beneficial for all organizational employees to recognize informal leadership as embedded in everyday activities that support the collective use of expertise (Friedrich et al., 2009). Informal leadership offers a valuable lens for understanding everyday work dynamics and influence relationships within groups, particularly related to competence-based collaboration.

For formal leaders, informal leadership provides a way to make better use of group expertise in the complex realities of contemporary organizations (see e.g., He et al., 2021; Marion et al., 2016), and to ease their own workload. This requires accepting and supporting informal leadership and related expertise, even if it may exceed one's own expertise. By learning how to utilize informal leadership and accepting being influenced by it, it is possible to create collaborative and supportive interactions between formal and informal leadership that benefit all parties (Larsson et al., 2011; Nouman & Luria, 2025). Nevertheless, informal leadership remains outside formal organizational charts as it cannot be prescribed or controlled. However, it can be recognized, utilized, or dismissed by formal leaders. This calls for a broader understanding of leadership and its development that includes informal leadership: i.e. how it emerges, how it is enacted, and how it affects work. This is highly relevant as collective forms of leadership are increasingly needed to address the challenges of dispersed contemporary work that relies on diverse and specialized expertise (Day et al., 2021).

For informal leaders, it is important to notice that their influence on others is not defined by positional power, but can emerge anywhere through competence-based influence and group-oriented leadership behaviours (Eva et al., 2021; He et al., 2021). While taking the lead may come naturally to some, as reflected by our participants, the findings also highlight opportunities for individuals to make their expertise visible and to develop an understanding of the leadership influence that may emerge from it (Chiu et al., 2021; Hanna et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). Yet, it is also important to acknowledge that informal leadership is granted by others (Badura et al., 2022; Neubert & Taggar, 2004), and therefore exploiting the gained influence is not advisable, as it may gradually diminish the granted influence.

5.4 Conclusion

We conducted a qualitative study to investigate how formal leaders perceive and utilize informal leadership. We identified three themes — *Informal leadership supporting formal leaders*, *Informal leadership as a work approach of specific individuals*, and *Informal leadership fostered through openness and shallow hierarchy* — revealing how informal leadership operates as a phenomenon that has influence and impact beyond formal power. Our findings show that formal leaders experience informal leadership as beneficial, are influenced by it in multiple ways, and perceive it as a long-term process that is enacted through the practices of specific individuals. This study demonstrates that informal leadership constitutes a significant component of collective leadership, and in turn contributes to reframing leadership in organizations as they move away from heroic, hierarchical models.

References

- Antonakis, J., & Day, D. V. (2018). *The nature of leadership*. 3rd Edition. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Badura, K. L., Galvin, B. M., Lee, M. Y., Badura, K. L., Galvin, B. M., & Lee, M. Y. (2022). Leadership Emergence: An integrative review. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 107:11, 2069–2100.
- Banks, G., Dionne, S., Schmid Mast, M., & Sayama, H. (2022). Leadership in the digital era: A review of who, what, when, where, and why. *The Leadership Quarterly* 33:5, 101634.
- Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *NursingPlus Open* 2, 8–14.
- Boira Lopez, A., & Connelly, S. (2025). The role of focal leaders in collective leadership behavior: A historiometric analysis of socialized and personalized leaders. *European Management Journal* 43:5, 812–830.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3:2, 77–101.
- Briker, R., Hohmann, S., Walter, F., Lam, C. K., & Zhang, Y. (2021). Formal supervisors' role in stimulating team members' informal leader emergence: Supervisor and member status as critical moderators. *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 42:7, 913–932.
- Chiu, C. (Chad), Nahrgang, J., Bartram, A., Wang, J., & Tesluk, P. (2021). Leading the team, but feeling dissatisfied: Investigating informal leaders' energetic activation and work satisfaction and the supporting role of formal leadership. *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 42:2, 527–550.
- Day, D. V., Riggio, R. E., Tan, S. J., & Conger, J. A. (2021). Advancing the science of 21st-century leadership development: Theory, research, and practice. *The Leadership Quarterly* 32:5, 101557.
- Denis, J. L., Langley, A., & Sergi, V. (2012). Leadership in the plural. *Academy of Management Annals* 6:1, 211–283.
- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 62:1, 107–115.
- Eva, N., Wolfram Cox, J., Tse, H. H. M., & Lowe, K. B. (2021). From competency to conversation: A multi-perspective approach to collective leadership development. *The Leadership Quarterly* 32:5, 101346.
- Friedrich, T., Vessey, W., Schuelke, M., Ruark, G., & Mumford, M. (2009). A framework for understanding collective leadership: The selective utilization of leader and team expertise within networks. *The Leadership Quarterly* 20:6, 933–958.
- Gjerald, O., Kars-Unluoglu, S., Zabicka-Włodarczyk, M., & Lupina-Wegener, A. (2025). Changing change: From heroic leadership to collective agency. *Journal of Change Management* 25:3, 169–178.
- Gjerald, O., Lupina-Wegener, A., Crevani, L., Kuipers, B., Kars-Unluoglu, S., Murphy, J., Meglio, O., Meier, N., Vardaman, J., Zabicka-Włodarczyk, M., & Zabicka, M. (2026). Reframing leadership and organizational change: 25 Years of inquiry at JCM. *Journal of Change Management* 26:1, 1–7.
- Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. (2013). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods* 16:1, 15–31.
- Graneheim, U. H., Lindgren, B.-M., & Lundman, B. (2017). Methodological challenges in qualitative content analysis: A discussion paper. *Nurse Education Today* 56, 29–34.
- Gronn, P. (2009). Leadership configurations. *Leadership* 5:3, 381–394.
- Hanna, A. A., Smith, T. A., Kirkman, B. L., & Griffin, R. W. (2021). The emergence of emergent leadership: A comprehensive framework and directions for future research. *Journal of Management* 47:1, 76–104.

- He, V. F., von Krogh, G., & Sirén, C. (2021). Expertise diversity, informal leadership hierarchy, and team knowledge creation: A study of pharmaceutical research collaborations. *Organization Studies* 43:6, 907–930.
- Hill, C. E., & Knox, S. (2021). *Essentials of Consensual Qualitative Research*. American Psychological Association.
- Holm, F., & Fairhurst, G. T. (2018). Configuring shared and hierarchical leadership through authoring. *Human Relations* 71:5, 692–721.
- Johannessen, I. A., McArthur, P. W., & Jonassen, J. R. (2015). Informal leadership redundancy: Balancing structure and flexibility in subsea operations. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 31:3, 409–423.
- Kuckartz, U. & Rädiker, S. (2023). *Qualitative content analysis: Methods, Practice and Software*. 2nd Edition. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Kalish, Y., & Luria, G. (2021). Traits and time in leadership emergence: A longitudinal study. *The Leadership Quarterly* 32:2, 101443.
- Larsson, M., Segerstéen, S., & Svensson, C. (2011). Information and informality: Leaders as knowledge brokers in a high-tech firm. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* 18:2, 175–191.
- Larsson, M., Barfod, J. R., Clifton, J., & Schnurr, S. (2025). Exploring the realization of moments of leadership: A methodological approach. *Organization Studies* 46:9, 1307–1330.
- Liden, R., Wang, X., & Wang, Y. (2025). The evolution of leadership: Past insights, present trends, and future directions. *Journal of Business Research* 186, 115036.
- Liu, S., Li, N., Wang, H., Wang, Z., & Du, J. (2024). Is an informal leader always popular? The curvilinear relationships between informal leadership, threat to peers, and helping from peers. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* 42:2, 745–776.
- Liu, S., Summers, J. K., Guo, N., Li, X., & Wang, H. (2025). Political skill and informal leader emergence: The role of relationships, competence and outcome interdependence. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 98:1, 1–22.
- Marion R, Christiansen J, Klar HW, Schreiber, C. & Akif Erdener M. (2016). Informal leadership, interaction, cliques and productive capacity in organizations: A collectivist analysis. *The Leadership Quarterly* 27:2, 242–260.
- Muijs, D., Chapman, C., & Armstrong, P. (2013). Can early careers teachers be teacher leaders? A study of second-year trainees in the teach first alternative certification programme. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership* 41:6, 767–781.
- Neubert, M. J., & Taggar, S. (2004). Pathways to informal leadership: The moderating role of gender on the relationship of individual differences and team member network centrality to informal leadership emergence. *The Leadership Quarterly* 15:2, 175–194.
- Nouman, H., & Luria, G. (2025). Beyond formal authority: Cultural perspectives on informal leadership in social work practice. *British Journal of Social Work* 55:8, 3694–3713.
- Ospina, S. M., Foldy, E. G., Fairhurst, G. T., & Jackson, B. (2020). Collective dimensions of leadership: Connecting theory and method. *Human Relations* 73:4, 441–463.
- Pan, J., Liu, S., Ma, B., & Qu, Z. (2018). How does proactive personality promote creativity? A multilevel examination of the interplay between formal and informal leadership. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 91:4, 852–874.
- Qiu, F., Yu, L., Wen, X., Duffy, M., & Mai, K. M. (2026). When the moon is jealous of the stars: Implications of informal leadership for supervisor downward jealousy and their treatment of other subordinates. *Academy of Management Journal*, in-press.
- Sklaveniti, C. (2020). Moments that connect: Turning points and the becoming of leadership. *Human Relations* 73:4, 544–571.

- Stincelli, E., & Baghurst, T. (2014). A grounded theory exploration of informal leadership qualities as perceived by employees and managers in small organizations. *International Journal of Business Management and Economic Research* 5:1, 1–8.
- Svensson, I. (2026). What's next for leadership after the hero rides off? A critical reflection on collective and processual approaches to leadership. *Journal of Change Management* 26:1, 73–81.
- Svensson, I., Stureson Stabel, L., & von Knorring, M. (2025). From 'I' to 'We' - conceptualising the work and experiences of managers in fostering collective leadership. *Leadership* 22:1, 40–60.
- van Baarle, S., Bobelyn, A. S. A., Dolmans, S. A. M., & Romme, A. G. L. (2024). Power as an enabling force: An integrative review. *Human Relations* 77:2, 143–171.
- Van De Mierop, D., Jonathan, C., & Verhelst, A. (2020). Investigating the interplay between formal and informal leaders in a shared leadership configuration: A multimodal conversation analytical study. *Human Relations* 73:4, 490–515.
- White, L., Currie, G., & Lockett, A. (2016). Pluralised leadership in complex organizations: Exploring the cross network effects between formal and informal leadership relations. *The Leadership Quarterly* 27:2, 280–297.
- Wilson, D. C. (2023). Defining leadership. *Philosophy of Management* 22, 99–128.
- Yammarino, F. J., Salas, E., Serban, A., Shirreffs, K., & Shuffler, M. L. (2012). Collectivistic leadership approaches: Putting the “We” in leadership science and practice. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 5:4, 382–402.
- Zhang, C., Nahrgang, J. D., Ashford, S. J., & DeRue, D. S. (2020). The risky side of leadership: Conceptualising risk perceptions in informal leadership and investigating the effects of their over-time changes in teams. *Organization Science* 31:5, 1138–1158.
- Zhang, Z., Waldman, D. A., & Wang, Z. (2012). A multilevel investigation of leader–member exchange, informal leader emergence, and individual and team performance. *Personnel Psychology* 65:1, 49–78.