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# Negotiating leader identities through indirect mockery in talk *about* decision-making in a distributed leadership context

## Abstract

In this article, we scrutinise how humour, and in particular, indirect mockery contributes to the construction of leader identities in talk *about* decision-making in an organization characterized by a distributed leadership context. So rather than focusing on decision-making episodes themselves, we tease out an aspect of the goal achievement side of the leadership influence process. Through multimodal discourse analysis, we focus on episodes in which the implementation side of decisions is discussed and in which the head of the team initiates a humorous sequence, as this turned out to be an integral part of talk about decision-making. We found that the humour was always oriented towards upper management and that it could serve various functions. Overall, we argue that indirect mockery was a crucial means to navigate the tension that emerges from the team head's position within the complex leadership constellation, thus offering a critical perspective on distributed leadership.

**Keywords:** discursive leadership, distributed leadership, meetings, humour, laughter, indirect mockery, multimodal discourse analysis

## 1. Introduction

The concept of leadership has been the subject of much debate, which is not surprising as the term “does not signify anything specific or fixed” (Kelly 2014, 906), endowing it with a “seemingly unlimited elasticity” (Kelly 2008, 767). This has resulted in “many competing and complementary definitions, meanings and interpretations” (Kelly 2014, 906), which seem to have little in common, apart from some form of reference to the conceptualization of leadership as an influence process (Yukl 1989). This is also central in the seminal definition which we draw on in this paper, namely of leadership as “the process (act) of influencing the activities of an organised group in its efforts towards goal setting and goal achievement” (Stogdill 1950, 3). Traditionally, this process was conceptualised as one-directional and static (DeRue & Ashford 2010, 628), namely as emanating from the central figure of a heroic leader who was surrounded by followers who resembled a flock of “timid, docile sheep” (Collinson 2006, 179). Yet, in the last decades, there is an increasing recognition that “the identities of followers and leaders” are “inextricably linked, mutually reinforcing, and shifting within specific contexts” (Collinson 2006, 187), thus leading to a more dynamic, and less heroic, conceptualisation of leadership.

Such a dynamic and relational understanding of leadership has always been central in studies that approach leadership from a discursive perspective. Defining leadership as a phenomenon that is locally accomplished in situated interaction (Fairhurst 2007), discursive approaches

have been seeking to “demonstrate how leadership as a shared phenomenon is enacted as part of everyday workplace routines” (Clifton, Larsson, & Schnurr 2020, 513). Thus, rather than attempting to tease out static features that define ‘great leaders’, scholars of discursive leadership have capitalised on the ‘*doing*’ of leadership – that is, to practically engage in the process of influence through which organisational goals are achieved (Northouse 2016) – as it is enacted in the day-to-day activities of institutional life.

Discursive leadership is firmly embedded in social constructionism, and this implies that communication takes up the center stage of the research. This is because the “social constructionist approach frames communication as a process that is instrumental in the creation of our social worlds, rather than simply an activity that we do within them” (Holmes, Marra, & Vine 2011, 21). From this perspective, a leader identity is thus “not an a priori label that participants carry with them”, but instead it is “made procedurally relevant through (...) talk” (Clifton 2006, 209). This means that rather than automatically attributing the identity of leader to the hierarchical superior, researchers carefully tease out how participants may “talk themselves into being as the leader” (Clifton 2006, 209) on a turn-by-turn basis, and how these leader identities may shift from one turn to the next.

This dynamic and more shared conceptualisation of leadership is also in line with changes at the macro-social level that have generally characterised western workplace contexts. In the last few decades, these have seen a shift from the ‘old economy’ to the so-called ‘New Work Order’ (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear 1996), and this implied – along with various other processes (see e.g., Van De Mierop and Clifton (2017) for an overview) – a tendency towards hierarchical flattening. And so, while a minimal interpretation of the collaborative nature of leadership ‘only’ requires the alignment of ‘followers’ with the interactional moves of ‘leaders’ (Larsson, Clifton, & Schnurr 2021), more maximal interpretations have gained increasing academic interest as these reflect the current-day organisational ideology to orient to more egalitarianism. This explains the surge in studies that focus on the various forms of collective or shared leadership (Fairhurst, Jackson, Foldy, & Ospina 2020), such as co-leadership (Schnurr & Chan 2011; Vine, Holmes, Marra, Pfeifer, & Jackson 2008), informal leadership (Van De Mierop, Clifton, & Verhelst 2020) and distributed leadership (Bolden 2011; Choi & Schnurr 2014; Clifton 2017). The latter will be the focus of our article, and can be conceptualized specifically as a form of collective leadership characterized by a combination of various leaders situated at different hierarchical levels across intra-

organizational and inter-organizational boundaries (cf. Denis, Langley, and Sergi 2012, 213). Finally, as noted by Denis et al., most studies about these various forms of plural leadership rely on the assumption that plurality “necessarily implies convergence around common goals and directions” (2012, 269). Because of this ideological undertone, they observe a tendency to highlight positive aspects of these shared forms of leadership, while at the same time rendering “more contentious organizational situations” invisible (Denis, Langley, and Sergi 2012, 269), which is a research gap we also aim to address in this article.

In order to investigate such rapidly shifting leader identities in these various leadership constellations, many discursive leadership studies have attempted to track these down by zooming in on decision-making episodes (see e.g. Clifton 2012, 2017; Van De Mieroop 2020). This is not surprising, as decisions can be defined as the creation of a commitment to a future course of action (Huisman 2001, 70) and they are thus crucial for influencing the future shaping of the organisational reality. There are of course various strategies that can be used in the course of such decision-making episodes – as well as in other leader activities – but in this contribution, we specifically highlight the use of humour in relation to leadership.

Humour has been extensively discussed in interactional sociolinguistic studies of leadership and it has been described as a “valuable strategic resource (...) which leaders can choose to use where appropriate” (Holmes & Marra 2006, 123). Next to “its core function of providing entertainment or amusement”, humour tends to serve “a wide range of other functions” (Holmes & Marra 2006, 124) which can be divided in two different strands. On the one hand, humour tends to be used to reinforce solidarity, such as creating a positive working atmosphere and ‘doing collegiality’ (Holmes 2006; Holmes & Marra 2006; Kangasharju & Nikko 2009; Schnurr 2009a, 2009b), while it on the other hand also often serves to attenuate aspects that relate to power issues, such as mitigating instructions or admissions of errors and softening critical comments and complaints (Holmes & Marra 2006; Vöge 2010).

Next to this functional approach to humour, Watson and Drew have also emphasised that it is important to examine “what humour and laughter enable participants to do, in interactional terms, in relation to influence, decision-making and the emergence of leadership” (Watson & Drew 2017, 316). Linking up with work on laughter<sup>1</sup> from a conversation analytic perspective, they tease out how laughter is not “an adjunct to humour, a mere side product, but a linguistic imperative”, as it is by sharing laughter as a result of humour, that the group is

aligned (Watson & Drew 2017, 326) and that – through these locally negotiated interactions – organisations are performatively enacted. Importantly, from this perspective, shared laughter needs to be analysed as an interactional achievement (see e.g. Glenn 2003), i.e., by looking at how laughter is initiated, how the laughter itself is produced, as well as the broader interactional context. Earlier research shows how a playful frame that anticipates laughter from the co-participants can be indicated through various resources such as laugh particles or smiling, exaggeration (Holt 2011), interdiscursive expressions (Haakana & Sorjonen 2011), as well as prosodic or bodily practices such as modulation of voice loudness and quality, or shrugging shoulders (Ford & Fox 2010). The laughing itself can take various forms, as, for example, different laugh particles may have different connotations (Glenn 2003).

As for the broader context, research on meetings from such a conversation analytic perspective has shown that laughter is, on the one hand, connected to the opening and closing phases of meetings (Kangasharju & Nikko 2009), and on the other, to potentially delicate activities such as complaining (Vöge 2010) or assigning challenging tasks (Kangasharju & Nikko 2009). As Watson and Drew (2017, 318) have argued, this conversation analytic perspective on laughter can be merged with the interactional sociolinguistic view on humour as a leadership strategy by focusing on “sequences of talk-in-interaction” that are “understood as humorous by participants” and in which laughter features centrally. In this article, we aim to add to the previous research as sketched above by shifting the analytical lens slightly, yet importantly, in two different ways, as we explain in the next section.

## **2. Research aim and method**

First, in this article we focus on the organisational functions of humour and shared laughter as they are realised through specific interactional practices by zooming in on a very specific kind of humour, namely laughing at an absent third party. This links up with research on gossip, which can be defined as “talk which involves pejorative judgment of an absent other” (Eggin & Slade 1997, 278) and which has been described as multifunctional, but which is often used to establish and maintain social relations, e.g., by showing “solidarity with another member of the group, while evaluating an absent third party” (Thornborrow & Morris 2004, 267). More specifically, our analysis resonates with “the performance of gossip as a form of indirect mockery” (Acuña Ferreira 2014, 625), which, next to performing the functions of gossip, also tends to have a highly salient entertainment value. In particular, we aim to tease out how such

indirect mockery can be linked to the construction of leadership and how this functions interactionally as well as in terms of identity work, especially in relation to leadership.

Second, as mentioned above, we study a quite complex leadership context which can be considered as an example of ‘distributed leadership’ (see more details in the data description below). Rather than focusing on decision-making episodes in which a hierarchical leader is the pivotal figure, which is usually the case in leadership studies, we decided to shift the focus to another, integral aspect of such a distributed leadership constellation and zoom in on meetings in which one of the *other* leaders, i.e. a head of a team, is the central figure and in which talk *about* decision making takes place.

Thus, first, rather than relying on the hierarchical position of this head of the team to argue that she is engaging in leadership, we draw on Hosking’s (1988, 152), definition of the leader being the one who, regardless of their official position in the organisation, emerges as “salient, relative to others” in terms of influencing the decision-making practices of an organisation. And second, these meetings are oriented at the implementation of decisions, or they aim to provide a reflection on ongoing decision processes. Linking back to the definition of leadership as “the process (act) of influencing the activities of an organised group in its efforts towards goal setting and goal achievement” (Stogdill 1950, 3), we thus shift the focus from the often-scrutinised goal setting-meetings to meetings that are much closer to the achievement of the previously set goals. In these meetings, which we will discuss in more detail below, the head of the team reports on decisions that were made or are in the process of being made. As could be expected given the current New Work Order ideals of egalitarianism, a straightforward imposition of these decisions tends to be avoided, and so we will tease out in this article how through the distributed leadership constellation, these decisions are presented and negotiated to become more palatable, and in particular, how laughing at a third party comes into play in this process.

Finally, in terms of method we draw on multimodal discourse analysis, meaning that we combine an analysis of discursive features typical of interactional sociolinguistic approaches to language in the workplace studies (see e.g. Holmes et al. 2011) with a more conversation analytically inspired scrutiny of the sequential and multimodal characteristics of the interaction under study (see e.g. Mondada 2016). The analysis is holistic, in the sense that we study how the conversational actions are achieved through the complex and neatly timed

interplay of all these features together, which has already proven to be a useful approach for the study of leadership in meetings (see e.g. Van De Mieroop 2020; Van De Mieroop et al. 2020).

### **3. Data**

The data come from the context of a development project in a Finnish white-collar company which is undergoing a major information system change. In this company, there is quite a complex distributed leadership constellation in place, since the company collaborates with a consulting group that works only for this company and is thus, basically, also on the company's payroll, but in spite of this, works relatively independently. The group offers training services for the company on the use of the new information system and its implementation in the organisation's daily work.

In this study, we focus on meetings held by this consulting group team. The team consists of a head – whose name we pseudonymised to Eveliina – who is the main go-between between the team and the upper management of the company, and twelve coaches who give these trainings. During team meetings, which vary in structure, content and number of participants, Eveliina regularly brings news, plans and information from the upper management to the team. In this article, we zoom in on those plans, as they typically consist of talk about decisions that were made – or are in the process of being made – at the upper management level. After the discussion of these decisions during the team meetings, the head of the team is expected to relay the team's comments back to the upper management.

For this study, we draw on video-recordings of ten meetings of the consulting group, which each lasted for 1.5 to 2.5 hours (18 hours in all). The consent to use the video-recordings was obtained from all participants. To ensure anonymity, all names in the excerpts are pseudonyms. As we focus on fragments about ongoing or finalised decisions in which laughter occurred, we made a selection from these data and could retain 14 fragments for further analysis.

### **4. Analysis**

On the basis of the analysis of these 14 fragments, we found that the head of the team presented herself in two different ways in relation to the decision-making process that she is reporting on, namely 1) as a follower who did not have any say in the decision, or, 2) as an

agentive collaborator in the decision-making process, or, in other words, as a co-leader. In the analysis, we will show how these two identities are negotiated with the help of laughter. We start by the former and then move on to the latter scenario. In both cases, we will also show how these identities are intertwined with her role as team leader and the ambivalence of her position in the distributed leadership constellation. In line with our research aim, we especially tease out how laughing at a third party comes into play in these discussions of ongoing or finalised decisions that the team will eventually have to carry out in practice.

#### **4.1 Head of the team as a follower**

In the first extract, the head of the team is informing the team members of the planned timetable of the project which is presented as a decision that has already been made by the upper management. This is evident in the document on a digital platform that the team uses and that is projected on the screen of the meeting room. In particular, the document is labelled: 'The ratified timetable of the project' and the definitive nature of the decision is further demonstrated by the marking of the ratification's date and author (namely the administrative body in charge of this). Thus, from the documentation on the platform, it is clear to the participants that these are finalized decisions. In explaining the decision to the team members, the head of the team utilises the screen, pointing and scrolling to relevant parts on the platform.



## Extract 1

01 EVE: ja tosiaan koulutusten ajankohta oli nyt  
and indeed the time for the trainings was now  
02 se kaheksas \*yhdeksäs #,(.) sit se henri sano tällai  
the eighth ninth, (.) then henri put it like this  
\*EVE PAINTS '08-09-2020' ON THE PLATFORM  
#FIG.1

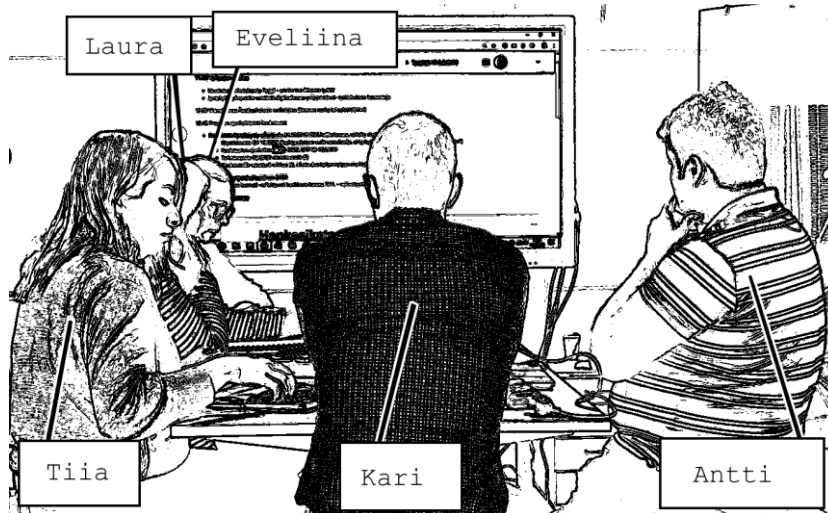


FIG.1

03 ääneen että (1.0) niinku se käyttöönotto  
that (1.0) like the deployment  
04 oli sillai jotenki et \*ku se on quu neljä, (.)  
was kind of like as it is Q four  
\*EVE PAINTS 'DEPLOYMENT Q4 10/2020'  
05 et @suhtaudutaan vielä varauksella, ei  
@let's take it with a grain of salt for now, it doesn't  
06 tarkoita että edetään jä<sup>m</sup>ptisti t(h)äm<sup>n</sup>  
mean that we will proceed prec<sup>i</sup>sely acc(h)ording to  
07 m(h)ukaan.@  
t(h)his.@  
08 ?: hah  
09 ?: \*he: #  
\*SOF SMILES

#FIG.2

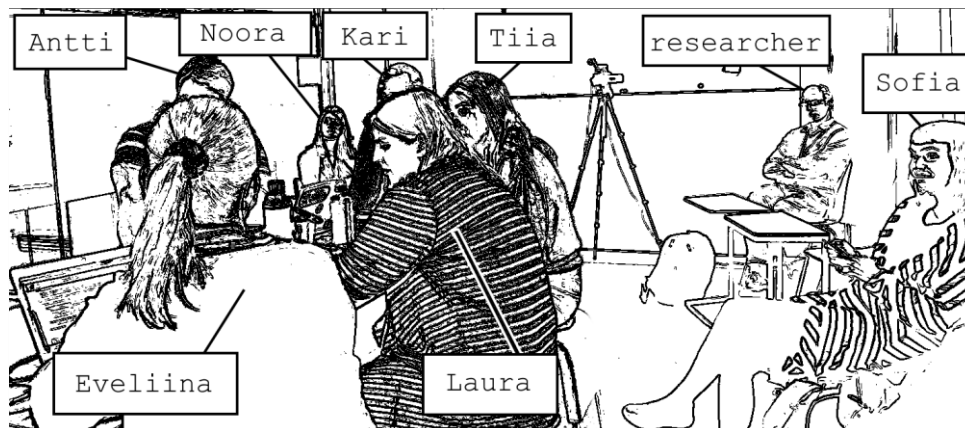


FIG.2



The attempt to pursue laughter is successful in that two of the participants laugh (lines 8–9)<sup>3</sup>, and two of them smile (lines 9, 10). Thus, there is joint laughter, and a joint recognition of humour. Importantly, the humour is targeted at the upper management, in particular at their inability to stick to the timetables they have set themselves. The laughter, however, is quite restrained. The participants either produce single laugh particles or just smile. Also, Eveliina herself shifts quickly to a serious mode again, as we see in the final lines of the extract, thus displaying a professional attitude.

Overall, in this extract, we could observe that Eveliina engages in ‘decision-announcing’ (Clifton 2009) and attributes the decision to the upper management, in particular to Henri (line 2). In this way, she distances herself from this decision-making process, and this is further reinforced by the contextualisation cues (Gumperz 1992), namely her change in tone and production through laughter, that mark the utterance as indirect mockery. Through this, she expresses her critical stance towards the way the upper management deals with these timetables. At the same time, however, she orients to her position in the distributed leadership context as she constructs herself as the one who has access to the discussions with the upper management and can announce the decision to the team in order for it to be implemented, thus influencing the goal achievement side of this decision. In this respect, it is also important that she guides the team through the indirect mockery, first through inviting them to the humour frame and, consequently, joint criticism of the upper management, and then through returning quickly to the serious frame.

We see a fairly similar case in extract 2, in that the decision in question has been made elsewhere. The head of the team presents her position in the distributed leadership constellation much in the same way as in extract 1, namely as not having had any part in the decision, but only having access to it, as is shown by the emphasis on her role as merely ‘forwarding’ the ‘message’.<sup>4</sup> The issue concerns the way the participants should design the footnotes of their PowerPoint slides when they give workshops. In particular, the upper managers have decided that the team members can put both their own names and the name of their organization (anonymised as ‘Tuomikari’) only on the first slide and should put the name of the project (anonymised as ‘Teka project’) in the footnotes in the rest of the presentation. The head of the team has explained this issue very extensively prior to the extract below, and, as signalled by the concluding conjunction *ni* ‘so’ in line 1, Eveliina is now reaching the end of her monologue:

## Extract 2

01 EVE: ni to- kirjotetaan se me- (.) niinku ne meiän (2.5)  
 so (-)- let's write that our (.) like our (2.5)  
 2 Tuomikari ja (.) valmentajan tiedot >siihe< (.) siihe  
 Tuomikari and (.) the coach's info >there< (.) there  
 3 etusivulle ja sitte (.) muuten siellä  
 on the front page and then (.) otherwise  
 4 alaviitteis käytetään vaan tommosta epämäärästä  
 in the footnotes let's just use that type of vague  
 5 teka-hanke- (0.5) -termiä. ni sitte ne et jos kuka  
 term (0.5) teka project. so then basically whoever  
 6 tahansa valmentaa ni, (0.5) ei tarvi joka sivulle niit  
 is training, (0.5) we don't then need to change it on  
 7 sit muuttaa. (1.5) >tommonen< pieni pieni # yksityiskohta.  
every page (1.5) a tiny tiny detail >like that<.

#FIG.3

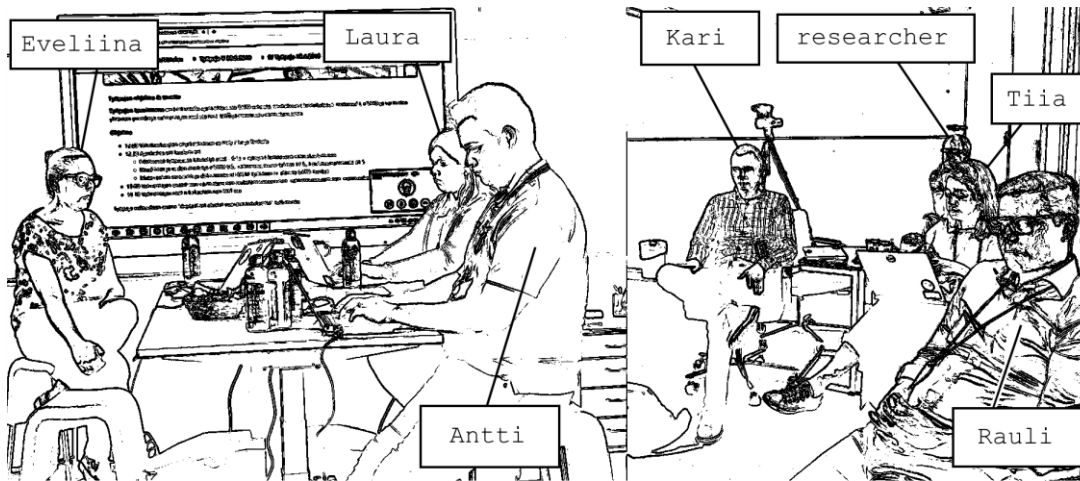


FIG.3

8 .hhhhh mutta koska asiakkaamme on tarkka näistä  
 .hhhhh but since our client is pedantic about these  
 9 asioista \*niin (.) niin pyysi tä- pyysi tätä tietoa  
 things they (.) they asked me asked me to forward this  
 \*KAR SMILES  
 10 (1.0) tei:lle sitten välittämään tästä myös. (1.2) eli  
 piece of info (1.0) to you: as well. (1.2) so  
 11 siellä kyl sit kaikki kirjotusvirheet ja muut käydään  
 they will certainly go through all typos  
 12 varmasti (.) \*su\*urennuslasilla #\*1(h)äpi.  
 and the like (.) with a magnifying g(h)lass.

\*RAU SMILES, TURNS GAZE TOWARD KAR AND TII

\*KAR SMILES, TURNS GAZE TOWARDS RAU

\*TII SMILES, TURN GAZE  
TOWARDS RAU

\*LAU SMILES

#FIG.4

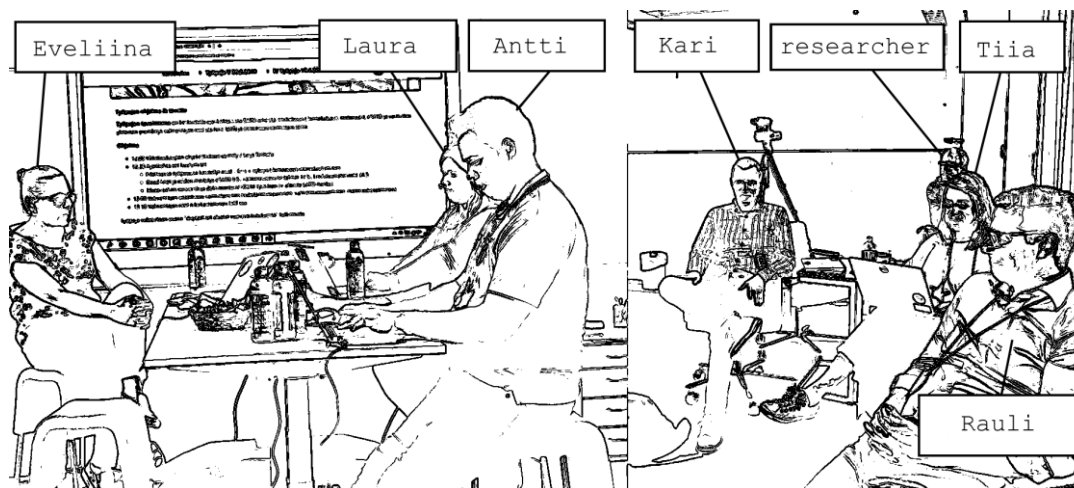


FIG. 4

13 (1.0) .hh joo.  
 (1.0) hh yeah.

The extract starts with an encouragement (see the directives addressed to the whole group, translated as ‘let’s’ in lines 1 and 4) to the team members to implement the upper managers’ decision about naming practices on PowerPoint slides. In this way, she is clearly exerting influence on the team members in order to achieve these newly set organisational goals. This is then followed by yet another account – as there was already an account prior to the extract (not shown here for reasons of space) – in which an important advantage of this decision is mentioned (i.e., if the instructions are followed, unnecessary changes will not be needed in the future, see lines 5–7). The nature of these accounts is serious: they describe the beneficial consequences of this decision.

Importantly, this is then followed by a minimisation of the issue at hand, which Eveliina now presents as ‘a tiny detail’ and of which the pettiness is underlined by the repetition and emphasis on *pieni* ‘tiny’ (line 7). Then yet another account ensues (lines 8–12), but this has quite a different tone. Instead of focusing on the consequences of the decision, it zooms in on the characteristics of those who have given the instruction. They are presented as *tarkka* ‘pedantic’ (line 8). Through this formulation, and through prefacing the account with a depiction of the issue as a ‘tiny tiny detail’ (line 7), the head of the team is thus explicitly criticising the upper management. Moreover, she further distances herself from the upper management by labelling them as ‘our client’ (line 8).<sup>5</sup> All in all, this account thus functions as a criticism.

Moreover, the criticism may be understood as having a non-serious tone to it and is thus expected to potentially engender laughter, as we can indeed observe as Kari produces a brief smile (line 9) shortly after the word *tarkka* ‘pedantic’. Yet, the other participants do not respond in any way and this lack of uptake may be the reason why Eveliina pursues the humorous mode further (lines 10–12). This is initiated by the particle *eli* ‘so’, which is used in Finnish for marking a reformulation of what was said earlier (see Sorjonen 2018). In this reformulation, Eveliina anticipates, in an exaggerated way (cf. Holt, 2011), what the ‘pedantic client’ is going to do in the future, namely using a ‘magnifying glass’ in going through ‘typos’ (lines 11–12). In this turn, she not only makes her critical tone even more explicit, but also marks it more clearly as humorous as she produces the last word of her turn through laughter. There is thus a clear pursuit of laughter through Eveliina’s mockery of the decisions of a third party, namely the upper management.

This time the head of the team is a bit more successful in evoking a response. While none of the participants laugh in a hearable way, four of them smile and some of them turn towards each other while smiling (see comparison between figure 3 and 4). There is thus a brief moment of joint amusement which is targeted at the ‘pedantic’ upper management that have made the decision on their behalf. Once again, however, the orientation to the humour is very restrained. The head of the team produces one word through laughter and the other participants only smile. Also, after the joint smiling, Eveliina utters the particle *joo* ‘yeah’, which functions here as a closing device of the humour. Thus, similar to extract 1, while Eveliina initiated the humorous mode, she is also the one to close it again and return the group’s orientation to the main activity.

Overall, regarding these two extracts, we can observe similar tendencies with regard to two intertwined perspectives related to the head of the team’s position in the distributed leadership constellation: Eveliina’s portrayal of her relationship to the upper management, and her activities as a team leader. The indirect mockery is crucial in both respects. As for the first perspective, Eveliina distances herself from the upper management and presents herself as merely a messenger of the decision rather than an agentive collaborator in it. She thus implicitly constructs the identity of a follower rather than a leader vis-à-vis these decisions, which are merely announced. This distancing is further supported by the indirect mockery which always targets the upper management, and which thus highlights Eveliina’s critical stance towards the latter’s decisions. Second, with regard to leadership of the team, it is

important that Eveliina, as the meeting chair, manages the humorous sequence interactionally, as she always opens and closes it. She thus invites the team to share a certain kind of attitude towards the upper management, but, at the same time, is careful to maintain professionalism through a swift closure of the non-serious frame. Moreover, through the closure of the humorous mode, the topic of the decision-announcing is also closed and thus the decisions are presented as accepted and ready for implementation. In this way, Eveliina influences the team towards achieving the goals that were set by the upper management.

We now move to a second set of extracts in which the role of the head of the team vis-à-vis the decisions that are in the process towards implementation, is presented quite differently.

#### **4.2 Head of the team as a co-leader**

In this analytical section, we show how instead of only ensuring that decisions made by others are implemented (as in the previous section), ongoing decisions are also discussed. In such contexts there may be elusiveness about both the actual content of the decision and the current status of the ongoing decision-making process (see Boden 1994, 155; Honkanen & Nissi 2014). Importantly, the head of the team positions herself here as a co-leader who is actively involved in the decision-making process together with the upper management. Moreover, we observed that while showing how she is trying to influence the decision positively from the team's perspective, the head of the team at the same time tends to initiate humour and pursue laughter. Unlike in the previous section in which humour consisted of brief individual contributions by the head of the team followed by quick smiles or laughter by the co-participants, in this section, we show that the head of the team initiates more extended sequences in a humorous mode, which invite other participants to co-construct the 'play frame' (see Coates 2007; Holmes 2006; Watson & Drew 2017). We particularly aim to tease out how these humorous sequences function in relation to the way in which the head of the team presents herself as a co-leader in the distributed leadership constellation.

Extract 3 is a first case in point. In the extract, the participants are looking at a sketch of a timetable Eveliina has made at the request of the upper management, which thus immediately underlines the team head's agentive role in this decision which is not finalised yet. The participants are asked to go through the schedule from their own perspective and note whether there are any problems regarding their trainings. The extract starts with Tessa bringing out a

possible problem of the schedule, which leads to a discussion about the plans of the upper management, and, in particular, of manager Henri.

### Extract 3

- 01 TES: \*kun täällä voi olla ihmisiä ketkä kyl  
when there might be people here who  
\*TES POINTS AT PARTS OF HER PAPER WITH THE SCHEDULE  
\*EVE GAZES AT THE PAPER WITH THE SCHEDULE
- 02 oikeesti on myös \*täällä kun on pienistä  
genuinely are here when they're from small  
\*TES & EVE MUTUAL GAZE
- 03 [aluekaupoista  
[regional shops
- 04 EVE: [just \*näin  
exactly  
\*EVE & TES GAZE AT THE PAPER WITH THE SCHEDULE
- 05 TES: ni niitten kapasiteetti ei riitä  
so their capacity is not sufficient
- 06 [lyhyellä] \*ajalla ottamaan [näitä asioita  
to take these things under control in a short  
\*TES GAZES AT EVE
- 07 EVE: [joo ] [siihen se  
yeah to that he
- 08 TES: [haltuun]  
timeframe
- 09 EVE: [sii- ]sen se \*henri oli niinku  
ther- that henri had like  
\*EVE GAZES AT TES
- 10 hiffannu  
figured out
- 11 TES: ↑HYVÄ henri [\*jes heh heh  
↑GOOD henri [yes heh heh  
\*TES GAZES AT TII  
\*TII SMILES
- 12 ANT: [\*↑woo#hoo  
\*ANT CLAPS HIS HANDS

#FIG. 5



FIG. 5





Interestingly, the final part of this response to Tessa's turn (lines 9–10) can be heard as implicitly initiating a play frame. This is because instead of using a neutral verb to describe Henri's understanding of the issue, Eveliina uses the slang verb 'hiffata'. By shifting to this informal register, Eveliina marks the turn as non-serious. With her utterance, she frames this understanding as extraordinary behaviour *for* Henri. This is invoked especially by means of the stressed *sen* 'that' at the beginning of the utterance, which implies that the issue at hand is the only thing that Henri has figured out, thus portraying him as a non-expert regarding this issue. Tessa reciprocates the play frame first by producing an exaggerated positive evaluation *HYVÄ Henri* 'good Henri', followed by laughter (line 11). By stressing the adjective 'good', Tessa frames the positive evaluation as ironic, thus signalling that this contribution is to be understood as jocular and thus inviting the others to join the play frame. She uses prosodic devices, e.g., higher volume and stressing the evaluative word, for parodic stylisation to produce indirect mockery of Henri (see Acuña Ferreira 2014). Tessa gazes at Tiia during her humorous comment, which leads Tiia to join in the humorous mode by smiling. Even a more explicit shift to the play frame can be seen in Antti's turn in line 12. Right after Tessa's ironic evaluation, and partly overlapping her turn, he produces an interjection 'woohoo' together with applause (see figure 5). This cheering and positive evaluation align with Tessa's exaggerated evaluation of Henri's behaviour, thus extending the play frame further.

After this indirect mockery of Henri's – for his capacities – exceptional insight in the timetables, Eveliina shifts back to a serious mode, and, using indirect reported speech, she reiterates what Henri has said to demonstrate that he really has "figured out" the team's perspective (lines 13–15). This is once more positively evaluated by Tessa by means of the repetition of *hyvä* 'good' and an affirmative particle. This is mirrored by Eveliina, who starts to initiate a new part of the topic, but this is overlapped by Tessa's partly unintelligible turn. Yet, the laughter particles at the end of Tessa's overlapping turn (line 18) suggest that she is still continuing in the play frame.

In spite of this, Eveliina continues to pursue this new part of the topic and claims that there was one thing that Henri suggested and that cannot be accepted from the point of view of the team. With a self-interruption in line 19 ('I didn't go along with it'), Eveliina explicitly describes her own past behaviour and dissident role in this discussion with the upper management. In this context, this formulation calls for support from the team, as Eveliina

positions herself as a defender of the team's best interest. This claim of dissident behaviour triggers laughter in line 20, which is followed by Eveliina's description of Henri's suggestion.

Interestingly, in this description, she does not bring out the problem yet, but waits for a response from the other participants first. This strong expectation of affiliation with Eveliina's stance is met by Tessa in lines 22–23. By saying 'yeah no they can't', Tessa does not only agree that those trainings cannot be organised at the points suggested by Henri, but, in doing so, she also supports Eveliina in her dissident stance against the upper management. After getting this post-hoc support from Tessa, Eveliina utters indirect reported own speech and thus reiterates what she said earlier to Henri to indicate the problem ('we have the same trainers here', line 24), once more without explicitly evaluating it. By means of this formulation, Eveliina again relies on the shared expertise of the team within this specific domain of knowledge: they all know better than the upper management what would and would not work in practice and the formulation thus serves to seek post-hoc support from the team. This is subsequently provided, of which we see the first turn<sup>6</sup> in line 25 in which Laura adds 'there are too many risks there'. In this way, the shared knowledge about the situation is consolidated within the team.

Overall, although it is Eveliina who initiates the play frame, she is also the one who shifts back to business after others have taken it up, thus once more displaying her professional attitude and orientation to her leadership position. Interestingly, the play frame is used here to mock the upper manager's correct insight in the issue at hand, while the serious talk is used to point out which parts of the issue the upper manager did not understand correctly according to Eveliina, thus foregrounding where she tried to exert influence on the decision-making process. The mocking of the manager's insight is achieved by framing it as exceptional for him, thus highlighting his low knowledgeability in this matter. Moreover, while Eveliina declares her own dissident stance vis-à-vis the other issues, she does not formulate the problem herself but leaves that up to the other participants, thus invoking the team's shared expertise in this particular domain. As she thus lets the formulation of the issue come from the group members themselves, she further emphasises the knowledge differential between herself and her team on the one hand versus the upper manager on the other and creates very strong in-situ affiliation with her dissident stance on the matter. In this way, the influence that Eveliina reports to try to exert in the distributed leadership constellation is now presented as backed by the team members.



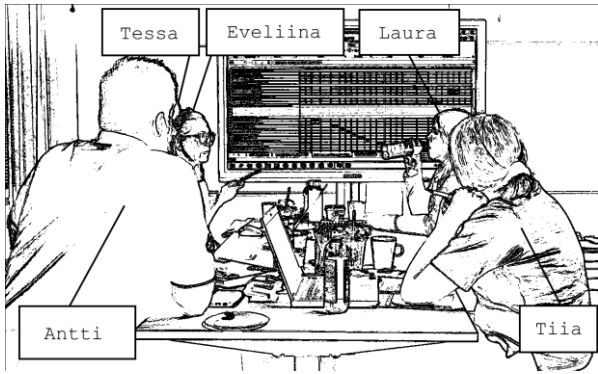


FIG. 6

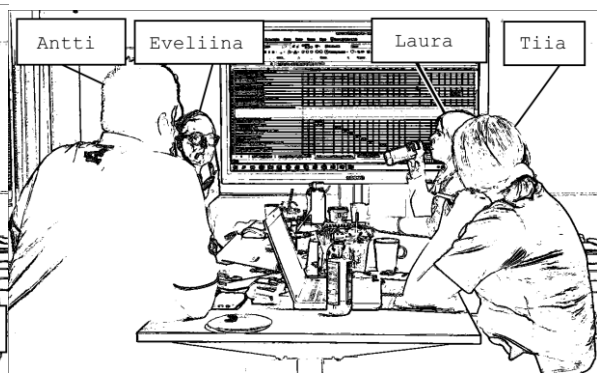


FIG. 7

11 [koulutus et antti ei pääse  
 training 'cause Antti cannot make it  
 12 OTH: [heh #heh

#FIG. 8



FIG. 8

13 TES: et oota pieni hetki mä [\*meen kaataa \*sen #tiedon uhh  
 just wait a while I'll [go dump the information uhh

\*TES GAZES AT ANT

\*TURNS TO LAU, MAKES A  
 MOVEMENT WITH HANDS  
 TOWARDS LAU

#FIG. 9



*-hAn (eihän)* implies an orientation to the information as self-evident (Lehtinen 2012, 196), thus orienting to the participants' knowledge about the team's working practices and seeking agreement from the group.

At the end of line 9, Eveliina initiates a hypothetical scenario through the temporal reference 'now'. After a brief pause, she continues the scenario in a way that triggers laughter. In particular, the continuation 'Laura goes instead and runs the assortment management training 'cause Antti cannot make it' is responded to with laughter, implying that there is something laughable from the point of view of their actual work, possibly the very different professional orientations of Laura and Antti. The hypothetical scenario is thus understood as highly problematic, and this would be the consequence of complying with the unrealistic guidance of the upper management. The hypothetical scenario and its problematic nature are emphasised in Eveliina's pointing gesture between Laura and Antti (see figures 6 and 7). As can be seen in Tessa's next turn in line 13, 'just wait a while I'll go dump the information', there is once more a collaborative elaboration of the play frame that Eveliina initiated, and by Tessa's co-creation of the imaginary scenario, the plans made by the upper management are jointly treated as infeasible. The hypothetical scenario is thus turned into a laughable, through which the team members show their shared knowledge, especially in relation to the plans on the one hand, and what is or is not feasible in practice on the other hand, and laugh together at the non-present third party, that is, the upper management.

However, Eveliina quickly overlaps this play frame turn by Tessa in line 14 and transforms the counterfactual nature of this hypothetical scenario into a scenario that is closer to a factual scenario by uttering a more logical name for a substitute coach in this case (Heta). Even a clearer shift away from playfulness can be seen in the next utterance, starting with 'but in a way' (line 15), which is responded to by the participants as a return to serious talk in line 16. Right after getting back to serious talk, Eveliina summarises the problem once again and, as she formulates it as her opinion (line 17) that 'we cannot build this plan to count on like that' (lines 17–18), she not only emphasises her knowledgeability in relation to this issue, but she also hints at her role as someone who 'builds plans' together with the upper management through the use of the *we*-form. In this way, she presents herself as someone who influences the decision-making process and thus acts as a co-leader. Tiiia then positively evaluates Eveliina's contribution to the discussion with upper management, thus implicitly aligning with the latter's preceding claim of being involved in the decision-making process. Finally, by

qualifying Eveliina's contribution as direct (cf. *suoraan* 'like it is', line 22), she thus contributes to the construction of Eveliina both as a team leader who has influence on the team and as a co-leader who is not afraid to take a position vis-à-vis the upper management in the distributed leadership constellation.

In sum, we have observed that after initiating a laughable hypothetical scenario, Eveliina creates a place for the co-participants to take part in constructing this play frame through pausing and leaving the floor open for others to continue. This extract has thus shown once more how indirect mockery can be used as a subtle strategy to invite the team to share a critical attitude towards the upper management and to invoke shared knowledge about working practices in the team and, in this way, get support for the head of the team's stance and her position as a co-leader. However, although Eveliina pursues laughter, she does not take part in that activity, and she also cuts off the laughter before it escalates too far. The management of laughter also enables the head of the team to withdraw from criticising the upper management too much after support for her position in the matter is obtained, and more important matters – such as Eveliina's active role in influencing the decision-making process and thus enacting her co-leader identity – are then highlighted and collaboratively constructed.

Overall, these two final extracts show once more how Eveliina is, on the one hand, 'doing team leadership' in a here-and-now manner by adopting a role of a meeting chair who is entitled to open and close mockery and by inviting the team members to adopt particular kinds of attitudes with regard to the decision-making process. On the other hand, by describing past and hypothetical events about the upper management meetings, it can be seen how she constructs herself as a co-leader vis-à-vis the upper management. These intertwined perspectives enacting her ambivalent position in the distributed leadership constellation can be seen in various interactive activities in extracts: First of all, Eveliina does not distance herself from the decision-making process itself but presents herself as being actively involved in it instead. Second, the co-leader identity is presented as being based on expertise, namely that she is more knowledgeable in a particular domain – viz. that of the feasibility of certain schedules and plannings in practice – than other members of the upper management, and in particular Henri. Third, this difference in expertise is the topic of the humorous sequences (especially in extract 3) that the head of the team initiates and that are collaboratively elaborated to play frames by other participants. Fourth, through this joint achievement of



these play frames as well as through other resources (such as the joint construction of evaluation in extract 4), the head of the team's expert identity is not only corroborated by the team but presented as shared within the group. In this way, the head of the team's knowledge claims are backed by the whole team, who thus provide post-hoc support for her stance and attempts to 'do' influence in the preceding discussions about this decision. Fifth, after a shared view is achieved in the play frame, Eveliina is always the one to manage a quick return to a serious mode in which the decision – which, in this case, is not yet finalised at the upper management level – is discussed and further support can be rallied for exerting influence on future discussions with upper management.

## **5. Discussion and conclusions**

In the analyses, we have observed that the head of the team, Eveliina, initiates humour and pursues it until joint laughter is achieved in talk *about* decision-making. These encounters are interesting in that there are two intertwined levels of leadership involved: the team leader's accounts of decision-making processes at the upper management level, in which she can construct herself in different roles, and her activity as the team leader here and now in the team meetings. Talk about decisions may concern 'decision-announcing' (Clifton 2009) as in extracts 1 and 2, or this may consist of a reflection and discussion regarding a decision-making process that still has to be finalised at the level of the upper management as in extracts 3 and 4. While in the first two extracts, Eveliina presents herself as non-involved in the decision-making process and thus as a follower vis-à-vis the upper management, she clearly stipulates her involvement in the ongoing decision in the two final extracts, thus emphasising her role as a co-leader regarding these issues and foregrounding her position in the distributed leadership constellation.

In spite of this difference between the way the head of the team presents her role vis-à-vis these decisions, she initiates a humorous sequence in all cases. On the one hand, in terms of interactional treatment, there is a clear pattern of this sequence to be discerned in all extracts. In particular, after Eveliina's initiation of the humour, laughter ensues – thus creating alignment on the interactional level – and this is followed by closure of the humorous mode by Eveliina again. It is thus important to emphasise that the head of the team is not only the one to open, but also to close the humorous mode, by which she sometimes cuts off laughter uttered by other participants (e.g. in extract 4). Moreover, the closure of the humorous mode

is often quite swift, even though the laughter in some of these extracts is relatively limited. In this way, she prevents the humour from escalating, which would be possible especially in extracts 3 and 4 in which a play frame is collaboratively constructed. By doing so, the head of the team displays an orientation to professionalism and constructs her identity as the chair of the meeting who is entitled to open and close topics. Moreover, through closing these topics, they are implicitly presented as accepted by the team in the first two extracts, and they enable the meeting chair to move on and initiate new – and related – topics in the final two extracts. In this way, one of the goals of these meetings, namely, to implement decisions (extracts 1 and 2) or to further the discussion of an ongoing decision (extracts 3 and 4), is successfully achieved. As these goals are related to the ‘goal setting’ and ‘goal achievement’ side of the influence-process typical of leadership (cf. Stogdill 1950, 3), Eveliina in this way exerts influence and enacts her identity as a leader of the team in the here-and-now of the team meetings. This thus shows that chairs’ resources regarding topic management and, in this case especially, the opening and closing of humorous modes, may give them “‘the edge” when influencing the sense-making process and so enact leadership’ (Clifton 2006, 209; see also Larsson 2017).

On the other hand, on a content level, it is important to note that all the humour we observed here is connected to the accounts Eveliina gives about decision-making and is directed at an absent third party, namely the upper management. The latter, and especially one of the upper managers, is criticised by Eveliina for being indecisive (extract 1), pedantic (extract 2), unknowledgeable (extract 3) and unrealistic (extract 4). This type of humour has been labelled ‘indirect mockery’ (Acuña Ferreira 2014), which links up both with gossip and with humour. Both are multifunctional (Holmes & Marra 2006; Thornborrow & Morris 2004), and this is clearly also the case for our examples. Next to creating entertainment, this indirect mockery of the upper management distances the team from the latter group and in this way, reinforces solidarity within the team.

Moreover, it also serves to attenuate aspects relating to power issues, especially in the first two extracts in which decisions are merely announced, without any hint at – at least – the head of the team having had any say in this. These different functions have been identified as important strategies to construct leader identities (Holmes & Marra 2006), and also in our data, they indeed contribute to the influence process. Yet, the particular way in which these humour-sequences tend to take shape in our dataset – namely as forms of indirect mockery

targeted at upper management – may not be particularly motivational for the participants who are supposed to act as followers vis-à-vis their hierarchical superiors. And so, when considering this for a moment from the perspective of leader traits, this indirect mockery can hardly be considered as a ‘unique talent’ of the team head who enacted a leader identity in these interactions. In this way, our analysis of the real-world enactment of these influence processes shows that leadership can be a rather messy undertaking that does not necessarily make the ‘leader’ stand out in a particularly flattering way. This is of course far removed from the traditional view of the leader as a heroic, charismatic individual endowed with a number of “essential qualities that have a unique influence over others” (Kelly 2013, 907). In this way, our analyses may thus also contribute to a more critical perspective on leadership, showing that the achievement of organisationally relevant goals is not always done through processes involving transformation, motivation or inspiration.

Moreover, these humour sequences may also serve as a way to counter the non-egalitarian aspect of the way these decisions are made, as for example shown by the decision-announcing (Clifton 2009). This is less and less acceptable in modern day ‘New Work Order’ workplaces (Gee et al. 1996) – in which more collective forms of leadership such as the distributed leadership constellation in our dataset, becomes a ‘normative ideal for practice’ (Denis, Langley, and Sergi 2012, 251) – and the laughter may thus also serve to alleviate the tension in this respect. In the first two extracts, this process is rather straightforward, namely even though the participants – including the head of the team – have no power vis-à-vis the decision itself, the indirect mockery gives them the chance to adopt a joint critical attitude towards it. As the criticism is always initiated by Eveliina, she constructs her identity as a somewhat dissident member of the distributed leadership constellation, who is thus a reluctant follower of the upper management’s decisions and who shows her critical stance vis-à-vis this hierarchical way of working.

Yet, in the last two extracts, things are more complex. As Eveliina emphasizes her contribution in the ongoing decision-making process, she presents herself as a co-leader. Yet, she still mocks the upper managers, thus refraining from constructing an ingroup with them. Importantly, she mocks them on the basis of their limited insight in the issue at hand, and thus reinforces her own expert identity in this domain, especially in comparison to manager Henri. Hence the indirect mockery of the upper managers in the final two extracts reinforces Eveliina’s identity as an expert and her superiority in this matter and this thus strengthens her

position as a co-leader vis-à-vis these upper managers in the distributed leadership context. This is because knowledge and expertise are well-known grounds to claim a leader identity when one does not have the self-evident hierarchical position for it (see e.g. Clifton 2017; Clifton, Van De Mieroop, Sehgal, & Aneet 2018; Van De Mieroop & Wouters 2020).

Moreover, as the team head's expertise is constructed as shared with the team, this thus, once more, emphasises sharedness in the group and presents Eveliina as a somewhat heroic leader who has to stand up against the upper management to defend the interests of the team regarding matters about which they all share the same opinion and knowledge. Our analyses of indirect mockery thus uncover a somewhat conflictual situation between the team and upper management and, as Denis et al. (2012) note, such situations are hardly ever analysed in studies on (various forms of) plural leadership. This, they argue, is largely due to "the ideological tone that sometimes accompanies the discourse of sharing, pooling, spreading, and producing leadership" (2012, 273). Yet, we argue that it is nevertheless important to also scrutinize such conflictual situations to truly understand the various potential aspects and implications of more plural forms of leadership.

In particular, in this article we have shown that indirect mockery was used to navigate the tension that emerges from the team head's position within the complex distributed leadership constellation. In these extracts, we could observe a balancing act between maintaining a professional attitude on the one hand, and creating solidarity in the team and negotiating the power imbalance at the expense of the upper management on the other hand. While the first serves the construction of Eveliina's identity as a team leader, the second presents her as a co-leader at the upper management level who has to fight against the managers in the distributed leadership context. These various leader identities are sometimes at odds with another, while they need to be kept in the exact right balance in order for Eveliina to protect the construction of her identity as a morally sound leader vis-à-vis the higher as well as the lower level for which she is the go-between. This position is delicate in two ways: on the one hand, it seems delicate to criticise the upper management – hence the quick exit from the humorous mode – on the other, it seems delicate to be subordinate – hence the initiation of criticism through indirect mockery. In this way, the initiation and closure of indirect mockery are emblematic for the team head's go-between position in the highly complex and quite ambivalent distributed leadership constellation that is in place in this organisation.

One could hypothesize that many of our observations are actually related to tensions inherent in distributed leadership in general, or in any other form of plural leadership for that matter, as these “may be seen as hiding an agenda of control beneath a veneer of democracy” (Denis 2012, 273), just as the New Work Order’s ideals of egalitarianism (Gee et al. 1996) have been criticized for being a superficial layer that strategically hides new managerial power structures (Sarangi and Roberts 1999). So, while these democratic and egalitarian tendencies may have had an impact on what is considered as acceptable in terms of the way leadership can be ‘done’ in current-day Western organisations (Clifton 2017), one may wonder to what extent they have *actually* had an impact on influence processes in relation to decision-making. As in the meetings discussed here, there are merely accounts about decision-making even though these decisions directly concern the meeting participants. Hence, in this case, it is quite clear that egalitarianism may be more of an ideal instead of real workplace practice. We believe that we have truly shown a glimpse of this by showcasing the rather unheroic way in which distributed leadership may take shape in real life, as well as by having shifted the focus of the analytical lens from the ‘goal setting’ to the ‘goal achievement’ side of the leadership influence process (Stogdill 1950). Regarding the latter, we believe that this focus shift is important for providing a fuller picture of how leadership is not only talked into being in meetings by decision-makers, but also how these decisions are subsequently negotiated when they trickle down to the lower organisational levels, i.e., to the people who actually have to implement these decisions in practice.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that laughter and humour are two distinct activities, even though they often go hand in hand in practice. Yet, as Watson and Drew observe, “it is certainly not the case that all instances of laughter are produced in response to humour. Nor is it always the case that what is intended to be humorous elicits laughter as a response (...), while on occasion, nonhumorous remarks can be received as highly amusing” (2017, p. 318).

<sup>2</sup> Q4’ refers to the fourth quarter of the year, from October to December.

<sup>3</sup> It is not possible to see which of the participants are laughing, since we can’t see all of their faces in the camera.

<sup>4</sup> These were her literal formulations in the interaction preceding fragment 2, but they are omitted here for reasons of space.

<sup>5</sup> In a way, this is accurate, since the company the team belongs to is separate from the main company, in principle at least, but as the companies are closely related, the team mostly depicts the project as a joint one.

<sup>6</sup> The following turns are omitted for reasons of space but also contain negative evaluations of this aspect of the timeschedule.

### **Appendix. Transcription symbols**

.	Falling intonation
?	Rising intonation
↓	Fall in pitch
↑	Rise in pitch
<u>word</u>	Emphasis
>word<	Faster pace than surrounding talk
<word>	Slower pace than surrounding talk
WORD	Loud talk
°word°	Quiet talk
wo:rd	Lengthening of the sound
wo-	Word cut off
@word@	Change in sound quality
heh	Laughter
.hhh	Inbreath
hhh	Outbreath
w(h)ord	Word produced through laugh
[	Beginning of overlapping talk
*	Beginning of overlapping nonverbal action



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=	No pause between two adjacent utterances
(0.5)	Pause in seconds
(.)	Micro pause (less than 0.2 s)
(-)	Talk not heard by transcriber
TURN HIS HEAD	Nonverbal action
#fig	The exact moment at which a screen shot has been taken is indicated
#	with a # sign showing position within turn at talk.