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Empirical Research Paper

A narrative-based relational leadership: Insights from UK CEOs of project-based organisations

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ABSTRACT

Although the subject of leadership has received increased attention among project management academics and practitioners, there is still a need to explore the underlying processes associated with leadership in project-based organisations. The generic leadership theories cannot be easily applied to understand leadership in project-based organisations because their nature rely on relationships to navigate the very uncertain environment with high stakeholder expectations. In this paper, the relational aspect of leadership is explored through the insights and reflections provided by Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) from various project-based engineering, construction, and infrastructure organisations in the UK. Twenty narrative interviews have been conducted with the CEOs. A narrative inquiry methodology and thematic interview analysis have been used in this research. Four narrative-based relational leadership processes have been identified: storytelling, acting, visioning, and influencing organisational actors. We show that these four processes are connected through ongoing teaming process, which provides the relational foundation for leadership in project-based organisations. The interactions between these processes are anchored in the relational leadership theory, which makes an original contribution to theory and provides multiple avenues for future research to enhance our understanding of leadership in project-based organisations.

1. Introduction

In the realm of leadership in project-based organisations, a new breed is needed with a focus on relational approaches, one that transcends the ordinary and aims to cultivate transformative, inclusive, and sustainable social capital (Nguyen and Dau, 2026; Whyte et al., 2026). With the rapid emergence of AI, hybrid ways of working, increased engagement with external stakeholders, and the narrative of sustainable and resilient future all demand new leadership practices in project-based organisations (Huzooree, 2026). Leadership in project-based organisations drives innovation, improves team performance within complex project environments. Whereas lack of leadership in project-based organisations can cause significant cultural, strategic, operational dysfunctions leading to poor team performance and negative impact on outcomes. The evolving perspective on leadership in project-based organisations encompasses a deeper commitment to purpose and visioning narrative, broader values and relationships than ever before (Abson et al., 2024; Minoretti et al., 2026; Clegg et al., 2021). This shift in leadership paradigms has captivated academics and practitioners' attention, leading to new educational programs and research interests (Afzal and Tumpa, 2025; Ninan et al., 2022). Research in this area explores various facets of leadership, including the characteristics of leaders and their leadership styles (Shamir et al., 1993; Sosik and Godshalk, 2000), situational approaches influenced by the contextual factors in which leaders operate (Edmondson, 2012; Egri and Herman, 2000), and the processes inherent to effective leadership (Browning and McNamee, 2012).

Historically, leadership in project-based organisations research has predominantly focused on the leader as an individual possessing specific traits, qualities and styles (Keegan and Den Hartog, 2004; Zhang et al., 2018). This trait-based perspective emphasised the distinctive intellectual and social attributes of leaders but faced criticism for neglecting the critical role of contextual factors in leadership (Sergeeva and Kortantamer, 2021; Sergeeva et al., 2024). In the context of project management, leaders are often portrayed as decision-makers and problem-solvers who reflexively adapt their actions by drawing from past experiences, assessing the prevailing organisational climate, and considering future aspirations (Winch et al., 2022; Winch and

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Hajikazemi, 2025). They shape their activities to meet not only their own needs but also those of others, both in the present and the future (Garud et al., 2014). Leadership, in this context, becomes a dynamic interplay of processes, practices and interactions (Crevani et al., 2010). Consequently, it is imperative to broaden the study of leadership in project-based settings beyond an exclusive focus on 'the leader' as an individual with specific personality traits, leadership styles, or career trajectories. There is a pressing need to investigate the intricate processes involved in decision-making, problem-solving solving and driving organisational change (Clegg and Ninan, 2023). In this research, we emphasise the significance of understanding these processes, focusing specifically on Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) within project-based organisations (PBOs) because they offer a strategic and reflective vantage point on leadership processes that transcend individual projects (Van Doorn et al., 2023). While project managers operate at the execution level, CEOs influence culture, vision, and relational dynamics across multiple projects and programs (Adomako et al., 2025). This top-level perspective complements - and often contrasts with - studies that focus on project-level management. Yet there is a lack of theorisation on the processes associated with leadership in project-based organisations. Despite isolated theorisation on leadership, there is a growing interest in exploring the underlying processes associated with leadership in project-based organisations (Sergeeva, 2024). This study narrows the focus to a processual view of leadership, guided by relational leadership theory, and examines how leaders enact leadership through narrative practices. In this research, we aim to address two key research questions: 1) What are the underlying narrative-based processes associated with relational leadership in project-based organisations? and 2) How do these integrated processes contribute to leadership within the context of project-based organisations?

The structure of this paper is organised as follows: The first section provides an introduction, presenting the motivation and objectives of the study. The second section delves into the literature review, exploring topics such as leadership in project-based organisations, relational leadership theory and the role of narratives. Subsequently, the research method, involving data collection through narrative interviews with 20 CEOs in the UK, is described in the third section. The fourth section presents the findings through a thematic approach, followed by a discussion firmly grounded in the reviewed literature. Finally, the concluding section encompasses discussions on the contributions of this study, implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Leadership in project-based organisations

Leadership in project-based organisations extends beyond individual behaviour and is inherently relational, team-centred, and applicable across divisions and organisational forms (Abson et al., 2024; Hobday, 2000; Müller et al., 2018; Sergeeva and Kortantamer, 2021; Turner and Keegan, 2010). Leadership in the context of project-based organisations can be understood through processes, competences and relationships, taking into consideration the context of organisations involved and projects they deliver (Prouska and Kapsali, 2021). Leaders in project-based organisations wield language and narratives as a powerful tool for shaping their initiatives (Sergeeva and Ninan, 2023). Their reflections on past, present, and future are significantly influenced by the language they use (Boddy and Paton, 2004). How business leaders construct and communicate narratives holds significant sway over the present and future trajectories of organisations and industries. There is a 'linguistic turn' within project management literature (McKenna and Metcalfe, 2013) with an emphasis on the importance of practitioners' lived experiences and the language they employ (Cooke-Davies et al., 2007; Cicmil et al., 2006). Löwstedt and Räisä;nen (2012) employ a narrative approach to elicit middle managers' stories of change episodes over two decades. These narratives reveal that change appears continuous in formal accounts but discontinuous in lived experiences. Sergeeva and Kortantamer (2021) explored leadership in project-based organisations through the lens of life stories and self-identities. Their research is based on life-story interviews with Chief Executive Officers, which provided an opportunity to get insights into personalised stories of senior leaders with experience, their roles and identities. In the latest work by Abson et al. (2024), the emphasis is placed on trust and shared leadership in project-based organisations. Zhou et al. (2025) show that shared leadership has a positive impact on project performance. In particular, team failure learning and team resilience play mediating roles in the relationship between shared leadership and project performance. Whyte et al. (2026) emphasise the need for new leadership practices in project-based environments that address the rise of AI, hybrid ways of working, fragile supply chain, increased engagement with external stakeholders, a narrative of sustainable and resilient future. The literature on leadership in project-based organisations reflects a shift from individualistic, trait-based models toward more relational and process-oriented perspectives. However, while distributed and relational leadership have gained traction, few studies have examined how leadership is enacted through narrative processes at the top executive level in project-based organisations.

The demand for developing next-generation leaders in project-based organisations who can translate strategy into tangible results and core values into actionable behaviours has become a prominent challenge for many CEOs. While this issue has gained recognition, most CEOs acknowledge their struggles in this endeavour. Ready (2002) suggests that storytelling by senior executives can provide aspiring leaders with valuable context, drawing inspiration from respected role models. This storytelling approach can yield impressive results, positioning a company for success when the current generation of leaders eventually steps aside, making way for a new leadership era. When storytelling is seamlessly integrated into a company's strategic and cultural context, it becomes a powerful tool for building strategic competence (the 'doing' aspects of leadership) and fortifying organisational character (the 'being' aspect). A compelling narrative typically revolves around the storyteller's experiences during earlier career stages, with a crucial focus on relating these experiences to the current challenges faced by the company. These narratives often highlight the tough choices made by project leaders, often in the absence of complete stakeholder alignment. Such compelling stories capture the attention of participants and serve as valuable leadership lessons. Similarly, narratives about goals, culture, context, and practice play a significant role in leadership (Trottier et al., 2008). In this paper, we focus on leadership in project-based organisations, with particular attention to how leaders engage in decision-making and drive organisational change across complex, temporary, and multi-stakeholder environments.

2.2. Relational leadership theory

In the realm of leadership studies, a shift towards the relational-based, practice- and process-oriented perspective has gained prominence, emphasising the importance of closely examining the relational aspects and practices of leadership as social and collective processes (Denis et al., 2012; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012). Uhl-Bien (2006), as one of the original contributors of the relational leadership theory, defines relational leadership as a social influence process that fosters emergent coordination and change. This includes the formation of new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviours, and ideologies within a given context, reflecting a dynamic and collaborative leadership style focused on relationships and their impact on change processes. It directs attention to the collective dimensions of leadership, shedding light on the relational dynamics of how individuals interact and work with one another (Orr and Bennett, 2017). Consequently, a relational lens moves beyond the search for traits, exceptional individuals, or specific behavioural styles and instead delves into how leadership emerges within

organisational and social settings (Crevani et al., 2010). Relational leadership theory is particularly relevant for project-based organisations, where leadership is distributed across networks and occurs in temporary, fluid contexts. This theoretical lens allows us to explore how leadership is practised through everyday interactions and narratives.

Relational leadership theory, as outlined by Komives et al. (1998), encompasses five key components of the collaborative process that evolve from interactions between leaders and followers: inclusion, empowerment, purposefulness, ethical behaviours, and process orientation. Inclusion involves creating an environment where everyone feels valued and respected. Empowerment entails giving followers the authority and resources they need to succeed. Purposefulness is about articulating a clear and inspiring vision for the organisation. Ethical behaviour entails acting in a manner consistent with one's values and principles. Process orientation emphasises building relationships and fostering a supportive work environment. Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012) in their book built upon a social constructionist lens, discussed a dialogue among perspectives advancing relational leadership research. They argued that "leadership practices are purposeful interventions that contribute to the accomplishment of leadership" (p. 279). They emphasise a holistic perspective on leadership processes, collective leadership approaches and the ways these are practised. The work of Bakhtin and Ricoeur (1984) extend work on relational leadership theory by conceptualising leadership as embedded in the everyday dialogical practices of leaders. Jian (2021) advances relational leadership theory by integrating philosophical and communicative insights, presenting a constructionist perspective of empathy. This approach forms the foundation for conceptualising empathic leadership practices. Distinguishing their work from Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011), Jian (2021) deepens the comprehension of empathy in present-day leadership practices while supplementing it with the construction of empathy directed towards a collective other, facilitated by narrative practices. The author introduces the concept of narrative empathy in leadership, expanding the leadership context from immediate interpersonal connections to encompass relating to a collective other across temporal and spatial dimensions.

2.2.1. Narratives and stories

Importantly, narratives and stories play a vital role in relational leadership theory, as everyday interactions such as storytelling contribute to leadership within communities of practitioners (Denis et al., 2012). Narratives enable organisational actors to comprehend and navigate new and evolving situations, effectively implementing relational leadership practices (Ricoeur, 1984). Narratives hold a central place in communicative relationships, especially in leadership contexts (Dachler, 1992). They offer valuable insights into what leaders actually do and are essential components of the relational style of leadership (Ospina and Dodge, 2005). Previous research indicates that narratives concerning organisational phenomena involve comprehensive depictions of events along with contextual details surrounding their unfolding (Humphreys and Brown, 2002). These narratives are typically conveyed from the perspective of the narrator or another individual or group and are recognised as crucial components of the organising process (Brown et al., 2009). They serve as a conduit for linking past experiences, current circumstances, and future aspirations. (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). Narratives are also recognised as strategic tools for persuading individuals to embrace change and work towards common goals (Denis et al., 2012). They act as focal points for followers seeking to comprehend leaders and their aspirations (Sternberg, 2008). Tsoukas (1996) contends that knowledge, often in the form of 'industry recipes,' is embedded within conversations and social interactions, shaping the strategic vision of organisations. Material entities, like written reports and brochures, are always discussed in conversations, making them meaningful for present purposes. Analysing the language and narratives employed by strategists is imperative for comprehending how they craft strategic direction and articulate a vision of the future. Narratives are often seen as a way of sharing meaning during strategic activities, forming an overall sense of direction, (re)constructing individual and organisational identities, and enabling actions of actors (Brown and Thompson, 2013; Fenton and Langley, 2011).

While story is a bounded, coherent account of events or experiences that typically follows a temporal sequence such as beginning, middle, and end, and includes a plot, characters, and a setting (Gabriel, 2000), a narrative is a broader organising framework that gives meaning to a series of experiences, ideas, or actions. Narratives can contain multiple stories and may not always follow a linear timeline (Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Storytelling refers to the act of crafting and sharing stories or narratives to achieve a communicative purpose, such as persuasion, meaning-making, identity construction, or sensegiving (Czarniawska, 2004). In leadership, storytelling becomes a way of articulating vision, modelling values, and influencing others. We acknowledge that the terms are often used interchangeably in the literature, but in this paper, we use 'story' when referring to a specific account and 'narrative' when referring to a broader sensemaking structure.

2.2.2. Influencing others

Leadership is a multifaceted concept with various interpretations. One common understanding is that leadership involves influencing others in a way that enhances their contributions to group goals (Haslam, 2004). Kouzes and Barry (2002) describe it as the art of motivating others to willingly strive for shared aspirations. This perspective also emphasises the role of teaching others about the why and how of accomplishing activities and goals, facilitating both individual and collective efforts towards achieving shared objectives within organisations (Yukl, 2006). Additionally, leadership can be viewed as a discourse used to categorise the actions of managers (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). Historically, leaders were often perceived as bureaucratic functionaries, responsible for managing the operational aspects of an organisation (Orr and Bennett, 2017). The field of organisation and management studies has explored leadership from various angles, including the characteristics and styles of leaders (Shamir et al., 1993; Sosik and Godshalk, 2000), situational approaches based on contextual features (Edmondson, 2012; Egri and Herman, 2000), and the processes intertwined with leadership (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

The emphasis on narratives in leadership aligns closely with theories of transformational and charismatic leadership, where communication, vision, and emotional resonance are central mechanisms of influence. The literature on charismatic or transformational leadership has been growing, focusing on understanding leadership processes and how leaders construct their identities through impression management. Gardner and Avolio (1998) argue that charismatic leaders rely heavily on impression management and describe four phases: framing, scripting, staging, and performing. 'Framing' pertains to how leaders' communication shapes meaning and 'reality' for themselves and their followers. 'Scripting' involves identifying the actors and their use of rhetorical devices (dialogue) and physical and emotional cues to convey meaning in a communication event. 'Staging' deals with the audience and physical elements like symbols and settings. Finally, 'performing' encompasses enacting scripted relationships and behaviours through self-presentation, vision sharing, organisational promotion, and personal embodiment. Notably, audience members are active participants in the leader's performance. Sharma and Grant (2011) criticise Gardner and Avolio (1998) for overlooking the value of narratives and storytelling in leader impression management behaviours. They argue that leaders effectively employ narratives and storytelling as persuasive tools. Zhu et al. (2005) further argue that transformational leaders create a strategic vision, communicate it through framing and metaphors, and 'walk the talk,' acting consistently to build commitment to the vision. Garud et al. (2014) focus on projective storytelling, which entrepreneurs use to set future expectations and gain legitimacy for their ventures. Stories serve as persuasive tools for influencing various stakeholders. Stories

also play a crucial role in constructing identity (Brown et al., 2008), making them essential for understanding organisational leadership. Examining leadership practices through a relational lens moves the analysis beyond the concept of the 'heroic leader' and directs attention toward understanding the everyday practice of organising (Orr and Bennett, 2017). Therefore, leadership in organisations is increasingly focused on comprehending what constitutes leadership, necessitating an exploration of processes related to roles and identities, even in the intricate, interactive, and dynamic context.

2.2.3. Sensemaking

Sensemaking is an ongoing social process by which leaders make sense of themselves, others and situations, and give meaning to their collective experiences (Weick, 2012). It is retrospective and prospective which leaders notice and label activities, extract cues for closer attention, and project the future. Sensemaking is also about identity construction characterised by ongoing tensions and struggles leaders may find themselves and others. It does not exist without sensegiving directed at external audiences and followers whose perceptions are held to be important and hence worth influencing (Weick et al., 2005). Browning and McNamee (2012) examined the sensemaking processes of twenty-four temporary leaders, referred to as internal interims, falling into categories such as dutiful, traditional, aspiring, reluctant, and self-conscious leaders. Dutiful leaders demonstrated initial willingness and a sense of obligation to assume leadership roles, coupled with empowerment in organisational decision-making. Traditional sensemakers shared a similar initial willingness but did not feel obligated. Aspiring sensemakers actively sought interim leadership roles, felt empowered to make decisions, and were inspired to drive the organisation forward. Self-conscious sensemakers, on the other hand, perceived ongoing challenges and felt thrust into the interim leadership role unnaturally. Reluctant sensemakers believed they either could not or should not make many organisational decisions. Importantly, Browning and McNamee (2012) discovered that the sensemaking processes of these leaders significantly influenced their subsequent actions and the environment in which they operated. These actions were shaped by past experiences and personal choices.

2.2.4. Acting

Some researchers draw parallels between leaders and actors in the theatre. Meyer (2001), for instance, discusses reflective leadership training using theatre as a representation tool. The core argument is that theatrical performance serves as a means for educational administrators, both in-service and pre-service, to reflect on their professional practices through scenarios. Cronin (2008) extends this idea by highlighting the importance of well-defined acting skills, especially for political leaders. Being a skilled performer is considered a means of effective leadership, where acting is seen as a performing act (Schreyögg and Höpfl, 2004). Biehl-Missal (2010) further emphasises the strong performative components shared by theatre art and leadership, suggesting that organisational leaders can apply related acting principles. These authors collectively call for more empirical research into leadership processes, signalling a shift in leadership from being perceived as bureaucratic functionaries to becoming leaders within a web of narratives (Orr and Bennett, 2017).

3. Research method

3.1. Narrative inquiry methodology

To gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of leadership processes, a context of project-based organisations in the United Kingdom was selected. This choice was deliberately driven by the belief that this setting would provide an opportunity to enrich our understanding of leadership in its specific context, given the depth of available data (Lundin and Steinthórsson, 2003). The United Kingdom serves as compelling research setting for our exploration, particularly in the context of construction project-based firms. The construction industry in the UK has consistently underscored the need for process improvement, as evidenced by numerous industry reports, including those by Egan (1998) and Farmer (2016). The industry has garnered significant attention from government policymakers due to its sheer size, inefficiencies, low skill levels, labour-intensive nature, and substantial impact on the broader economy (Raiden et al., 2019). Moreover, recent policy initiatives such as the UK's Construction Playbook (HM Government, 2020) and the Transforming Infrastructure Performance: Roadmap to 2030 (Infrastructure and Projects Authority, 2021) underscore the urgent need for leadership that can enable collaboration, drive innovation, and deliver value across fragmented supply chains. This reinforces the relevance of studying leadership processes at the executive level within UK project-based organisations.

Our research approach is qualitative and interpretivist in nature, adopting a narrative inquiry methodology (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry views stories and narratives as socially constructed means through which people make sense of their experiences. We conducted in-depth narrative interviews with 20 Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) from a diverse array of construction and infrastructure project-based organisations operating across the public and private sectors in the UK. CEOs of project-based organisations oversee all the organisation's various functions and set organisational visions and strategies. Table 1 in the Appendix provides a full list of job titles and a brief description of the employing organisations. The sample included clients, contractors and consultancy firms, several of which operate globally. The interviewees were purposefully selected based on their formal leadership roles and extensive experiences working in the project-based sector. CEOs were selected because they are strategically positioned to reflect on patterns of leadership practice across multiple projects. While not directly involved in day-to-day project delivery, they are responsible for setting direction, shaping organisational culture, and influencing leadership values. Their reflective accounts provide insight into high-level leadership processes that shape project-based organising. The selection of this sample size was guided by qualitative interview sample size recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2021), ensuring that our study adhered to established standards in qualitative research.

3.2. Data collection

The narrative-based approach in this research provided an opportunity to listen to narratives and stories of leaders of project-based organisations about themselves, their experiences of practising leadership, their followers and situations (Mishler, 1991). Unlike structured interviews, narrative interviews encourage open-ended, story-like responses (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000). The interview guide employed open questions such as: Could you please tell me about a time when you had to lead a difficult change, and how do you communicate your vision to your teams? Could you please tell me about your leadership approach and how it evolved through time? These questions prompted interviewees to reflect on their leadership experiences through storytelling. Thus, we delved into various aspects of leadership, including how leadership was practised, the challenges faced, and other leadership-related dimensions about themselves, their organisations, their colleagues and teams. The open-ended nature of these questions also allowed interviewees to express their perspectives freely, without constraints, while the semi-structured format ensured that the interviews maintained a focused and purposeful direction (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002). The narrative interviews typically ranged in duration from 45 to 60 min and were conducted with the full consent of the interviewees. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the research team, allowing for early familiarisation with the data and emerging themes. To protect the identities of leaders, pseudonyms were used. We continued conducting narrative interviews until we reached a point of theoretical saturation, where additional

interviews no longer significantly contributed to the development of our key constructs. This approach aligns with previous research findings, which suggest that the vast majority of the most crucial codes and insights emerge within the first few interviews (Guest et al., 2006). This reaffirmed the sufficiency of our sample size in terms of ensuring valid and comprehensive findings.

3.3. Data analysis

Our data analysis process began with an immersive reading of the interview transcripts. We followed this by employing the Gioia methodology which entailed a thorough examination of the transcripts, marking key information, and then condensing it to create a set of codes and themes (Gioia, 2021) (see Fig. 2 in the Appendix). We conducted the Gioia multi-staged qualitative interview analysis: 1. Open coding (initial codes), detailed codes that use interviewees' own words, terms, and phrases to categorise interview transcripts. 2. Axial coding (sub-themes) has derived from the researchers grouping similar open codes into more conceptual theoretical sub-themes that help explain the underlying processes of leadership. 3. Aggregate dimensions (themes) clustered into overarching themes, grouping related sub-themes to one another, creating a robust high-level conceptual framework. These codes were instrumental in helping us compare, categorise, and group related content, ultimately leading to the identification and development of overarching sub-themes and themes (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). For example, we grouped instances of telling old experiences, backing up facts, etc., into the concept of storytelling. This analytical approach involved an ongoing search for similarities, differences, underlying meanings, and patterns within the data. Importantly, this analysis was conducted simultaneously with the data collection process, ensuring that our findings were grounded in the data and reflected a deep and nuanced understanding of leadership processes. Through this rigorous research approach, we aimed to uncover the intricate and multifaceted nature of leadership processes in project-based organisations, with a specific focus on the construction and infrastructure sectors in the United Kingdom. Through our interviews, coding, and thematic analysis, we sought to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on leadership within this context and offer valuable insights for both academics and practitioners in the field. To improve validity of the data, we conducted member checking by validating findings with the interviewees.

4. Findings

In the analysis, four interrelated processes associated with leader identity formation were identified, including storytelling, acting, visioning, and influencing. The term 'processes' in this study refers to patterned, observable sequences of practices through which leadership is enacted, constructed, and made meaningful in project-based organisations. Although our interview guide did not ask directly about any processes, participants repeatedly described recurring leadership practices, which we coded and thematically grouped. Each process is described below with examples derived from the empirical material compiled from the grounded theory analysis of the 20 semi-structured interviews with UK CEOs.

4.1. Storytelling

Storytelling involves the use of narrative structures to convey experiences, establish meaning, and influence others. Leaders used storytelling not only as a communication tool but as a means of shaping identity, building relationships, and navigating complexity. It was commonly seen as a classic leadership skill, and many leaders noted that they were not necessarily great at it. There has been an agreement among interviewees that storytelling plays an important role in leadership in project-based organisations. Leaders often use PowerPoint slides to keep the story on track, which helps them tell good stories. The role of 'storyteller' was common amongst leaders. There is a clear self-awareness of leaders in terms of the extent to which they self-consciously recognise the importance of using stories:

> *"I think it is very powerful when leaders use stories to help people understand. I think you have to choose … You have to select your stories carefully, and you have to be sincere about it. It is not to tell the story for the sake of telling a story. But the right story at the right time told in the right way can illustrate the point very effectively. It is a bit like making something visual to help people understand and appreciate if they can see it. Certainly, in construction, people respond very well to pictures and images. I think it helps to create a picture or an image. I use stories a lot when I am talking about all aspects of the business, actually. Examples that I can relate to, I use them a lot around a group to help spread knowledge. I use them a lot with clients. Clients also appreciate it. The advantage of stories is that they back up facts. You can use them to illustrate things. It creates more substance. It can help, I found them helpful."* (Mike, CEO, Multinational construction and development company)

> *How do you set your vision? How do you do it with passion that engages people? The answer is you have to do storytelling. I did a presentation and next day they said you did your usual passionate storytelling and it was great. Storytelling is a classic leadership skills. By the way, I am not necessarily great at it. I can tell a good story using slides.* (Don, CEO, Leading network-type construction organisation)

The nature of storytelling was explained as a means of helping a client to better understand the business and illustrate the point. The need for carefully selecting the 'right stories' at the right time is seen as critical for leadership. Another consciousness, as highlighted by many interviewees, was that there is a need to update 'old stories' with 'new stories':

> *"I have a phrase I use which works against storytelling, which can get very boring, is that I often think of the question leaders have to ask themselves, particularly when they grow in experience, is when you start to bring old solutions to new problems. That is a disadvantage. Half of the problem is that I probably listen to half of your story. I decided I knew what it was. Does it mean I am not listening to it properly? I just think that very often it may well be a brand new problem, and you may not ask me to give you a solution. Sometimes it is just about sharing, and still giving you a responsibility to deliver. The point that I am trying to make is that storytelling will be about me telling old stories. I am always mindful of it. I like telling stories, but I am also very conscious of the audience. Might be less interested in old stories than the ones that they can relate to. It might be important to talk about my old experiences. I just worry about too much storytelling."* (Terry, CEO, Public client infrastructure organisation)

Of particular emphasis is the importance of reinventing yourself and telling relevant and engaging stories. The role here is that of the *'concerned storyteller'* who is very experienced and recognises the role of telling stories about past experiences, but raises the importance of the nature of the stories themselves and the audience to whom these stories are told.

4.2. Acting

Acting refers to the performative and presentational aspects of leadership, where leaders engage in impression management to align their outward behaviours with organisational expectations. This differs from formal 'performance' metrics and instead relates to how leaders embody leadership roles through emotional regulation and strategic self-presentation (Schreyögg and Höpfl, 2004). Acting was commonly recognised among leaders as an important process associated with leader identity formation. Some leaders perceived acting as the art of performing fictional roles or temporarily doing the duties of another

person (connected with emotions). This process refers to how organisational actors put on self-confident, positive and controlled masks, showing a play. Leaders made sense of their leadership roles in the manner of a *'theatre actor'* who played a performative positive role for the audience, while feeling a different inner side:

> *"A lot of it is acting. A lot of it is whatever the internal emotion is, you have to be positive. There are days at conferences when I have to speak positively about our industry, and I am feeling terrible. I wake up late. I have a hangover. There is horrible news in the newspaper about our industry. Last year was difficult. We had a recession in our industry. I was going around and talking about the vision of our industry. People were losing their jobs. The industry was doing some terrible commercial behaviours. It is pretty hard to be positive in days like that. But you have got to because you have got to keep this consistency of vision. I am not a great actor. I am ok at it."* (Don, CEO, Leading network-type construction organisation)

Of particular note is the inner emotions of leaders when they perform their roles. Negative inner emotions have to be hidden from others, playing a consistent positive role in the eyes of others.

Others, in contrast, thought about acting by making the actual actions or performing activities at work. It was increasingly emphasised that leaders need to perform actions rather than just lay claim to acting. It was consistently argued that organisational members will follow the will of authorities if they are convinced of leaders' actions and if they believe these actions will have benefits for them:

> *"You have to be relaxed walking in and talking to people. If you are very shy, it is difficult to do. I can see that some acting techniques would be quite valuable. But it is just to overcome personal things. It is not something that I use. Action is important. I think if you are in a big role, you have this impatience. You just want to do things, to change things. I think people want to see a leader who gets things and does things."* (Graham, CEO, Public Infrastructure Enterprise)

> *"If you say something important to the organisation you have to demonstrate is that it is important in your actions as well as your words. To demonstrate that is important and to show consistency is to show that is very real."* (Mike, CEO, Multinational construction and development company)

While the role of theatrical acting techniques was recognised, the actual actions made by leaders were seen as crucial by many interviewees. The actions involved putting stories into action and can embed the narrative in the minds of all stakeholders involved (Ninan and Sergeeva, 2022). The role here is a *'mover and shaker'* who actively engages in various organisational and industrial activities and enjoys continuous changes and improvements. Confidence and a relaxed state of mind, while being impatient to make changes, are characteristics of this role.

4.3. Visioning

Setting a future vision and direction in organisations was recognised as one of the key processes for leaders. The vision should be meaningful and consistent for organisational members. By articulating a future vision, leaders provide followers with a sense of a collective identity. They persuade their followers with their messages. The process of sharing a common vision was seen as important for leaders. By projecting future vision, leaders provide followers with a sense of continuity and, for themselves, a sense of pride and achievement. One CEO talked about narratives of vision for the project, such as changing from delivering projects on time and on cost to moving the industry forward.:

> *"When I arrived here, the vision was to deliver on time, on cost and in partnership - and that was fine. That is what we do for the day job. But it seemed to me the ambition was quite big enough that we are responding for the legacy to move the industry forward as well as delivering the world-class railway."* (Andrew, CEO, Public Client Infrastructure organisation)

> *"Leadership is to be clear what is your vision, what are you trying to achieve. If you can get everybody to understand what that is and explain it to somebody who is not part of the team that is what I am really focused on. It is a narrative that explains that vision"* (Paul, CEO, Public client infrastructure organisation)

While there is some overlap with storytelling, visioning is conceptually distinct as it centres on projecting future directions, articulating values, and inspiring shared goals. Visioning often uses narrative as a medium, but the intent is future-focused and strategic. The role of *'ambitious forward thinker'* was common for leaders. Forward thinking and predicting the future were commonly seen as significant processes for leaders because they can influence and change it. Of further note, there was a common tendency to link a vision with the organisational values, often being formalised in the form of published brochures and business and policy reports:

> *"I think it is important in leadership terms to create a vision of where you are going. It is supported by appropriate behaviours. In leadership terms, being able to express the values of the organisation, what behaviours are the ones you aspire to achieve, are important."* (Terry, CEO, Public client infrastructure organisation)

It was commonly recognised by leaders that organisations have different values, but the process of sharing values across organisations was increasingly emphasised. The notion of value was closely associated with the notion of organisational culture. The culture of questioning, trying, challenging and looking for better ways was commonly described. This can be seen as a process of forming organisational identities.

4.4. Influencing

Leadership has traditionally been viewed as a process centred around influencing the behaviours of others. However, the approaches taken by leaders in wielding this influence can vary significantly. Some leaders embrace a self-identified 'walk and talk' role, actively driving and spearheading changes within their respective sectors. Conversely, others opt for a more personalised approach, conveying their thoughts and directives directly to individuals or in smaller, intimate group settings. In this context, leadership is perceived as a symbiotic relationship that requires a complementary set of skills between a leader and their team:

> *"A good leader tends to have in a team what they do not have. I am not a charismatic leader who can speak publicly really well. I am not that sort of leader. But I have colleagues who are good at that. I like communicating ideas from person to person or in a small group. Some people are great leaders because they can influence a big group and others can influence a small group, and some of their teams can influence a big group. It is a complementary skill. You do not have to have it yourself."* (Anna, CEO, International Construction Engineering Enterprise)

The role here can be characterised as that of a *'thoughtful leader'* or an *'empathy leader.'* These leaders prioritise understanding themselves and others while exemplifying a sense of wisdom in their actions. Within this framework, communication with the team holds paramount importance as it serves as the bedrock for fostering trust and empathy within organisations. Influencing is both a standalone process and a meta-process: it captures how storytelling, acting, and visioning converge to affect others' understanding, motivation, and behaviour. In this sense, the other processes are also means of influence. A profound dedication to the business, coupled with a personal touch that values the perspectives and opinions of others, can be exemplified through their identity story:

> *"My technique, which I think works here, is about building trust and a bit of empathy. I only do things which I believe in, which I think is a bit*

altruistic. I just cannot engage with them otherwise. I am proud of the road that I run and the service we give. I think that genuine commitment to the business comes across in all the communication I have with people. Making it personal, as they realise that I am dealing with the same things as they are." (Graham, CEO, Public infrastructure enterprise)

Leaders acting as storytellers play a pivotal role in guiding their followers through the organisational journey. There are two aspects to this dynamic: repetition and engagement. Repetition can be powerful in reinforcing a message as people tend to retain information that's reiterated multiple times. However, the storytelling prowess of a leader lies not just in repetition but also in crafting narratives that are captivating and engaging. When stories are compelling, intriguing, and resonate with the audience, they become memorable even if told only once.:

"Storytelling should be interesting to make people remember. If it is really interesting and dramatic, people will remember. If not, they will remember because they heard it 10 times. So, something that is quite mundane, you have got to repeat. But something exciting, you know, people will remember because it was an interesting story to listen to." (Anna, CEO, International construction engineering enterprise)

The nature and substance of stories are pivotal in the storytelling process. Stories serve as reflections on remembered past events, current situations, and even imagined future scenarios. Leaders, being self-aware, recognise the influential role stories play in organisational learning. These narratives serve as repositories for lessons gleaned from past failures and successes. They encapsulate valuable insights and experiences, offering a platform to impart these lessons to new generations of leaders. By sharing stories, leaders not only preserve the organisational wisdom accumulated over time but also facilitate a seamless transfer of knowledge and learning. These stories serve as guiding beacons, enabling emerging leaders to navigate challenges and make informed decisions. In essence, storytelling becomes a conduit for continuous learning and knowledge transmission within an organisation, fostering a culture of growth, adaptation, and evolution. While we analytically distinguish these four processes, they often overlap in practice. For example, storytelling may include visioning elements; acting may reinforce influence; and visioning is often narrated through stories. Our typology reflects recurring patterns rather than mutually exclusive categories.

5. Discussion

In this section, we interpret our empirical findings in light of relational leadership theory put forth by Komives et al. (1998), Uhl-Bien (2006), Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012) and position them within the context of project-based organisations. Our study illuminates how leaders interpret and engage with four fundamental processes, each manifested in diverse ways, as evidenced by the distinct explanations provided by the leaders. We therefore focus on how the four identified narrative-based processes - storytelling, acting, visioning, and influencing - contribute to leadership practice and identity construction in project-based organisations, and how they relate to and extend existing theoretical frameworks.

Firstly, storytelling emerges as a central facet of leader narratives. Stories are recognised for conveying information about oneself, others, and events, with a deep-seated impact on various aspects of a project-based organisation (Brown et al., 2009). A crucial inquiry pertains to who tells which stories and for what purposes. Effective storytelling demands narratives that are not only captivating but also memorable. Narratives are different from stories. Narratives have performative intent and often build on organisational, industrial or broader resources such as strategy, reports, vision, etc. Stories are more personalised and entertaining in nature (Sergeeva and Green, 2019; Sergeeva and Winch, 2021). Leaders use both narrating and storytelling. They also share stories about the ways they use narratives and how they use them for different purposes.

Leaders acknowledge the pivotal role of storytelling, remaining mindful of the content and substance of the stories themselves. Consistent with authors like Brown and Phua (2011) and Thomas and Davies (2005), stories play a pivotal role in shaping how individuals construct meaning, primarily through their interactions with others. Identity stories are viewed as discursive constructs continuously shaped by different audiences, playing an integral role in fostering an inclusive environment where all employees feel valued and respected (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). Project-based organisations structure their operations around temporary, goal-specific projects rather than permanent departments, which leads to unique challenges in leadership, such as managing time-bound teams, distributed authority, and fluid stakeholder relationships (Sydow et al., 2004; Whyte et al., 2026). In project-based organisations, storytelling plays a critical role in rapidly constructing shared meaning and identity within temporary teams. Unlike permanent organisations, where relationships, routines, and values evolve, these organisations require leaders to use storytelling strategically to create cohesion, communicate vision, and convey organisational values in time-constrained and dynamic environments (Söderlund, 2011). They use storytelling when presenting to project team members (PowerPoint presentation, blogs, videos), organising events, and at formal and informal meetings. In the project leadership model developed by Winch et al. (2022), the process of projecting is an important process that relates to narrating and storytelling. Our paper contributes to the existing model by unpacking the process of storytelling as an important means of leading in project-based organisations.

The process of acting also features prominently in leader narratives. Leaders frequently employ acting techniques akin to those used in theatres to influence how their audience perceives them. Previous studies have delved into the impression management skills essential for charismatic leaders to effectively perform their roles and persuade their followers (Brown et al., 2008; Harvey, 2001). Leadership is increasingly characterised as a form of performance art, assuming a theatrical and performative nature utilised by corporate leaders to craft compelling narratives (Schreyögg and Höpfl, 2004). This perspective aligns with Biehl-Missal (2010), who suggests that acting can both conceal and affirm role constraints and the mechanisms underlying human interactions. Acting does not merely involve role-playing but can also be viewed as a process of taking proactive actions (Dickson et al., 2003; Williams et al., 2010). Leaders, in the context of the acting process, exhibit behaviours consistent with the values and principles they espouse, empowering their employees with the necessary authority and resources for success (Uhl-Bien, 2006). This process has not been studied in the previous studies but is recognised as an important process of practising leadership in project-based organisations. Some early work by Lingren and Packendorff (2007) is relevant in providing insights into the art of performing, project work and professional identities in the context of theatre. In project-based contexts, leaders use performing arts techniques in their leadership practices, including narrating and storytelling.

Visioning, as a process, hinges on the exchange of insights and ideas among practitioners. During this phase, practitioners grapple with complex problems, some of whose dimensions may still be undefined, and explore potential strategic solutions that are not yet fully comprehended. The visioning process not only triggers a desire for future changes and innovations but also provides a framework for realising them. This aligns with contemporary leadership theory, which characterises vision as a "sense of direction and concern for the future" (Kouzes and Barry, 2002: 199). However, existing theory falls short in explaining the intricacies of the visioning process. While the importance of the visioning process has been acknowledged for leaders and champions (Zhu et al., 2005), little is known about how future-oriented visioning contributes to the processes associated with leader identity formation. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) highlight that managers frequently describe their leadership as the conveyance and formulation of visions, strategies, and overarching guidance. Through visioning, leaders

transmit their vision to employees, fostering a shared sense of purpose (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). The literature on leadership in project-based organisations emphasises the importance of studying vision (Sergeeva and Kortantamer, 2021; Whyte et al., 2022, 2026), the process of projecting and visioning (Winch et al., 2022). Leaders share visioning narratives about their organisations and, industry they work in. Part of a visioning process is a process of narrating.

The influencing process, intertwined with leader narrative, encompasses the various strategies and styles used by business leaders to persuade and mobilize others to follow their lead. Leaders adopt diverse approaches, ranging from charismatic and transformational styles to the use of stories and narratives as persuasive tools. As outlined by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003), leaders employ charisma, symbols, and emotional devices in their persuasive endeavours. However, there is an assumption that managers may encounter challenges when articulating convincing narratives about visions, strategies, and overall guidance within their leadership styles. Maitlis and Christianson (2014) emphasise that collective sensemaking in organisations revolves around influential individuals persuading others to align with their perspectives. Collective sensemaking unfolds as a dynamic, interactive process in which actors continually shape each other's understandings in repeated cycles. The empirical findings underscore leaders' efforts to cultivate a collective sense of organisational identity through a process-oriented approach, fostering relationships within a supportive work environment (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). We contribute to the literature by providing further insights into influencing process being used in leading practices. Narratives are the means through which leaders influence and convince others (Ninan et al., 2022).

In summary, our analysis of empirical findings, informed by the relational leadership theory, illuminates the multifaceted nature of leadership processes. Leaders engage with these processes in diverse and distinct ways, yet common themes emerge, underscoring the pivotal role of storytelling, acting, visioning, and influencing in shaping leader narratives and, consequently, their impact on organisations and teams. These insights provide valuable perspectives on the dynamic and intricate nature of leadership within the context of project-based organisations.

The four processes of storytelling, acting, visioning, and persuading find their grounding in the relational leadership theory (Komives et al., 1998; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012), as illustrated in Fig. 1. Our assertion is that these processes are intricately interconnected, each nurturing and influencing the others in a continuous cycle. The arrow here is for illustrative purposes to show that the processes are interconnected to each other, and each process is ongoing in practicing leadership in project-based organisations. Storytelling corresponds with inclusion in the relational leadership theory. Storytelling, telling and sharing stories, assist leaders in creating an environment that is inclusive and supportive where everyone has a voice and share experiences. Acting corresponds with empowerment/ethical behaviours. When leaders are acting, they align one's values and principles with wider organisational and industrial values. Acting contributes to empowering followers to work towards shared goals. Visioning corresponds with purposefulness in the relational leadership theory. Visioning is a process of setting a compelling vision and narratives for the future goal and purpose. Influencing corresponds with process orientation as it is about building trustful relationships and supportive work environment. The relational leadership model proposed by Komives et al. (1998) - originally conceptualised in the context of collegiate leadership - identifies five core components: inclusion, empowerment, purposefulness, ethics, and process orientation. While our findings emerge from a very different context, i.e., CEOs in UK infrastructure and construction project-based organisations, the processes we identified align conceptually with and extend these components. By applying this model to executive-level, real-world leadership in high-stakes, temporary settings, we extend the scope and applicability of Komives et al.'s framework beyond its original collegiate audience.

This is in alignment with the work of Abson et al. (2024), who emphasise that in project-based organisations, trust enables shared leadership. To facilitate this dynamic, it is imperative to cultivate an environment where employees are not only included but also empowered, as this is the foundation upon which the leader's vision is built. This symbiotic relationship between leadership and empowerment underscores that relational leadership can be cultivated through narrating and storytelling, rather than solely relying on traditional bureaucratic authority. The leadership processes are interconnected. For example, storytelling is an important leadership skill for acting. The entertaining stories told make an impression on an audience. Visioning provides a compelling vision for the future, which influences external stakeholders and how they perceive work. Moreover, we emphasise that the most effective way to acquire leadership skills is within the context where they will be applied. Particularly in complex, interactive, and ever-evolving settings like project-based organisations, leaders learn most effectively from other leaders. Consequently, our study delves into the practices of 20 CEOs in the UK, allowing us to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate processes that underpin leadership. It is through learning from these seasoned executives that emerging leaders assimilate not only the company's culture but also its values and guiding

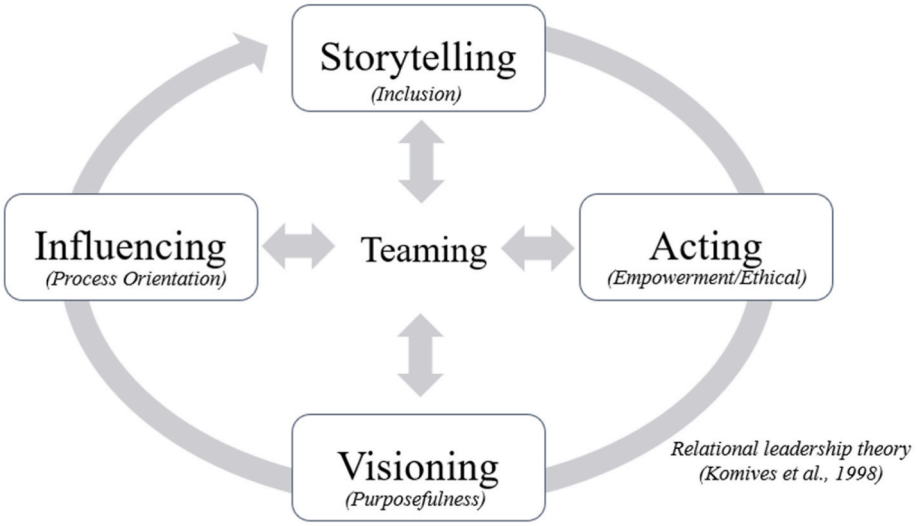


Fig. 1. Leadership processes in project-based organisations anchored in the relational leadership theory.

principles, thereby preparing themselves to take on leadership roles in the future. Leaders can establish relational leadership setups by involving individuals both within and outside an organisation (Sancino et al., 2022). Our research specifically emphasises the significance of narratives in connecting with not just the team but also the broader community. The study also addresses a gap in relational leadership on how communication evolves to remain relevant to changing times (Nielsen et al., 2023), and our study in a project-based organisation setting highlights the role of narratives in this.

'Teaming' occupies the central, integrative role that binds the four leadership processes, i.e., storytelling, acting, visioning, and influencing, into a coherent, dynamic whole as shown in Fig. 1. The evidence shows that all leadership processes are about teamwork and collective action. When we were validating the findings, interviewees recommended to include teaming at the heart of the developed model as it links all leadership processes together. Teaming refers to a fluid, relational process of collaboration and interaction: people coming together, coordinating, exchanging meaning, and jointly constructing action in response to project demands (Edmondson, 2012; Keegan, 2023). In project-based organisations, leadership rarely consists of isolated acts; rather, it emerges through continuous, adaptive collaboration across shifting constellations of actors (Whyte et al., 2022). Thus, teaming provides the relational infrastructure through which narratives are shared, visions are co-created, actions are synchronised, and influence is exerted, enabling the processes to reinforce one another and to shape collective meaning and direction. By foregrounding teaming, the model emphasises that leadership in project-based organisations is not a property of individuals, but of networks of interaction grounded in shared agency, collective sensemaking and joint enactment (Pye, 2005).

Taken together, these findings support a recontextualisation of relational leadership theory in the project-based domain. Unlike traditional organisations where leadership may evolve over stable, long-term interactions, leadership in PBOs must be performed, re-negotiated, and re-narrated within constrained timelines, shifting teams, and fluctuating goals. Our findings offer a relational-processual view of leadership in PBOs that complements and nuances existing generalised models.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary and theoretical contribution

The present study sheds light on how leaders in project-based organisations perceive their roles, emphasising the processes involved in leading. We argue that, along with emphasis on individual leaders and their traits and competencies in traditional leadership theories, there is a need to look at the critical role of narrative-based relational processes in leadership. Our insights stem from the analysis of data collected through narrative interviews with twenty CEOs in the UK. Through these interviews, it became evident that leaders make sense of their roles by engaging with leading processes. We contend that narratives are intertwined with processes such as storytelling, acting, visioning, and influencing, all of which play a vital role in shaping who leaders are and what they do. Our study shows that leaders interpret and engage with these processes in diverse ways, as evidenced by the varying explanations provided by the leaders themselves. This interpretive perspective enhances our scholarly comprehension of how leaders construct their roles within a social context. Furthermore, the roles we identified contribute significantly to understanding the process of leader identity construction, with each role representing a distinct leadership approach and style. This research also provides valuable insights into how these role enactments emerge in the dynamic and interactive work environments where leaders operate, illustrating how leaders may adopt multiple roles and identities for themselves and others.

Our contributions to relational leadership theory are multi-fold. Firstly, we emphasise the central role of narratives in the everyday practices of leaders in project-based organisations, highlighting their significance in storytelling, acting, visioning, and influencing. Whilst previous studies have started to recognise the importance of narrative work, the majority of past research is conceptual and is limited in providing insights into narrative approaches to relational leadership theory (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Jian, 2021; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). We advance the relational leadership theory by using a narrative-based approach that allows us to learn about leaders' narratives and stories, their experiences of practising leadership in project-based organisations, their followers and situations. Secondly, leaders engage in diverse and distinct ways with their employees, yet common themes in narratives emerge, which shape identities and impact teams. We make an original contribution to the relational leadership theory by illustrating narratives of leaders engaging in processes of leadership. Thirdly, we emphasise the utilisation of narratives by leaders and how these narratives evolve gradually, adapting to new and unexpected issues as they arise. Fourthly, while storytelling, acting, visioning, and influencing may appear in broader leadership settings, we highlight their unique execution in project-based organisations, such as when the transient nature of projects requires leaders to rapidly build trust, communicate direction, and establish identity within compressed timelines and shifting relational contexts. Finally, we show the relational aspect of how narratives are employed in leadership practices. We propose a framework anchored in the relational leadership theory, illustrating that leadership processes such as storytelling, acting, visioning, and influencing are interconnected and ongoing, each nurturing and influencing the others in a continuous cycle. This framework highlights the crucial role of ongoing teaming practices in enabling narrative-based leadership processes and shows the inherently dynamic nature of leadership in project-based organisations.

6.2. Practical implications

About the specific context of project-based organisations, our study has broader practical implications. Leaders who work in temporary settings, i.e. megaprojects, are expected to be more vision-derived and focus on purposefulness in comparison to leaders who work in permanent project-based organisations. In project-based organisations, there is a sense of urgency to get the work done by a specific time and budget. In this context, leaders set the vision to work collectively towards achieving the goals. Leaders and their team members, and followers can continually improve processes associated with leadership and practice their inter-connections. For example, in some project-based organisations, storytelling may not be the strongest leadership skill. The company may invest in training its employees and leaders in improving storytelling and narrating skills. The same applies to other leadership processes and competencies. The notion of 'incomplete leader' (Winch et al., 2022) provides insights into fulfilling competencies within the team and externally, where necessary. The idea is to work collectively and ongoingly to improve leadership processes and competencies. Leaders and their team members can learn about informal roles and leader identities, try these in their contexts and make some interesting and important contributions. We hope our paper will be a useful source for those who are or would like to become leaders of project-based organisations.

6.3. Limitations and future research

Our research is based on the narrative interview data with the CEOs of project-based organisations. It explores leadership processes from the CEOs' perspectives. It is important to acknowledge some limitations. The paper is based on CEOs' own perspectives and narratives. Yet it does not address team members' and followers' perceptions of leadership in project-based organisations. This would provide a deeper understanding from both leaders', their team members' and followers' perspectives, cross-reference these disparate perspectives, that would strengthen the validity of the data (Klenke, 2016; Yin, 2015). Future studies may use

other types of research data including team members' and followers' perspectives on leadership in project-based organisations. Different stakeholder groups may have different perspectives on leading processes in project-based organisations. This would provide a broader and more holistic perspective on leadership in project-based organisations. Considering the current and prior research, future studies may explore related processes of leader identity formation and identification. In this paper, we have not compared leadership in permanent project-based organisations and temporary project-based organisations (i.e. mega-projects). We have provided our thoughts for managerial implications. Future research may explore nuances and differences in leadership in different project-based settings. A further research avenue is to focus on complex relationships between senior leaders in project-based organisations and more junior leaders, as well as project leaders. Our research has not been directly focused on leaders' identities, but future research may explore identity narratives in greater detail. Investigating how strategic narratives are used to project future scenarios is a promising avenue. Additionally, examining the interplay between individual leader identities and organisational identities could yield valuable insights. Acknowledging and navigating the politicised nature of work environments and power dynamics is fundamental for a comprehensive understanding of organisational leadership. These efforts significantly contribute to a deeper comprehension of the intricate and dynamic processes that underlie identity formation within the organisational context. From a methodological perspective, while we relied on narrative interviews for data collection, future research may consider naturalistic inquiry approaches, as leadership is inherently embedded in communication processes.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Natalya Sergeeva: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Johan Ninan:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix

Table 1
Interviewees' characteristics.

Name	Job title	Nature of project-based organisation
Mike	Chief Executive Officer	Multinational construction and development organisation, approx. 500 employees
Terry	Chief Executive Officer	Public client infrastructure organisation, approx. 75000 employees
Don	Chief Executive Officer	Construction client organisation, approx. 250000 employees
Graham	Chief Executive Officer	Public infrastructure organisation, approx. 6000 employees
Andrew	Chief Executive Officer	Public client infrastructure organisation, approx. 75000 employees
Anna	Chief Executive Officer	International construction engineering organisation, approx. 10000 employees
Mark	Chief Executive Officer	Engineering construction organisation, approx. 20000 employees
Peter	Chief Executive Officer	Public client infrastructure organisation, approx. 6000 employees
Paul	Chief Executive Officer	Public client infrastructure organisation, approx. 6000 employees
Andy	Chief Executive Officer	Public client infrastructure organisation, approx. 4000 employees
Stephen	Chief Executive Officer	Construction and civil engineering organisation, approx. 20000 employees
David	Chief Executive Officer	Public client infrastructure organisation, approx. 50000 employees
Simon 1	Chief Executive Officer	Multinational construction consulting organisation, approx. 20000 employees
John	Chief Executive Officer	Infrastructure client organisation, approx. 10000 employees
Chris	Chief Executive Officer	Infrastructure owner and operator organisation, approx. 5000 employees
Steve	Chief Executive Officer	Public client infrastructure organisation, approx. 70000 employees
Alison	Chief Executive Officer	Public client infrastructure organisation, approx. 30000 employees
Simon 2	Chief Executive	International infrastructure organisation, approx. 25000 employees
Robin	Chief Executive	Construction project-based organisation, approx. 5000 employees
Peter	Chief Executive	Public client infrastructure organisation, approx. 6000 employees

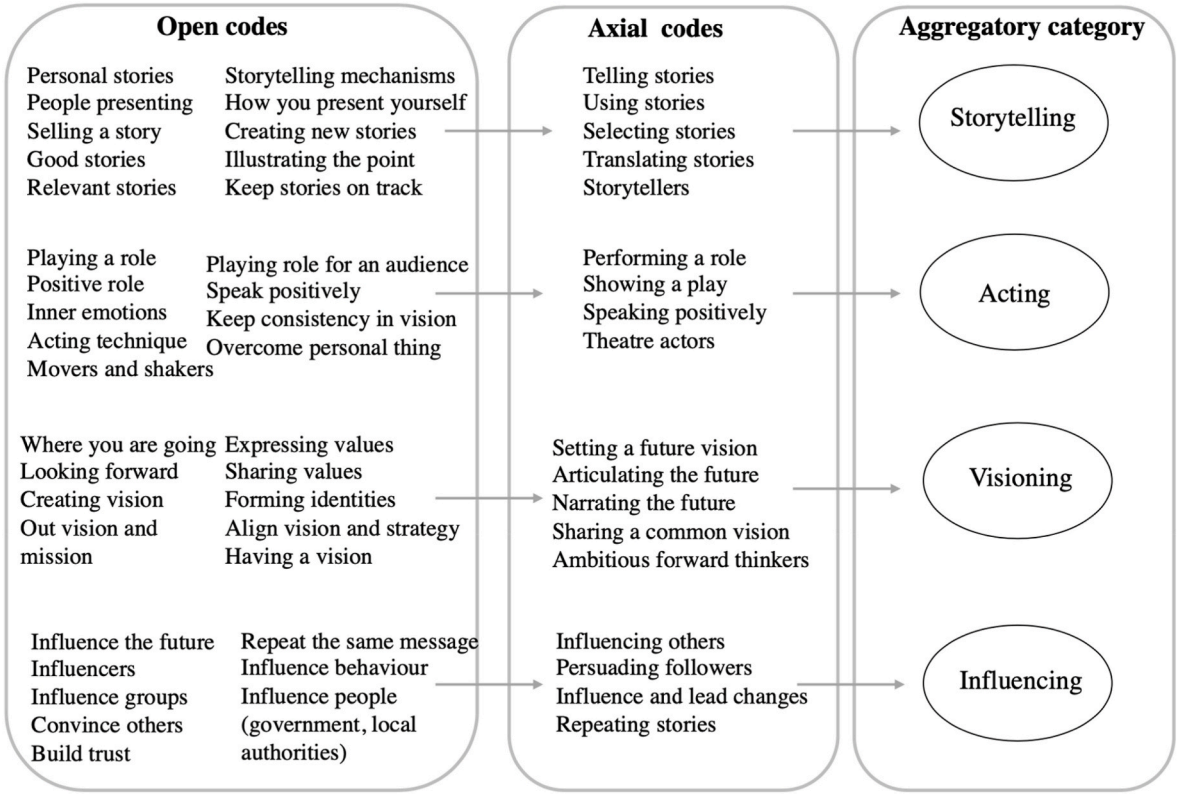


Fig. 2. Coding pattern.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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