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# **Leading autonomous followers: Indirect, Overt, and Covert leadership practices in professional service firms**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper asks: In organizations characterized by extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority, how do senior professionals exercise leadership?

Based on a cross-case analysis of four global professional service firms in the accounting, consulting, and legal sectors, this study contributes to the emerging leadership as practice literature by explicitly addressing two previously neglected themes: 1) how ambiguous power dynamics within organizations affect leadership practices, and 2) how leadership practices are both context-creating and context-dependent. The study identifies three distinctive leadership practices: *gaining and sustaining legitimacy to lead through market success, enabling autonomy whilst retaining control, and acting politically whilst appearing apolitical*. It demonstrates how these practices are manifested through a combination of *implicit, overt, and covert* behaviors. Our study suggests that professional service firms are led by supposedly “reluctant leaders” who must constantly negotiate and renegotiate their leadership positions with their “autonomous followers”. In so doing we contribute to the growing literature on plural models of leadership by exploring how leader/follower relationships can be contingent, constructed and negotiated.

**Key words:** Leadership practice, Professionals, Power dynamics

## **INTRODUCTION**

Practice-based approaches to leadership have focused attention on the everyday activities of leaders and their followers, the contexts and situations in which leadership is exercised (Carroll, Levy & Richmond, 2008; Ladkin, 2010). Often, however, the formal authority of leaders has been taken for granted and the underlying power dynamics within these organizational contexts largely neglected (Denis, Langley & Sergi, 2012; Wallace & Tomlinson, 2010). In this study, we address these limitations directly by analyzing how leadership is practiced in an organizational context of extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority. In the process we provide insights into how leadership practices operate in professional settings.

It is now understood within the scholarly literature that leadership can be conceptualized as a collective process, and various notions of plural forms of leadership have become increasingly influential (Carroll et al., 2008; Crevani et al., 2007; Denis et al., 2010; 2012; Empson & Langley, Forthcoming; Gronn, 2002; Ladkin, 2010). These studies, drawing on social theories of practice, characterize leadership not as something caused by or resulting from the competency or characteristics of individual persons. Rather, leadership is understood as an effect of the interactions of individuals and their exercise of influence upon each other. Thus leadership becomes viewed as more temporary, more insecure, and more subject to negotiation (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a; Ladkin, 2010). These approaches to leadership focus on highlighting the everyday experiences and activities of leaders and followers alike, shifting the unit of analysis from the individual leader and/or follower to the context of particular social situations (Carroll et al., 2008; Denis et al., 2012; Gronn, 2002).

This processual and plural practice-based perspective presents leadership as a deeply contextualized phenomenon, which is “both context-creating and context-dependent” (Wallace & Tomlinson, 2010: 41). It therefore becomes necessary to understand the context in which leadership interactions occur, as individuals’ relationships with each other are shaped by the context in which they co-exist (Bryman, 2004; Conger, 1998; Kempster & Parry, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). There is, therefore, as noted by Wallace & Tomlinson (*ibid.*), a need for empirical research into different types of contexts, in order to understand the leadership-context dynamic in a more nuanced manner. Denis et al. (1996: 674) suggest that the “study of strategic leadership seems particularly intriguing in situations of ambiguity ... where the traditional power of the hierarchy is limited, and where goals and technologies are unclear.”

In this paper we explore leadership in such a context: in professional service firms, which are characterized by extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority. In professional service firms, especially professional partnerships, the primary system of authority is based on meritocracy (i.e. superior skill at selling and delivering professional services) rather than hierarchical positioning within a formal bureaucracy (Abbott, 1988). The professional workers, with their expectations of autonomy in their delivery of professional services, are notoriously difficult to lead: a process often described as like “herding cats” (Løwendahl, 2005). Leadership is typically performed “in the plural” (Empson & Langley, *Forthcoming*), creating a constant need for partners to negotiate and renegotiate their leadership positions in relation to other partners.

In view of these complex power dynamics, professional service firms can be seen as pioneering organizational responses to leadership challenges which are becoming increasingly relevant to organizations more generally within the knowledge economy –

specifically how to persuade highly educated, relatively autonomous knowledge workers to work collaboratively to serve the needs of the organization (Empson & Langley, Forthcoming). Professional service firms have therefore grappled with, and to a significant extent resolved, one of the most challenging power dynamics at the heart of contemporary organizational life (Clegg et al. 2006). There is, therefore, much value to be gained from studying leadership practices in this context. To date, however, professional service firms have been almost entirely neglected by leadership scholars and very little is known about how leadership is performed in this context (Empson & Langley, *ibid.*).

Based on a cross-case analysis of four global professional service firms in the accounting, consulting, and legal sectors, we ask: *In organizations characterized by extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority, how do senior professionals exercise leadership?* This paper contributes to the emerging leadership as practice literature by explicitly addressing previously neglected themes of ambiguous power dynamics and the impact of context on leadership practices. It identifies three distinctive leadership practices: gaining and sustaining legitimacy through market success, enabling autonomy whilst retaining control, and acting politically whilst appearing apolitical. It demonstrates how this combination of implicit, overt, and covert leadership practices enables senior professionals to exercise leadership among autonomous followers.

The paper proceeds as follows. First we highlight some key themes within the emerging leadership as practice literature and its limitations regarding the analysis of power dynamics and conceptualization of context. We then examine leadership in professional service firms, highlighting the dearth of empirical and theoretical work in

this area. We elaborate on the particular challenges of leadership in this context, especially regarding individual autonomy and managerial authority. Next, the method of the study is presented. We then examine the organizational context of the four firms in the study and elaborate upon the three practices we have identified. The implications for leadership as practice theory are developed in the discussion and conclusions section.

### **LEADERSHIP AS PRACTICE: PROCESSUAL AND PLURAL**

Drawing on social practice theory (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; de Certeau, 1984; Schatzki et al., 2001), leadership researchers have turned their attention in recent years to the everyday activities of leaders, thereby shifting focus from abstract and individual level concepts such as traits and competencies, towards concrete and processual activities and situations (Carroll et al., 2008). Empirical studies based on this perspective “clearly emphasize *processual* ‘how’ questions, aimed at understanding how leadership is produced and performed” (Denis et al., 2012: 255). Ladkin (2010: 177–8) stresses that “leadership emerges from a collective process created through the confluence of a particular situation or context, people involved in that process who take up roles as ‘leader’ or ‘followers’ and a purpose to which their collective action is directed.” The emphasis within this approach is therefore to understand better how individuals influence each other and, thereby, exercise leadership (Carroll et al., 2008; Ladkin, 2010).

This focus on the process of leadership is consistent with the increased interest in plural models of leadership. According to this perspective, leadership should not simply be viewed as a property of individuals and their behaviors, but as “a collective phenomenon that is distributed or shared among different people, potentially fluid, and

constructed in interaction” (Denis et al., 2012). Therefore, unlike leader-member exchange theory which generally assumes pre-determined and stable hierarchical relationships between leaders and their followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), plural models of leadership acknowledge that leader/follower relationships can be contingent, constructed and negotiated through interaction.

Adopting this perspective, a growing number of scholars have begun to explore what they have variously called “collective”, “shared” or “distributed” leadership (Avolio et al., 2009; Denis et al., 2001; Gronn, 2002; Pearce & Conger, 2003; Spillane, 2005). Within this body of literature, broadly categorized as “leadership in the plural” (Denis et al., 2012), the terms shared, collective, and distributed leadership are often used interchangeably (Avolio et al., 2009). Although they refer to distinct concepts (Denis et al., 2012) these terms broadly describe a phenomenon where leadership roles are shared among multiple actors in organizational contexts and where authority relationships are ambiguous and potentially contested. For example, Pearce and Conger (2003: 1) describe shared leadership as: “a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups which ... often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence”.

Practice-oriented, plural approaches to leadership, therefore, highlight the way in which leadership as a phenomenon is continually produced and reproduced in concrete social situations and contexts, and emphasizes that identities such as “leader” and “follower” are socially constructed in talk and action. However, in their review, Denis et al. (2012) highlight an important limitation of this literature – the tendency to overlook, or at least make assumptions about, issues of power and hierarchy. As Denis et al. (2012) argue, scholars “need to pay greater attention to the underlying patterns of power

relationships that might influence the emergence of plural leadership” (p. 60). While the issue of power dynamics is central to understanding the phenomenon of plural leadership practices, very little is known about how exactly these dynamics are enacted and the processes by which leadership practices both shape and are shaped by formal authority and informal power structures. As Denis et al. (ibid: 267) note: “We still know little about how power affects leadership practices, interactions, and outcomes.” This is consistent with much contemporary theorizing on leadership which has tended to neglect the impact of power, presenting an idealized apolitical and unhierarchical view of contemporary organizations (Pfeffer, 2013).

Some micro-level practice studies *have* explicitly addressed issues of power, for example by examining how power dynamics are played out in particular situations, e.g. interaction sequences (see e.g. Crevani et al., 2007, and Larsson & Lundholm, 2010). Yet the assumption within these studies is that the power dynamics, specifically leader/follower roles and relationships, are predetermined. As yet very little is known about how individuals establish themselves and come to be accepted as leaders by their peer group, and how they construct, negotiate, and sustain these positions in contexts where power dynamics are fluid and managerial authority is contingent on the ongoing support of their peers.

Turning explicitly to the significance of context, a second limitation within the leadership as practice literature is the way in which context is conceptualized, specifically how it remains unproblematized. As Wallace and Tomlinson (2010) argue, leadership is intrinsically a contextually embedded activity that also has the potential to change the context within which it is embedded. Yet, while practice research puts a strong emphasis on context, as already highlighted, it tends to assume the stability of



pre-given hierarchical relationships and positional power structures. This neglect of power dynamics and the assumption of stable hierarchical relations become particularly relevant where authority is contingent (Denis et al., 2010). Few studies to date have addressed leadership in such contexts. Denis et al's. (2006) and Wallace and Tomlinson's (2010) studies in the healthcare and education sectors are important exceptions. However, while power relations amongst the leadership group within such pluralistic professional contexts are subject to constant negotiation, they take place within a pre-existing bureaucratic hierarchy, where leader/follower relations are broadly defined.

In this paper, we focus on the context of professional service firms. While noting that the healthcare and educational contexts approached by Denis et al. (1996, 2010) and Wallace and Tomlinson (2011) are indeed *complex* in terms of authority structures, in professional service firms managerial authority is more explicitly *contingent*, as explained below.

## **LEADERSHIP IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS: INFLUENCING AUTONOMOUS PROFESSIONALS**

Conventional models of leadership are predicated on the assumption that leaders, by definition, must have followers (Avolio et al., 2009; Howell and Shamir, 2005). In professional service firms, such as law, consulting, or accounting firms, the distinction between “leaders” and “followers” is problematic as traditional hierarchical dyadic relationships are replaced by more ambiguous and negotiated relationships amongst professional peers (Adler et al., 2008). As a result “leadership is a matter of guiding, nudging, and persuading” (Greenwood et al., 1990: 748). In spite of their distinctiveness,

professional service firms have received very little direct attention from leadership scholars, perhaps because of the difficulty of isolating notions of leadership and followership in settings where they tend to converge (Empson & Langley, Forthcoming). Put simply, the fundamental problematization of the professional service firm leadership literature is that it does not really exist.

The distinctive challenges of professional service firm leadership derive from two interrelated organizational characteristics: extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority (Empson & Langley, Forthcoming; Mintzberg, 1979, 1983). Experienced professionals require, or at least expect, extensive individual autonomy (Miner et al., 1994; Von Glinow, 1988). This autonomy is legitimated by the requirement for professionals to preserve the right to make choices about how best to apply their specialist technical expertise to the delivery of customized professional services. It is perpetuated by the fact that the core value-creating resources of a professional service firm – technical knowledge and client relationships – are often proprietary to specific professionals (Empson, 2001).

This emphasis on relatively extensive individual autonomy is associated with contingent managerial authority (Greenwood et al., 1990). In professional service firms, authority is “collegial and fragile” (Hinings, Brown & Greenwood, 1991) and deemed to rest with the professional peer group rather than the individual (Marcson, 1962). Clan control, i.e. behavior controlled through common values, traditions, and commitment to the organization (Ouchi, 1980), is the norm and power rests with professionals in the operating core (Mintzberg, 1983). Senior executives in professional service firms are selected (and often elected) by their peers to formal leadership roles for a fixed term of office and can be deposed if they fail to retain the support of their peers (Empson,

2007). As Mintzberg (1989: 181) states, a senior executive in a professional service firm “maintains power only as long as the professionals perceive him or her to be serving their interests effectively.” This is particularly so in partnerships, the prevailing form of governance within the traditional professions such as law and accounting (Greenwood & Empson, 2003), but is also common in corporate professional service firms which mimic the characteristics of professional partnership governance (Empson & Chapman, 2006). As a result, the formal authority of senior executives in professional service firms is contingent. They can only lead by consent.

While professional service firms may explicitly eschew formal hierarchy and espouse a commitment to individual autonomy, hierarchies nevertheless persist. These may be more or less explicit and are often derived from the perception of superior expertise in the design and delivery of professional services (Brown et al., 2010; Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011; Robertson & Swan, 2003). In other words, professional expertise conveys an informal authority which carries more weight than formal position. Through the apprenticeship model of skills transfer, which is fundamental to professional socialization and training process in professional service firms (Alvehus, Forthcoming; Anderson-Gough et al., 2000, 2001, 2002), the senior professional in effect exercises a leadership role by explicitly coaching more junior professionals and role modeling appropriate behaviors, explicating and embodying the beliefs and behaviors required of a partner and leader in a professional service firm (Denis et al., 2007; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Thompson, 1967). In this way, leaders within professional service firms provide professionals with an organizationally sanctioned vocabulary of motives (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Mills, 1940), thus enabling them to exercise a degree of informal control over autonomous professionals.

Empson's (2007) study of partner dynamics argues that leadership in this context is about managing the delicate balance between preserving each individual partners' individualistic desire to self-actualize and the collective partnership's desire to profit maximize. The election of individuals to the leadership roles of managing and senior partner is a manifestation of the partnership's collective will. It is the managing and senior partners' responsibility, within the delegated authority structure of the partnership, to build the consensus they need to implement that collective will (Adler et al., 2008; Denis et al., 2007) and, in so doing, resolve the inherent tension between the needs of the individual partner and the collective partnership.

In order to achieve this, Empson and Langley (Forthcoming) argue, senior executives need to be acutely aware of the implicit power structures and shifting networks of influence among their colleagues and to have highly developed political skills in order to navigate and negotiate these networks of influence. As Morris et al. (2010: 297) state, professional service firms are "uniquely political environments ... many traditional professional partnerships are consensus-based democracies but as such they are subject to the lobbying, scheming, and bargaining which occurs in any other political arena to achieve agreement on decisions among diverse individuals and interest groups." While it has been suggested that power and politics are central to the leadership processes within a professional service firm (Empson & Langley, Forthcoming) to date no empirical studies have been conducted into power dynamics and political practices in this context.

The current study seeks to address important limitations in the leadership as practice literature: first, the assumption of stable hierarchy and neglect of the impact of power dynamics on leadership practices, and second, the lack of insight into how leadership

practices are both context-creating and context-dependent. In so doing, it also seeks to contribute to the nascent literature on leadership in the context of professional service firms. Based on a cross-case analysis of four global professional service firms, this paper asks: *In organizations characterized by extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority, how do senior professionals exercise leadership?*

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

While leadership is a widely researched topic, there is a long established and on-going debate regarding its nature. Numerous definitions and diverging results have led to a very fragmented research field (Yukl, 1989; Barker, 1997). The approach we have adopted to conceptualizing leadership is to focus on the practices used by senior professionals in order to influence their peers, superiors and subordinates. These practices encompass deliberate tactics (Kipnis et al., 1980; Denis et al., 1996) as well as unconscious actions and unintended consequences, all of which collectively serve to influence the organization. By conceptualizing leadership and leadership practices in these terms, we sidestep problematic distinctions between e.g. leadership and management, and focus instead on how practices contribute to the construction of leaders and leadership.

The emphasis on processual and plural leadership practices has important methodological implications. There are growing demands for qualitative leadership studies “to capture the truly dynamic qualities of leadership” (Gordon & Yukl, 2004: 364) which cannot be studied through the survey-based methods which have traditionally dominated the leadership literature (Conger, 1998). Practice-based leadership studies, therefore, engage in detailed analysis of micro activities, emphasising thick descriptions

of how leadership actually happens in the workplace (Sveningsson et al., 2012) and situational factors that result in a decentered understanding of leadership.

In this study, we follow the logic of inquiry used by e.g. Denis et al. (1996, 2010), using indirect methods for approaching practices. By interviewing practitioners it is possible to understand “the way practice is evoked ‘everyday’ and ‘in the moment’ by practitioners” (Carroll et al., 2008: 367) and thus understand practices from the practitioners’ point of view. Many practices may also be difficult to actually study with more direct methods (e.g. observations), as they may concern the withholding or concealment of actions; this is indeed the case with two of the practices discussed in this paper.

The empirical basis of this study consists primarily of 144 interviews from four different cases (see Table 1). The cases were chosen by theoretical sampling, i.e. “cases are selected because they are particularly suitable for illuminating and extending relationships and logic among constructs” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007: 27). The four cases were selected from a broader set case studies which we conducted to examine issues of leadership in professional service firms. The cases that formed the focus of this paper were selected because : (a) the empirical context was most relevant (i.e. they represented more extreme manifestations of contingent managerial authority and extensive individual autonomy), and (b) the methods employed and interview sampling methods used in the cases were most consistent.

For the two smaller global firms studied (under 5,000 employees) we conducted interviews in multiple countries (16 in total) as the leadership dynamics operated on a globally integrated basis. By contrast, the two larger global (accounting) firms operated a highly federated structure and leadership dynamics were more self-contained so our

interviews focused on a single country. Cross-case analysis was conducted to draw out similarities between cases rather than to identify and interpret idiosyncratic issues specific to individual cases.

<b>TABLE 1 STUDY DATA</b>			
<b>Firm</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of Interviews</b>	<b>Supporting Data</b>
<b>Firm A</b>	Law firm, 5,000 employees globally	34	Observations, documents
<b>Firm B</b>	Consultancy firm, 1,500 employees globally	31	Documents
<b>Firm C</b>	Accounting firm, global firm with 11,000 employees in the UK	37	Observations, documents
<b>Firm D</b>	Auditing firm, global firm with 2,000 employees in Sweden	42	Observations, documents
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>144</b>	



Interviews were loosely structured and narratively oriented (Czarniawska, 1997). The main focus was to capture the point of view of the respondent rather than getting answers to highly directive questions. Thus, our questions were broad and open in order to evoke the interviewees' opinion, experience and standpoint. Example questions were "What does the concept of leadership mean to you in the context of [Firm X]?", "Do you think of yourself as a leader of [Firm X], and "When did you start to consider yourself as a leader of [Firm X] and why?". More important, however, were the follow-up questions, encouraging the interviewees to develop and deepen their response (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews were typically scheduled for 90 to 120 minutes. All interviews were transcribed.

The data were analyzed abductively (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009), i.e. interpretation of data and formulation of overarching themes were subjected to theoretical analysis as well as re-interpretations and reconsiderations of the already made interpretations. The logic of abductive analysis, drawing on pragmatist philosopher Pierce (1906), is to go from data, to theory, back to data, and so forth, continually refining theoretical concepts as well as re-interpreting empirical data. Abductive analysis thus "seeks out unexpected data and creates new concepts to explain them" (Agar, 2010: 289).

The emphasis throughout the analysis process was on leadership-related themes associated with extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority, with the view of developing a better understanding of how leadership practices both shape and are shaped by organizational context. We therefore searched for practices that were not broadly present in leader/follower relations generically but arose specifically from the context of ambiguous leader–follower relationships.

The interpretive process we adopted constituted four steps. The first step was an interest in the theme of role modeling as a part of leadership in professional service firms, which emerged as common across all cases during the initial data collection process. The second step included systematic working through the data from all cases, identifying qualities, behaviors or other requirements of being elected partner (including evidence of interest in leadership or being offered opportunities to display leadership), evidence of autonomy once becoming partner, explanations of why individual partners were elected or selected for formal leadership positions, and why individuals were recognized as leaders by fellow partners regardless of formal position. The third step was to compare the data to the nine manifestations of leadership in professional service firms proposed by Empson and Langley (Forthcoming) to ensure that our analysis had not overlooked any substantive themes. The fourth step involved returning to the data to refine the coding and conduct further analysis to identify ideas that were linked and overlapping or which needed to be expanded to encompass a broader conceptualization. So, for example, early stage codes such as “enabling autonomy” and “interacting politically” evolved to express the paradoxes identified in the data to become “enabling autonomy whilst maintaining control” and “interacting politically whilst appearing apolitical.” “Role-modelling professional behaviours” became focused on “gaining and sustaining legitimacy through market success” to reflect the emphasis emerging from the data.

The process of re-interpretation and inter-researcher interaction enabled us to see our data from different perspectives and interpret common themes featuring in all cases. The first step was based on direct interaction and co-analysis of the data by both of us. In the second step, we analyzed the data separately, each working on our own cases,

respectively. In the third and fourth steps, the coded data were re-read, and we discussed and refined the coding. Between the third and fourth step, both of us developed and refined the theoretical foundation for the analysis separately, particularly regarding the relation between ‘practices’ and ‘context.’ Thus, the last steps of the analytical process consisted of periods when we were engaged in direct collaboration interspersed with periods of individual interpretive work. As a consequence, during the analytical process, interpretations were tested several times, and ideas were generated as well as rejected during the process. While seemingly chaotic at times, this process is at the heart of interpretive research strategies, serving both to enable and restrain interpretive creativity (Weick, 1989).

### **ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT: EXTENSIVE INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY AND CONTINGENT MANAGERIAL AUTHORITY**

The central purpose of this study was to examine leadership practices in organizations characterized by *extensive individual autonomy* and *contingent managerial authority*. As explained in the review of the literature, these organizational characteristics are both typically present within professional service firm partnerships. In this respect the four cases that form the basis of this study are typical professional service firms partnerships, though Firm B was not in fact a partnership in legal form. Table 2 presents illustrative quotes from interviews (letter and number in brackets afterwards denotes firm and interviewee number).

As the Senior Partner from Firm A summarizes the tradeoff between individual autonomy and managerial control:

Partners like to carry the idea of a partnership as a kind of band of happy brothers... You can't have too much formality or perceived corporatism from the centre. (A7)

The sense of a professional community is maintained throughout the firms, and not only within the partnership. As an interviewee from Firm D explains, one implication is that hierarchy is fluid, and that leadership practices emerge from within these ambiguous power dynamics.

We have no administrative or organizational leadership in the sense of putting a strong emphasis on hierarchies or reporting structures and such. We don't have that. *What we do have is a professional community and in that we find some sort of leadership* (emphasis added). And it emanates from older colleagues who are experienced and have contacts, who have strong client relationships. And in order to introduce the younger colleagues and make them able to take on these assignments, a form of leadership is required, both professionally and commercially. (D35)

<b>TABLE 2 ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT: PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS</b>		
	<b>Extensive Individual Autonomy</b>	<b>Contingent Managerial Authority</b>
<b>Firm A</b>	<p>Interviewer: Does anyone have power over you?  Partner: Not as far as I'm concerned no.  Interviewer: Does anyone think they have power over you?  Partner: I don't think so. (A8)</p>	<p>The interesting thing in this role (of Senior Partner) is that you find that you can't achieve anything except through other people... You can only make things happen by essentially working with this group (of key influencers) who in turn influence the wider group, so power has a different meaning I think to other organizations. (A7)</p>
<b>Firm B</b>	<p>The CEO and Chairman, Board of Directors, Executive Committee etc. ... a lot of those positions are really coordinating or communicating - I don't think we need supervising. It's more about coordination and about guiding or making sure that cohesion is inside the organization, but definitely not controlling, not managing, not policing - no not that kind of thing. (B29)</p>	<p>I think we recognize that anyone in a leadership position in the firm is in a servant leadership role. It's something the partners ask you to do ... So I'm happy to get a view of where we need to go from (the partners). I say – I'm your servant leader and frankly if you don't want me in this role I'm more than happy just to be a partner and focus on clients because that's what we all love to do best. (B8)</p>
<b>Firm C</b>	<p>So it's not about following in that sense, it's about (leaders) enabling and directing, giving people outlets.... Because frankly nobody has to follow anyone. (C9)</p>	<p>My experience of authority is that it lasts about an hour if you stop refreshing it. I think of it as a license to lead. My experience is that you can, for a very limited time, get a license to lead from above in professional services but it actually has to come from your peer group. We've seen people get killed very quickly if their teams stop following them. (C1)</p>
<b>Firm D</b>	<p>This company is not based on anyone telling anyone else what to, as if there were some engineers or any other limited set of people designing the jobs. ... The consulting business starts at the other end, with a client who has a problem that needs to be solved. And the consultant finding out about this problem becomes the manager for that job. And then it is not mine or anyone else's business to tell this person what to do, or how to go about solving the problem. (D25)</p>	<p>It's not clear what it looks like at the top. There is this ambiguous circle of partners, and some partners are more important than others, but this is anything but clear. (D28)</p>

What then are the implications for leadership practices in such a context? The following three sections examine the three leadership practices identified as distinctive to the environment of extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority and which were strongly present in all four the cases analyzed. The first leadership practice is implicit and is a requirement for being accepted (and in some cases elected) as a leader by your peers: *gaining and retaining legitimacy to lead through market success*. The second leadership practice is overt, clearly understood as coexisting in a dynamic tension within the partnership: *enabling autonomy whilst retaining control*. The third leadership practice is covert, denied or at least not acknowledged explicitly but understood intuitively by individuals identified by their peers as effective leaders: *acting politically whilst appearing apolitical*.

### **PRACTICE 1: GAINING AND RETAINING LEGITIMACY TO LEAD THROUGH MARKET SUCCESS**

Our analysis demonstrates that, in order to gain and retain legitimacy to lead, it is necessary first to gain the respect of your colleagues through your professional work. It is this which enables a professional to have visibility and influence, both necessary preconditions for being perceived as a potential leader. As one interviewee explains:

You always generate respect if you are a "heavy hitter". If you bring in lots of business you will always generate respect. (A13)

In all of the cases in the current study, success in the marketplace emerges as by far the most important and fundamental requirement for gaining and retaining the legitimacy to lead. Table 3 presents a selection of representative quotes from all cases.

<b>TABLE 3 GAINING &amp; RETAINING LEGITIMACY TO LEAD THROUGH MARKET SUCCESS</b>	
<b>Firm A</b>	<p>Partners tend to want to be led by partners and in fact they tend to want to be led by partners who they respect as business generators. (A14)</p> <p>One of the reasons I think why people were happy to have me as Senior Partner, because I was perceived to be a successful Banking partner... I ran a lot of our key relationships and so on. (A7)</p> <p>I think a lot of the leadership in a firm is linked to your practice and the position in the market because those people have the credibility, those people are in the market, they actually know the client and so on and in the end all that we do is ultimately directed towards clients. (A1)</p>
<b>Firm B</b>	<p>Leadership in this firm is a function of ones credibility as a professional, in what we do – I don't think I necessarily have been the best consultant in our firm but I'm respected as a professional and particularly respected as a client relationship person – without that I cannot lead. (B11)</p> <p>You can't be a leader without having credibility as a practitioner in this firm. So if you're not seen by your colleagues as a successful client executor, I don't think your proposals carry as much weight. You have to have a demonstrated track record of having delivered, of being somebody who cannot only propose but also dispose. (B27)</p> <p>Everyone on the global ExCom has already been an office leader. And they're people who generally around the partnership, you would not expect an eyebrow to be raised at their appointment - the people who are perceived within the firm as being very strong performers in their market or in their practice. (B2)</p>
<b>Firm C</b>	<p>To be the person who actually runs something: either runs a function, runs a service line, or ends up as Chairman, you've got there because you've been outstanding with clients. Whether it's leadership or whatever it is, that's what people respect first and foremost in our firm. So that's the key to advancement. (C7)</p> <p>They earn the right to get into one of those positions through ... doing fantastic stuff with clients, through enhancing the value of the partnership because they've either developed a client relationship that we didn't have before, or won a major piece of work and done that consistently... They have the respect of the partners because they're recognized for doing that. (C14)</p> <p>I've dealt with some of our most difficult audits. So I've been the partner on (name of major client) having won that. I'm also still currently the partner on (name of major client) and that's not the easiest one either. And, even now I've become head of the audit practice; I'm just going onto (name of major client). ...So if I put my little ego hat on for a moment I was sort of, you know, seen to be a good partner. You know, one of the top partners, I suppose, and one that can get out there and win work. (C18)</p>
<b>Firm D</b>	<p>The role of the manager is, in this business, less important than in for example a manufacturing company. Here, I'd say, the leader plays a bigger role ... That is, people who don't have to be managers in any sense. Rather it is the clearly shining people who, in their way of being, show how to become a successful consultant. Good, successful tax consultants who show a way of being that ... get you to do fun things. And earn a lot of money. That's what we ultimately want to do.(D25)</p> <p>Those who are leaders in this organization are not that because they are good leaders but because they are good tax lawyers. (D5)</p> <p>What is particular of the organization is that those who become leaders are those who are good consultants. And they continue consulting on a full time basis even though they are managers. (D12)</p>



Market success is about “being strong performers in the market” (B2), having been “outstanding with clients” (C7) and “earn(ing) a lot of money” (D25). “Everything else is icing on the cake.” (A4). That is, market success is defined within these firms primarily as bringing in work, either by winning substantial and high-profile assignments from established clients or by opening up entirely new areas of business.

While success in the market is the most fundamental element of gaining and retaining the legitimacy to lead, the more ‘technical’ aspects of professional practice, such as quality of advice and ability to delivery exemplary service, are also deemed important.

Leadership in a firm that is based on professional values requires a lot of respect and you need to be credible vis-à-vis your co-partners. And in the long term, the only way you can be credible is if you are exercising the profession in a way that is respected by your partners. (B15)

Yet, as demonstrated in Table 3, market success ultimately serves as a litmus test for ‘technical’ professional competencies. Why is this market success seen as such a significant indicator of fitness for leadership? One reasons may be because professional work in general is ambiguous and the results difficult to clearly evaluate (Alvesson, 2004). Showing market success in terms of e.g. billable hours provides an unambiguous image of the commitment to the firm and its values (Alvehus & Spicer, 2012). In many ways, then, market success comes to symbolize professional proficiency. By being seen as successful in selling work, aspiring leaders demonstrate to their colleagues that they are more than just highly skilled technicians but have a broader perspective of client

needs and, by implication, the commercial acumen needed to lead their fellow partners to commercial success.

The partners value an individual partner's commercial success because it should ultimately generate profits and reputational benefits for themselves also. This pecuniary aspect notwithstanding, there are also strong symbolic aspects associated with being successful in the market. It demonstrates to colleagues that you know what it means to work hard. In order to gain legitimacy, potential leaders must show that they have worked hard and have made the personal sacrifices they will be asking of their colleagues.

I think that professional service practitioners ... will accept almost unlimited decision making and authority from someone that they think understands the things they are going through. (C2)

The gaining of legitimacy thereby takes on a very concrete embodied form. The leader has been through it all, and is willing to do so again. But it is not enough to have done so in the past. Commercial success must be maintained. This continues after being promoted to positions of authority. One Firm A practice head contrasts his own experience with a less politically astute colleague's.

I did more billable hours than any other practice group head... I always find if you ask people to do something, you get a lot more respect if they think 'well he's doing it', so therefore they follow that. The banking guy who's very, very good, made a classic mistake of cutting right back on his practice and becoming full-time

management. And that doesn't work in a firm like ours. You do lose credibility doing that. You have to be able to show you can still cut it. (A11)

Showing that you can “still cut it” and demonstrating your continual commitment to the firm is vital if your colleagues are to entrust you with formal authority to lead them. However, market success is an imprecise proxy for leadership capability. Several of the non-partners interviewed in Firm D in particular expressed discontent with their leaders' abilities. As a partner in Firm C expressed it;

They may be the guys with the best industry capability, they may have a big client in the sector, but does it actually equate to leadership? That's just credentials. (C9)

But even if, according to some partners, it is “just credentials”, these credentials provide a foundation of legitimacy on which individuals are able to develop the informal authority to be promoted and accepted by their peers to lead the in the absence of formal authority.

## **PRACTICE 2: ENABLING AUTONOMY WHILST RETAINING CONTROL**

As noted in the introduction, a core aspect of professional work is autonomy. A Firm C partner said, “Frankly nobody has to follow anyone” (C9). One in Firm D explained:

In essence, nobody interferes regarding when you work and how you work, as long as you do it and deliver high quality. (D24)

But this comment about autonomy may be somewhat disingenuous as it does imply a degree of management supervision: how else can partners be sure that their colleagues are doing the work and doing it to a sufficiently high standard to protect the collective reputation of the partnership? Certainly partners espouse the rhetoric of autonomy, and appear to seek to maximize it; and leaders within the firms acknowledge this and to some extent accommodate this perspective within their rhetoric. Yet these firms are not anarchies operating on a haphazard basis; they are highly successful global professional service firms.

Ultimately the leaders *do* exercise a degree of control, primarily around ensuring that the activities of individual partners are aligned with the strategic goals and performance targets as agreed by the partnership. As demonstrated in Table 4, ultimately one of the most important leadership practices within a professional service firm is to maintain control whilst minimizing the perception of being managed and perpetuating the perception of autonomy. This balancing act, between enabling autonomy whilst retaining control within an environment of contingent managerial authority, is summarised by the Senior Partner in Firm C.

Partners say ‘you’re too tight’ and they say ‘get looser’. So you get looser and they say ‘it’s chaotic, get tighter’. If the money is going up, you can do what you like. If the money is going down, you can’t do anything. But the money going up or down isn’t within control of the Senior Partner. (C1)

This means that formal management is minimized. Instead, just as they were mentored during their training process, younger partners are to some extent guided by more

experienced partners that they particularly respect. In this way leadership occurs within the informal hierarchy, with partners accepting constraints on their actions in the interests of the partnership as a whole, whether imposed through informal disciplining mechanisms or simply through encouragement and rhetoric. As put by a partner in Firm D (see above), in the “professional community” they “find some sort of leadership” (D35). An experienced partner from Firm A reflects on the distinction between the expectations of experienced and less experienced partners when it comes to their roles and responsibilities as leaders and followers:

I think the younger partners want you to spend more time (than them) thinking about what the firm is as a whole doing and ... to provide thought leadership which they will either follow or not, because it's not telling them what to do; it's actually just coming up with the prompts and ideas to maximize the business and get the best out of people. I think that's what they expect some of the more senior partners to do. So it sort of happens. (A8)

	<b>Enabling Autonomy</b>	<b>Maintaining Control</b>
<b>Firm A</b>	You can't really tell people what to do. You can say what you're going to do and then hope people will agree with it ... and the people you can least tell what to do are those who are most important for the success of the business. Because they are the ones who control the client relationships. (A17)	Because we are the size we are now, we have to have a more regulated set of rules. ... You can't just simply go off and do what you want because you are depriving other people of their hard earned cash. So there has to be checks and balances and I think that stops a bit of entrepreneurialism. (A9)
<b>Firm B</b>	[The Chairman's] classic line is 'I don't want management in this firm'... And I think he's right. If I look at my last three years, I've tried to do some management stuff in [country] and it's not worked. (B17)	We're all leaders...that's the narrative, that's part of the story and that's exactly what I say and that's what I expect them to say. But when we went through the global financial crisis, guess what, there was no argument. When the pressure's on, they expect me to lead. (B33)
<b>Firm C</b>	One of the things that I have always liked about the organization is that you take as much responsibility as you want. And people will allow it. But they don't offer it to you, you have to go and take it. And I think an important aspect of leadership is to make sure that we mine to the fullest possible extent the capabilities of the people in the organization because what else have we got? (C6)	At the same time even though all the partners are peers, there do need to be decisions made. There do need to be tough things done or decisions made on where we're going to invest, that sort of thing. ... knowing when you have to step in and say no, yes. (C14)
<b>Firm D</b>	Most of us know what to do anyway. Things move towards common goals for the business and agreeing on those. But how every partner works, that's something that others care very little about. Sure, if you're going to do something special, then others may interfere, but how you work with clients and so on, that's each and everyone's business. (D6)	I'd say part of the leadership is to ensure that some things become more efficient. Each individual shouldn't have to handle all routine tasks. If they did, they'd spend their time on that instead of on client work, and then we cannot charge for that time. It is better that they do something we can charge for. ... (But we have no) administrative or organizational leadership in the sense that we put a strong emphasis on hierarchies or reporting structures and such things. We don't have that. (D35)

Leadership “sort of happens”, yet when interviewees are explicitly asked about leadership, many present a more conventional view of the role of leadership within these firms. They refer to concepts such as “vision” and “direction”. This is not surprising as these are common themes in popular notions of leadership in general. As this illustrative comment from Firm C demonstrate, some interviewee’s statements are indeed very generic in character and could apply in any organizational context.

I think leadership here is about a number of things. I think it is about providing a sense of direction, vision, ambition, purpose that resonates with the other partners and people. It’s about trying to articulate what is different about our firm, why would we be better than the other firms? Why is it that you as a client or partner would want to work with us? (C14)

While common, talking of “setting the right tone, setting a vision, (and) strategic direction” (C8) is vague and abstract and other similarly vague terms such as “ambition,” “inspiration” and “strategy” (e.g. C14 above) are also common. Largely these kinds of comments by interviewees rehearse generic talk about leadership and what leadership should achieve (cf. Carroll & Levy, 2008). This kind of talk is, however, difficult to enact in everyday work practice (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003c; Sveningsson et al., 2012). Thus, while professionals can certainly talk the leadership talk, what this actually means in the context of the firms is not particularly clear. Thus, some interviewees state that more leadership is needed:

Lots of people here are crying out for leadership, you know, they just don't realize it. But they are. They do what they do but if somebody could inspire them and show them there was a better way of doing it, they'd follow that. (C9)

The problem, however, is that such overt leadership activity could be perceived by partners as interfering with their autonomy and thus be met with resistance or disdain. Control is maintained in subtler and less obtrusive ways – and, accordingly, this requires subtle political skills.

### **PRACTICE 3: INTERACTING POLITICALLY WHILST APPEARING APOLITICAL**

The last of the three practices identified is perhaps the most subtle. Whereas Practice 1 is implicit and Practice 2 is overt, Practice 3, interacting politically while appearing apolitical, is covert. In order to be accepted by their peers as leaders, professionals must appear to be apolitical (according to notions of political behavior as defined by professionals within the firm). Yet these individuals are in fact engaging in highly political behavior. The subtle and covert nature of this third practice becomes clearer if presented as three distinct but intertwined sets of beliefs and behaviors: 1) professed abhorrence of political behavior, 2) adoption of political language and practices, and 3) professed belief that effective leaders are “above politics”.



<b>TABLE 5 INTERACTING POLITICALLY WHILST APPEARING APOLITICAL</b>
<b>Part 1: Professed abhorrence of political behaviour</b>
If somebody has a political score to settle and that agenda becomes transparent, that person is diminished within the firm. (B1)
This firm is a structure where creating enemies or politicking is wholly unproductive. (B21)
One of the things that is great about the firm is that there's no vindictive politics about people who upset you because they don't want to do something.... It's one of the reasons I could never survive in a corporate, because I'm almost completely apolitical. (B23)
I mean this organization is no different to many others. There are people who are clearly very ambitious in the firm who will say from quite an early age to you, particularly over a beer or over a meal or over a chat [slams hand on table], 'do you think I'm in the frame to be Managing Partner or Senior Partner, what is it I need to do along the way?'... And they're regarded as quite pushy, will be more political in their views in terms of what they think people will want to hear and what they think people will want to vote for. (A2)
<b>Part 2: Adoption of political language and practices</b>
The role involves us being seen as acting as the servants of the partners. We have our constituents, when they email us or call us we have to call back and we have to help them, be seen to be helpful. (A34)
The previous election for Senior Partner there was a bit of a power struggle between two individuals who were dominant characters within the organization and (person) held sway on the basis of support from a number of the more senior partners including the outgoing Senior Partner who had quite a lot of influence.... It was all closed doors – smoke filled rooms – lots of politicking etc. etc. etc. – a variety of promises being made to various senior people to get them to support (person). (C6)
You govern by your mandate and your personal credibility and authority not by virtue of some kind of constitutional power that's given to you. (A7)
(One of the candidates in the election campaign for Chairman), his video and manifesto were the most edgy and challenging of all the candidates and at times aggressive towards the incumbent leadership ... He had worked out that in order to win enough votes his best opportunity was the more junior partners. If you are going to attract the more junior partners you appeal to their desire for improved profitability (by saying) 'we'll knock down some of the more senior partners who are earning a load of money but not pulling their weight.'(C3)
<b>Part 3: Believing effective leaders to be "above politics".</b>
(You need to be) straight with people even if you tell them bad things, if you're straight with people that's, in my view, the best way of playing it... If you're seen as being slippery, just saying things to be highly political, you lose a lot of the trust (A34).
Sometimes my sense would be (Senior Partner) doesn't necessarily always understand how influential he is. He's very modest about it, quite self-effacing, and he himself doesn't attach such great importance to some of those things that might be under the heading of creeping as in slightly sinister. He is not himself a player in that way at all. ... it's simply because his own motivations in this world are so, I think, very genuine and clean. (A19)
It's typical of the partners who've been in the firm for quite a long time, that they're actually trying to do the right thing. And so they don't get involved in politics. But they are aware of stuff going on. (C12)
I think it's all about trust... People who just tell it straight, in a non-personal way, it's not vindictive, it's not personal, this is the view, and those people have the highest respect, like (person), is a straight forward, very bright, very intellectual, quietly spoken but articulate, will just tell you it straight, it's not personal, it's an analytical way, it's quite a cold way but it's not personal, he's trusted. (A12)

In all of the firms studied interviewees expressed an abhorrence of apparent political behavior (e.g. “I hate politics.” (B12)). Politics is typically described in terms of self-serving behavior or acting to advance your individual interests rather than the interests of the partnership as a whole:

To me politics smacks of alliance building in the corridors, in offices behind the scenes. It smacks of people engineering agendas, which creep up on the firm and deliver *fait accompli* or in ways that become disruptive. Or politics could manifest as someone undermining another person. I would like to think we don't have those behaviors. (B11)

This professed abhorrence of politics (see Table 5: Part 1) is particularly remarkable because professional partnerships to some extent resemble political parties and their leaders need a high degree of political skill to influence their colleagues. Firstly, as with political parties, elections are held, requiring the issuing of manifestos, the organizing of election hustings, and talk of “constituents” and “the electorate”. Secondly, as with a politician, a leader within a professional service firm needs to build and sustain consensus among his colleagues, to make trade-offs between competing interest groups, and to offer incentives to individuals to lend him or her their support. Leaders acknowledge this political dimension within these firms implicitly in the language they use to describe their role and behaviors of their colleagues (see Table 5: Part 2). Interviewees, therefore, perceive that there is something distinctive about the nature of organizational politics within professional partnerships, reflecting the distributed nature of power as well as ownership in these firms. As one interviewee in Firm C expressed it:

I think the level of politics and personality here is different because you have a sort of cadre of highly paid (partners) ... people who own the client relationships. So there is something about needing to keep all 500 partners happy which brings a level of politics, which you wouldn't get if we were an engineering company or a pharmaceuticals company. (C5)

This apparent paradox (of denigrating political behavior whilst creating a structure which privileges skillful politicians) can be reconciled by recognizing that the more skillful leaders persuade their peers that they are not personally ambitious or “pushy” (A2), whilst they are rising to the top of their organizations. Their peers are willing to cast themselves in the role of followers because they trust these individuals sufficiently to allow them a degree of formal authority over the partnership. These individuals persuade their peers that they are ambitious for the partnership rather than for themselves personally (though, of course, the two are not mutually exclusive).

The partnership as a whole trusts the leader, that he's going to resolve it for the best – for them and only for them, for the good of the partnership. As long as they believe that and trust that, then there's no reason to put any other kind of hold on him or her. (B23)

As demonstrated in Table 5: Part 3, effective leaders must be seen to be “above politics”. To win the trust of their peers, leaders must be seen as “genuine and clean” (A19) rather than “slippery” (A34), “creeping” and “slightly sinister” (A19). Leaders must

convince their peers that they are not “political” in the crude sense in which political behavior is conceptualized within these firms.

We have people in leadership positions who don’t appear to be having to work politically to keep their position...The one who does (leadership) more naturally, partners will recognize that, and is more likely to sustain the role. And the others are more likely to crash and burn. (C4)

Yet individuals operating in a highly politicized environment who do not appear to have to work politically to keep their position, may in fact be deploying highly sophisticated political skills – whether they are utilizing them consciously or not, or to fulfill their personal ambitions or their ambitions for the firm as whole. An interviewee in Firm A (the Global Head of Human Resources, who was not herself a partner) reconciles the apparent paradox of denigrating political behavior whilst privileging political skill within these firms.

It is important to distinguish between the sort of political ego, which doesn’t work, and political savvy, which is absolutely essential. And that savvy is borne out of empathy and the ability to see and absorb and understand what is spoken and unspoken, and just what goes on sort of implicitly. I think is critical in this organization ... Without it you are in real trouble because if you don’t have it you can’t have influence. (A19)

The need to continuously reinforce authority is acknowledged by interviewees; as one partner put it, authority “lasts about an hour if you stop refreshing it” (C1, see Table 2), but it is important to seem apolitical while so doing. It can be argued, therefore, that the crude way in which political behavior is understood within these firms actually serves to downplay the political nature of the firms. Behavior not framed as “political” can still in fact be of very political. Consequently ideas of professionalism and meritocracy, which form the basis of leader legitimacy (Practice 1), are not threatened within these firms. Quite the contrary; by downplaying the politicalness of certain behaviors and by denigrating blatant political efforts, an image of professionalism is maintained.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: ALLOWING FOR AUTONOMOUS FOLLOWERSHIP AND DISPLAYING RELUCTANT LEADERSHIP**

Returning to the underlying research question, in organizations characterized by extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority, how do senior professionals exercise leadership? Based on a cross-case analysis of four global professional service firms this study has contributed to the emerging leadership as practice literature by explicitly addressing previously neglected themes of : 1) how ambiguous power dynamics within organizations affect leadership practices, and 2) how leadership practices are both context-creating and context-dependent.

The paper has identified three distinctive leadership practices within professional service firms that emerge from the context of extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority. Table 6 identifies these, highlights the manner in which they are manifested, and summarises their implications for power dynamics and organizational context in professional service firms.

<b>TABLE 6 THREE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS</b>			
<b>Practice</b>	<b>Manifestation</b>	<b>Implications: Power Dynamics</b>	<b>Implications: Organizational Context</b>
Gaining and retaining legitimacy to lead through market success	Implicit	Partner peers acknowledge individual's superior abilities. Individual establishes status difference relative to peers.	Increase profits of firm. Secure employment and income for colleagues.
Enabling autonomy whilst retaining control	Overt	Partners accept constraints on autonomy if they perceive they will ultimately ensure commercial success.	Interpret and implement partners' objectives for firm. Deliver on election mandate.
Interacting politically whilst appearing apolitical	Covert	Build coalitions and marginalize opponents, whilst being seen as acting in best interests of partnership.	Successfully implement controversial change initiatives. Persuade partners this is in their best interests.

Practice 1, *gaining and sustaining legitimacy to lead through market success*, is an implicit manifestation of the ability to lead rather than direct evidence of leadership capability. Market success, our study shows, is a requirement if a partner's peers are to accept him or her as worthy to lead them; a necessary condition for colleagues to willingly concede their much-valued autonomy to a peer and to cast themselves in the role of "follower". Whilst seen within these firms as a necessary qualification for such a leadership role, it is not in itself evidence that the individual is qualified to lead. It is in effect a proxy for leadership capability as it is understood as having a positive impact on the organizational context as the individual role models behaviors likely to lead to increased profits for the partnership. A person who has understood the way the business operates and the nuances of professional work is less likely to interfere in the way things work and therefore is less threatening to individual autonomy. While market success is an important precondition for any leadership role in a professional service firm, it is particularly necessary for the most senior leadership roles, which are typically formally elected rather than appointed. Only in this way can individuals with limited formal authority gain the legitimacy they need to exercise influence over their peers. This is especially true when a person enters a senior leadership position which necessitates a reduction in their fee earning work because they will receive a share of the fee income generated by their colleagues.

Practice 2, *enabling autonomy whilst maintaining control*, is overt. It is also subtle, as leaders need to downplay the extent of control they attempt to exercise over their peers. As this study demonstrates, partners recognize that a delicate balance needs to be maintained between enabling their autonomy as a partner and maintaining control over the partnership. However, partners will only co-operate with overt attempts to

control behavior if they perceive that these will ultimately ensure commercial success and are not bureaucratic intrusions or excessive “management.”. This is the essence of the contingent nature of managerial authority in such organizations. Leaders in effect have a mandate from their partners to interpret and implement partners’ objectives for the firm. This is what enables them to engage in overt leadership practices. In so doing, they are able to shape the organizational context within certain implicitly and explicitly understood constraints. So traditional management controls are permitted by the partners to some extent but have to be applied selectively to maintain the perception of partner autonomy. Leaders are therefore required to be extremely subtle in how they enable autonomy whilst maintaining control.

Practice 3, *interacting politically whilst appearing apolitical*, is covert. In order to be accepted by their peers as leaders, professionals must appear to be apolitical (according to notions of political behavior as defined by the partners within the firm). Yet this study emphasizes that these individuals are in fact engaging in highly political behavior. Such behavior is justified, by the individual leaders and their “followers,” as long as these individuals are seen as acting in the best interests of the partnership rather than to advance their own interests. In so doing, such individuals are able successfully to implement controversial change initiatives, and thus shape the organizational context. Within a context of extensive individual autonomy and contingent managerial authority, peers are willing to cast themselves in the role of followers because they trust certain individuals sufficiently to allow them a degree of formal authority over themselves. Yet an individual operating in a highly politicized environment who does not appear to have to work politically to keep their position may in fact be deploying highly sophisticated political skills, to enable them to interact politically whilst



appearing apolitical. This is the covert nature of leadership practice in professional service firms.

The findings from the current study are therefore consistent with the established literature on leadership practices. As noted by several authors (e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Crevani et al, 2007; Ladkin, 2010), leader and follower identities are precarious and subject to negotiation. However, while acknowledging the importance of context, the focus in these studies is often on “micro” aspects such as talk and interaction in particular situations. Instead the current study focuses attention on two previously neglected themes within this literature: 1) how ambiguous power dynamics within organizations affect leadership practices, and 2) how leadership practices are both context-creating and context-dependent.

The growing literature on plural models of leadership acknowledges that leader/follower relationships can be contingent, constructed and negotiated through interaction. The current study has taken one particular extreme organizational context to examine in detail the impact of ambiguous power dynamics on leadership practices. In a professional service firm, authority is established not in any formalized relationship between leader and follower but through a combination of overt, indirect and covert practices. Practice 1 highlights how the legitimacy to lead is not gained through demonstrable ability to engage effectively in specific “leader” activities. On the contrary, individuals establish status difference relative to their peers (enabling them to exercise leadership) by engaging in practices that are not part of a traditional leadership curriculum. Practice 2 highlights how explicit management activities are minimized as they are seen to interfere with the individual autonomy of partners. Retaining legitimacy to lead is, apparently, more important than directly influencing one’s peers, and attempts

to do the latter can too easily be seen as endorsing “management” or even being political. But partners will accept constraints on their autonomy if they perceive it will ultimately ensure commercial success. Practice 3 highlights how political behavior is denigrated whilst political skill is privileged within these firms. In order to rise to the top within the complex and ambiguous power dynamics of these highly politicized environment, individuals should not appear to have to work politically to keep their position while in fact deploying highly sophisticated political skills. They must continuously build coalitions and marginalize opponents, whilst being seen as acting in the best interests of the partnership. Thus, an imagery of a homogeneous partnership, a “happy band of brothers” as one interviewee put it, is maintained. Political maneuvering is designed to ensure that harmony is ultimately preserved within the partnership or at least that damaging splits within the partnership are avoided. At the same time, leadership is practiced through knowledge of and subtle maneuvering within the power dynamics of the firm. This also reproduces and indeed reemphasizes the ambiguous power dynamics, as they remain covert, so that the belief in the apolitical nature of power dynamics within the firm can be preserved.

The current study has also emphasized the extent to which leadership practices can be both context-creating and context-dependent. Practice 1, gaining and sustaining market success, is a means of preserving the firm by improving financial performance. In this way it can be seen as both context-sustaining (ensuring the longevity of the firm) and context-changing (enabling the firm to grow). The second practice, enabling autonomy whilst maintaining control, shows how the impression that leadership “sort of happens” is created and how the impact of subtle leadership practices on organizational context is kept within boundaries that are acceptable to the partnership. Practice 2, an overt

practice, is about carrying out an explicitly agreed mandate from the partnership but even these more overt aspects of leadership are about nudging partners in a particular direction – through affecting the framing the organizational context. The covert leadership Practice, on the other hand, enables individual leaders to persuade their partners to follow them to places they had not necessarily previously agreed to go. In fact, as illustrated in this study, a degree of subterfuge about how activities are framed is important when displaying reluctant leadership to autonomous followers.

In these professional service firms, therefore, leadership politics are demonized, overt leadership activities are marginalized, and people are raised up to leadership positions by their peers without necessary demonstrating leadership ability. In order to lead, one must appear reluctant to take on the role and one must create legitimacy by performing well as a professional rather than as an aspiring leader. Individuals seen to be eager for leadership roles are suspect as being self-serving power-seekers and for being willing to move away from full-time fee earning work, which is the lifeblood of the partnership. Our study suggests, therefore, that professional service firms are led by supposedly reluctant leaders and populated by autonomous followers.

As Denis et al. (2012: 267) noted: “We still know little about how power affects leadership practices, interactions, and outcomes.” The current study has sought to address this issue by highlighting a combination of implicit, overt, and covert leadership practices. This study raises important issues about how leadership practices may operate outside direct relations between leaders and followers. As illustrated, implicit and covert leadership practice represent important aspects of the leaders’ repertoire of resources available for influencing the power dynamics and organizational contexts within their firms. This is not of course exclusive to professional service firms (the

practices identified in the current study may be familiar to those working within academia, for example). Rather, we propose, that indirect and covert practices are important for leadership generally. While leadership practice theory has opened up important avenues for research, it runs, as pointed out by Denis et al. (2012), the risk of becoming too myopic in its view of practices. Micro-oriented studies of leadership will benefit from a broader understanding of the importance of implicit and covert leadership practices that are not easily observable since they may involve long-term and subtle meaning management and manipulation by leaders. As a result, this emphasis on the interplay of explicit, implicit, and covert leadership practices has potentially significant methodological implications for future research.

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<b>TABLE 1 STUDY DATA</b>			
<b>Firm</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Number of Interviews</b>	<b>Supporting Data</b>
<b>Firm A</b>	Law firm, 5,000 employees globally	34	Observations, documents
<b>Firm B</b>	Consultancy firm, 1,500 employees globally	31	Documents
<b>Firm C</b>	Accounting firm, global firm with 11,000 employees in the UK	37	Observations, documents
<b>Firm D</b>	Auditing firm, global firm with 2,000 employees in Sweden	42	Observations, documents
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>144</b>	

<b>TABLE 6 THREE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS</b>			
<b>Practice</b>	<b>Manifestation</b>	<b>Implications: Power Dynamics</b>	<b>Implications: Organizational Context</b>
Gaining and retaining legitimacy to lead through market success	Implicit	Partner peers acknowledge individual's superior abilities. Individual establishes status difference relative to peers.	Increase profits of firm. Secure employment and income for colleagues.
Enabling autonomy whilst retaining control	Overt	Partners accept constraints on autonomy if they perceive they will ultimately ensure commercial success.	Interpret and implement partners' objectives for firm. Deliver on election mandate.
Interacting politically whilst appearing apolitical	Covert	Build coalitions and marginalize opponents, whilst being seen as acting in best interests of partnership.	Successfully implement controversial change initiatives. Persuade partners this is in their best interests.

**TABLE 2**  
**ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT: PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS**

	<b>Extensive Individual Autonomy</b>	<b>Contingent Managerial Authority</b>
<b>Firm A</b>	<p>Interviewer: Does anyone have power over you? Partner: Not as far as I'm concerned no. Interviewer: Does anyone think they have power over you? Partner: I don't think so. (A8)</p>	<p>The interesting thing in this role (of Senior Partner) is that you find that you can't achieve anything except through other people... You can only make things happen by essentially working with this group (of key influencers) who in turn influence the wider group, so power has a different meaning I think to other organizations. (A7)</p>
<b>Firm B</b>	<p>The CEO and Chairman, Board of Directors, Executive Committee etc. ... a lot of those positions are really coordinating or communicating - I don't think we need supervising. It's more about coordination and about guiding or making sure that cohesion is inside the organization, but definitely not controlling, not managing, not policing - no not that kind of thing. (B29)</p>	<p>I think we recognize that anyone in a leadership position in the firm is in a servant leadership role. It's something the partners ask you to do ... So I'm happy to get a view of where we need to go from (the partners). I say – I'm your servant leader and frankly if you don't want me in this role I'm more than happy just to be a partner and focus on clients because that's what we all love to do best. (B8)</p>
<b>Firm C</b>	<p>So it's not about following in that sense, it's about (leaders) enabling and directing, giving people outlets.... Because frankly nobody has to follow anyone. (C9)</p>	<p>My experience of authority is that it lasts about an hour if you stop refreshing it. I think of it as a license to lead. My experience is that you can, for a very limited time, get a license to lead from above in professional services but it actually has to come from your peer group. We've seen people get killed very quickly if their teams stop following them. (C1)</p>
<b>Firm D</b>	<p>This company is not based on anyone telling anyone else what to, as if there were some engineers or any other limited set of people designing the jobs. ... The consulting business starts at the other end, with a client who has a problem that needs to be solved. And the consultant finding out about this problem becomes the manager for that job. And then it is not mine or anyone else's business to tell this person what to do, or how to go about solving the problem. (D25)</p>	<p>It's not clear what it looks like at the top. There is this ambiguous circle of partners, and some partners are more important than others, but this is anything but clear. (D28)</p>

<b>TABLE 3 GAINING &amp; RETAINING LEGITIMACY TO LEAD THROUGH MARKET SUCCESS</b>	
<b>Firm A</b>	<p>Partners tend to want to be led by partners and in fact they tend to want to be led by partners who they respect as business generators. (A14)</p> <p>One of the reasons I think why people were happy to have me as Senior Partner, because I was perceived to be a successful Banking partner... I ran a lot of our key relationships and so on. (A7)</p> <p>I think a lot of the leadership in a firm is linked to your practice and the position in the market because those people have the credibility, those people are in the market, they actually know the client and so on and in the end all that we do is ultimately directed towards clients. (A1)</p>
<b>Firm B</b>	<p>Leadership in this firm is a function of ones credibility as a professional, in what we do – I don't think I necessarily have been the best consultant in our firm but I'm respected as a professional and particularly respected as a client relationship person – without that I cannot lead. (B11)</p> <p>You can't be a leader without having credibility as a practitioner in this firm. So if you're not seen by your colleagues as a successful client executor, I don't think your proposals carry as much weight. You have to have a demonstrated track record of having delivered, of being somebody who cannot only propose but also dispose. (B27)</p> <p>Everyone on the global ExCom has already been an office leader. And they're people who generally around the partnership, you would not expect an eyebrow to be raised at their appointment - the people who are perceived within the firm as being very strong performers in their market or in their practice. (B2)</p>
<b>Firm C</b>	<p>To be the person who actually runs something: either runs a function, runs a service line, or ends up as Chairman, you've got there because you've been outstanding with clients. Whether it's leadership or whatever it is, that's what people respect first and foremost in our firm. So that's the key to advancement. (C7)</p> <p>They earn the right to get into one of those positions through ... doing fantastic stuff with clients, through enhancing the value of the partnership because they've either developed a client relationship that we didn't have before, or won a major piece of work and done that consistently... They have the respect of the partners because they're recognized for doing that. (C14)</p> <p>I've dealt with some of our most difficult audits. So I've been the partner on (name of major client) having won that. I'm also still currently the partner on (name of major client) and that's not the easiest one either. And, even now I've become head of the audit practice; I'm just going onto (name of major client). ...So if I put my little ego hat on for a moment I was sort of, you know, seen to be a good partner. You know, one of the top partners, I suppose, and one that can get out there and win work. (C18)</p>
<b>Firm D</b>	<p>The role of the manager is, in this business, less important than in for example a manufacturing company. Here, I'd say, the leader plays a bigger role ... That is, people who don't have to be managers in any sense. Rather it is the clearly shining people who, in their way of being, show how to become a successful consultant. Good, successful tax consultants who show a way of being that ... get you to do fun things. And earn a lot of money. That's what we ultimately want to do.(D25)</p> <p>Those who are leaders in this organization are not that because they are good leaders but because they are good tax lawyers. (D5)</p> <p>What is particular of the organization is that those who become leaders are those who are good consultants. And they continue consulting on a full time basis even though they are managers. (D12)</p>

**TABLE 4**  
**ENABLING AUTONOMY WHILST MAINTAINING CONTROL**

	<b>Enabling Autonomy</b>	<b>Maintaining Control</b>
<b>Firm A</b>	You can't really tell people what to do. You can say what you're going to do and then hope people will agree with it ... and the people you can least tell what to do are those who are most important for the success of the business. Because they are the ones who control the client relationships. (A17)	Because we are the size we are now, we have to have a more regulated set of rules. ... You can't just simply go off and do what you want because you are depriving other people of their hard earned cash. So there has to be checks and balances and I think that stops a bit of entrepreneurialism. (A9)
<b>Firm B</b>	[The Chairman's] classic line is 'I don't want management in this firm'... And I think he's right. If I look at my last three years, I've tried to do some management stuff in [country] and it's not worked. (B17)	We're all leaders...that's the narrative, that's part of the story and that's exactly what I say and that's what I expect them to say. But when we went through the global financial crisis, guess what, there was no argument. When the pressure's on, they expect me to lead. (B33)
<b>Firm C</b>	One of the things that I have always liked about the organization is that you take as much responsibility as you want. And people will allow it. But they don't offer it to you, you have to go and take it. And I think an important aspect of leadership is to make sure that we mine to the fullest possible extent the capabilities of the people in the organization because what else have we got? (C6)	At the same time even though all the partners are peers, there do need to be decisions made. There do need to be tough things done or decisions made on where we're going to invest, that sort of thing. ... knowing when you have to step in and say no, yes. (C14)
<b>Firm D</b>	Most of us know what to do anyway. Things move towards common goals for the business and agreeing on those. But how every partner works, that's something that others care very little about. Sure, if you're going to do something special, then others may interfere, but how you work with clients and so on, that's each and everyone's business. (D6)	I'd say part of the leadership is to ensure that some things become more efficient. Each individual shouldn't have to handle all routine tasks. If they did, they'd spend their time on that instead of on client work, and then we cannot charge for that time. It is better that they do something we can charge for. ... (But we have no) administrative or organizational leadership in the sense that we put a strong emphasis on hierarchies or reporting structures and such things. We don't have that. (D35)

TABLE 5

**INTERACTING POLITICALLY WHILST APPEARING APOLITICAL****Part 1: Professed abhorrence of political behaviour**

If somebody has a political score to settle and that agenda becomes transparent, that person is diminished within the firm. (B1)

This firm is a structure where creating enemies or politicking is wholly unproductive. (B21)

One of the things that is great about the firm is that there's no vindictive politics about people who upset you because they don't want to do something.... It's one of the reasons I could never survive in a corporate, because I'm almost completely apolitical. (B23)

I mean this organization is no different to many others. There are people who are clearly very ambitious in the firm who will say from quite an early age to you, particularly over a beer or over a meal or over a chat [slams hand on table], 'do you think I'm in the frame to be Managing Partner or Senior Partner, what is it I need to do along the way?'... And they're regarded as quite pushy, will be more political in their views in terms of what they think people will want to hear and what they think people will want to vote for. (A2)

**Part 2: Adoption of political language and practices**

The role involves us being seen as acting as the servants of the partners. We have our constituents, when they email us or call us we have to call back and we have to help them, be seen to be helpful. (A34)

The previous election for Senior Partner there was a bit of a power struggle between two individuals who were dominant characters within the organization and (person) held sway on the basis of support from a number of the more senior partners including the outgoing Senior Partner who had quite a lot of influence.... It was all closed doors – smoke filled rooms – lots of politicking etc. etc. etc. – a variety of promises being made to various senior people to get them to support (person). (C6)

You govern by your mandate and your personal credibility and authority not by virtue of some kind of constitutional power that's given to you. (A7)

(One of the candidates in the election campaign for Chairman), his video and manifesto were the most edgy and challenging of all the candidates and at times aggressive towards the incumbent leadership ... He had worked out that in order to win enough votes his best opportunity was the more junior partners. If you are going to attract the more junior partners you appeal to their desire for improved profitability (by saying) 'we'll knock down some of the more senior partners who are earning a load of money but not pulling their weight.'(C3)

**Part 3: Believing effective leaders to be "above politics".**

You need to be straight with people even if you tell them bad things, if you're straight with people that's, in my view, the best way of playing it... If you're seen as being slippery, just saying things to be highly political, you lose a lot of the trust (A34).

Sometimes my sense would be (Senior Partner) doesn't necessarily always understand how influential he is. He's very modest about it, quite self-effacing, and he himself doesn't attach such great importance to some of those things that might be under the heading of creeping as in slightly sinister. He is not himself a player in that way at all. ... it's simply because his own motivations in this world are so, I think, very genuine and clean. (A19)

It's typical of the partners who've been in the firm for quite a long time, that they're actually trying to do the right thing. And so they don't get involved in politics. But they are aware of stuff going on. (C12)

I think it's all about trust... People who just tell it straight, in a non-personal way, it's not vindictive, it's not personal, this is the view, and those people have the highest respect, like (person), is a straight forward, very bright, very intellectual, quietly spoken but articulate, will just tell you it straight, it's not personal, it's an analytical way, it's quite a cold way but it's not personal, he's trusted. (A12)

