

Exploring Leader(ship) Identity Development in Executive Education: A qualitative Case Study

Master Thesis zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades
“Master of Business Administration”

eingereicht bei
Univ.Ass.in Dr.in rer.soc.oec. Astrid Kleinhanns-Rolle

MMag.a Catherina Purrucker

09902172

Eidesstattliche Erklärung

Ich, **MMAG.A CATHERINA PURRUCKER**, versichere hiermit

1. dass ich die vorliegende Master These, "EXPLORING LEADER(SHIP) IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN EXECUTIVE EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY", 111 Seiten, gebunden, selbständig verfasst, andere als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel nicht benutzt und mich auch sonst keiner unerlaubten Hilfen bedient habe, und
2. dass ich diese Master These bisher weder im Inland noch im Ausland in irgendeiner Form als Prüfungsarbeit vorgelegt habe.

Wien, 26.09.2025

Unterschrift

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to all interview partners. Thank you for your valuable time and the inspiring conversations, which were not only essential for the completion of this master thesis, but also provided me with meaningful insights and learning moments for my personal leadership journey.

Further, I would like to thank Astrid Kleinhanns-Rollé for supervising my thesis, and Wolfgang Güttel for the support throughout the past years at the TUW Academy. Your guidance and encouragement have been highly appreciated.

I am also deeply grateful to my family, friends and colleagues for their continued support, patience, and belief in me throughout my MBA studies. Your encouragement gave me motivation during challenging times.

Finally, I acknowledge the use of OpenAI's ChatGPT as a technical tool in the writing process of this thesis, particularly for discussion, structural reflection, and occasional language refinement. The model was used exclusively as an aid, all final content, interpretations, and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the author.

Abstract

Leadership development is widely recognized as vital for organizational success in today's competitive and turbulent environment. Leadership initiatives enhance leadership effectiveness by aligning leadership skills and leader(ship) identity through targeted interventions. In this context the concept of leader(ship) identity has gained growing attention, as it links leadership behavior to individuals' self-perceptions as leaders.

This thesis explores how Executive MBA participants describe their leader(ship) identities after completing the TUW Academy's leadership development modules, whether they report changes in their leader(ship) identity, and which program elements they perceive as most impactful. The study adopts a qualitative case study design based on eleven semi-structured interviews conducted 6-18 months after completion. The analysis demonstrates that identity work for experienced leaders unfolds as a process of clarification, consolidation, and contextualization, sharpening perspectives on strategic focus, relational awareness, empowerment, and self-reflection.

A central contribution of the study lies in identifying how program design interacts with identity work processes to enable refinement. Five clusters of impactful program elements emerged: learning environment and program design, theory as reflective stimulus, peer interaction and social learning, experiential and group-dynamic learning, and structured and informal reflection. These elements supported identity work processes such as deep reflection, dialogue, integration of conceptual input with lived experience, experimentation, and narrative and values work.

Overall, the study indicates that Executive MBA programs can be understood as spaces of identity consolidation and refinement, functioning as holding environments where experienced leaders recalibrate, integrate, and strengthen their sense of self. These refinements extend beyond the program and resonate with the broader view in leadership scholarship that leader(ship) identity development is an ongoing trajectory.

Keywords: Leader identity, leadership identity, leader identity development, leadership development, leadership development programs, Executive MBA

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Problem Situation and Research Goal	3
1.2	Structure of the Thesis	4
2	Conceptual Framework	5
2.1	Leadership.....	5
2.2	Leader Identity and Leadership Identity.....	6
2.2.1	Leader Identity Development and Leadership Identity Development.....	11
2.2.2	Measuring Leader Identity and Leadership Identity	22
2.2.3	Relevance of Leader(ship) Identity	23
2.3	Leader Development and Leadership Development	25
2.3.1	Definition of Leader Development and Leadership Development	25
2.3.2	Antecedents of Leadership Development	29
2.3.3	Leadership Development Models.....	29
2.3.4	Methods in Leadership Development.....	32
2.3.5	Impact of Leadership Development on Leader(ship) Identity.....	33
2.4	Conclusions for the further proceedings in this thesis	35
3	Methodology	37
3.1	Research Case.....	37
3.2	Research Context.....	38
3.3	Research Design	39
3.4	Data Collection	42
3.5	Data Analysis	45
4	Findings	48
4.1	Leader(ship) Identity.....	48
4.1.1	Leadership Meaning and Leader(ship) Identity Orientations.....	48
4.1.2	Key Identity Development Antecedents: Motivation and Beliefs about Leadership	54

4.1.3	Leader(ship) Identity: Theoretical Mapping.....	57
4.2	Changes in Leader(ship) Identity and Practice.....	61
4.2.1	Leadership Ideals and Role Models.....	61
4.2.2	Changes in Leader(ship) Identity and Practice	64
4.3	Impactful Program Elements and Learning Experiences.....	70
5	Discussion and Limitations.....	80
5.1	Summary of Key Findings	80
5.2	Theoretical Implications.....	83
5.3	Practical Implications for Leadership Education	86
5.4	Limitations	89
6	Conclusion	92
	List of References.....	94
	List of Figures	101
	List of Tables	102
	Appendix Semi-structured interview guide.....	103

1 Introduction

“What we know matters, but who we are matters more.”

Brené Brown

In today’s turbulent and highly competitive business environment it is an increasingly critical and strategic imperative for organizations to develop leadership at all levels. This need is stimulated by both external and internal organizational factors such as rapid technological advancements, increased uncertainty about future developments and market volatility as well as growing complexity and ambiguity. The organizational landscape also changes the way leaders are expected to operate, when hierarchies of the past might no longer be applicable and managers can no longer rely on the knowledge and methods through training programs offering simplistic solutions (Dalakoura, 2010; Güttel, 2023).

Leaders hold essential roles for organizations, as they influence their current and future competitiveness: as such, leadership development is a top priority for companies worldwide and has become a multi-billion-dollar industry, with organizations spending billions on developing and building leadership capacity across organizations (Vogel et al., 2021).

Even though leadership is often based on the assumption that effective leaders possess inherent personality traits, research shows that leadership development initiatives enhance leadership effectiveness by aligning leadership skills and leadership identity through targeted interventions. In this context the concept of leader identity has gained growing attention, as it links leadership behavior to individual’s self-perceptions as leaders. Day & Harrison refer to leader identity as “the sub-component of one’s identity that relates to being a leader or how one thinks of oneself as a leader” (Day & Harrison, 2007, p. 365) is the foundation of two questions: “Who am I [as a leader]” and “What should I do [in a specific situation]?” (Epitropaki et al., 2017).

In line with recent integrative approaches, the present thesis adopts the integrated term leader(ship) identity, which reflects the interrelation between the individual's internalized self-concept as a leader (leader identity) and the enactment and social recognition of leadership in context (leadership identity) (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Komives et al., 2005; Sunderman & Orsini, 2024). This terminology emphasizes that leadership is not merely a function of role or behavior, but a dynamic identity-in-practice that is continuously shaped through reflection, action and interaction. Employing the concept of leader(ship) identity signals an awareness that being a leader and doing leadership are interdependent: how one sees oneself influences how one leads, and how one leads reinforces or reshapes that identity.

A leader identity can also serve as a motivating factor in sustaining long-term interest in leadership development. As leaders need to develop more complex leadership skills, aiming at structural changes at the identity level through leadership development programs can be useful and a strategic advantage for an organization (Güttel, 2023; Vogel et al., 2021).

Even though studies have demonstrated that leader identity is important for leadership behavior and increases leadership effectiveness (Day, 2000; Day & Sin, 2011; Haslam et al., 2022), relatively little is known about how specific leadership development program elements – such as pedagogical formats, reflection practices, and interpersonal interactions – contribute to changes in participants' identity or confirmation of their identity as leaders. As leader efficacy and leader identity are closely linked to leadership outcomes, understanding how and why identity changes within formal programs is important (Day et al., 2014). This thesis seeks to contribute to this area by examining how participants of the Executive MBA program describe and reflect on their leader(ship) identity post-program participation and explores what impulses from their leadership development program they consider particularly stimulating, and what changes they consequently implement in their leadership practice.

1.1 Problem Situation and Research Goal

Existing studies indicate that leader(ship) identity is a dynamic process, shaped by self-perception, experiences, and personality traits, among others. While Executive MBA programs increasingly incorporate leader(ship) development modules such as Self-Leadership, Team-Leadership and Leading Organizations, it remains unclear how these trainings influence participants' leader(ship) identity and what factors in the design of the trainings contribute to the (further) development of identity, due to the complex and multilevel nature of identity.

Scholars theorize that leader(ship) identity develops through an intrapersonal process of meaning-making that is facilitated or triggered by experiences and / or formal leader development experiences. The evolution involves therefore a gradual process of schema change and growth, as managers or leaders engage in experiences over time and in meaning-making of those experiences (Zaar et al., 2023a).

Against this backdrop, this thesis aims to examine and analyze the impact of a specific leadership development program on the leader(ship) identity and its evolution as well as to identify influential factors for the evolution.

The research is guided by the following questions

1. How do Executive MBA participants describe their leader(ship) identity after completing the TUW leadership modules?
2. Do Executive MBA participants describe changes in their leader(ship) identity following the leadership modules and if so, what changes do they report?
3. Which specific learning experiences or program elements do participants identify as most impactful to the development of their leader(ship) identity?

By answering these questions, the thesis will connect existing literature about leader identity and leadership identity, as well as leadership development with

personal insights into leaders' leader(ship) identities and their evolution after leadership trainings. The thesis will therefore provide a deeper understanding of leader(ship) identity in a real-world setting, as the findings from the qualitative interviews will present in-depth details about personal self-views and indicate which conditions of the Leadership Development Program within TUW Academy's Executive MBA Programs have had an impact on the leader(ship) identity.

1.2 Structure of the Thesis

The structure of the thesis is as follows: introduction, conceptual framework, methodology, findings, discussions and conclusion.

The first chapter introduces the research topic and research questions, as well as the starting situation and the problem statement. Finally, an overview of the structure of the thesis is given.

The second chapter presents the theoretical background and serves as conceptual framework. Hence, the concepts leadership, leader identity and leadership identity as well as leader development and leadership development are defined and discussed based on a literature review.

The third chapter focuses on the methodological approach for the master thesis. It first gives insight into the research design and context and describes the process of data collection and data analysis.

The fourth chapter presents the findings from the qualitative interviews in three sections: the description of leader(ship) identity, the changes of leader(ship) identity, and the program elements the participants found most impactful and meaningful.

In the fifth chapter, the findings from the qualitative interviews are interpreted and discussed by contrasting them with theory, thereby answering the research questions. Also, theoretical and practical implications are discussed as well as limitations of the study.

Finally, a conclusion will be drawn, highlighting the key findings.

2 Conceptual Framework

“Identity is important for leaders because it grounds them in understanding who they are, their major goals and objectives and their personal strengths and limitations.”

(Day & Harrison, 2007, p. 366)

This chapter provides the foundation for the thesis by presenting the theoretical concepts serving as conceptual framework. In a first step, the concepts leadership as well as leader identity and leadership identity are outlined. Secondly, leader and leadership development are defined, followed by antecedents of leadership development and different leadership development models, as well as methods in leadership development. Finally, the impact of leadership development on leader and leadership identity is highlighted.

2.1 Leadership

For decades, literature on management and organizational behavior has focused on leadership. Definitions of leadership vary according to researchers' individual perspective and hence, differ in many aspects, and sometimes have very little in common (Yukl, 1989). The collective understanding of leadership and how it develops continues to evolve (Day & Harrison, 2007). Leadership is about “influencing meanings, values and beliefs in a hierarchical (unequal) relation (Alvesson & Blom, 2019, p. 28) in contrast to management which targets subordinates' behavior more directly through planning, budgeting, resource allocation, assignment of tasks, role specifications, control or policy making, among others. Hence, key activities of a leader include providing direction (i.e., influencing followers in terms of ideas, values, meanings and understandings), support (i.e., influencing followers through emotional and cognitive support) and inspiration (i.e., influencing followers by being a role model) (Blom & Alvesson, 2015).

Leadership can be understood as a social influence and interaction process which serves to influence employees towards the achievement of organizational goals. Leaders are responsible for translating organizational or corporate strategies into their teams and for making sure the activities are aligned with the overall organizational goals (Güttel & Kleinhanns-Rollé, 2023). According to Day, (Day, 2000) leadership has traditionally been conceptualized as an individual-level skill. In addition to this traditional appearance of leadership (an individual in charge of a team, providing direction and aligning the team's goals within a broader purpose), some scholars have a broader understanding and definition of leadership arguing that leadership can also take the form of team members working together collectively to set direction, build commitment, and create alignment. This viewpoint goes beyond the single-leader perspective and encompasses concepts such as shared leadership (Day & Harrison, 2007). As leadership always requires some sort of interpersonal relationship and is embedded in a social context, multilevel issues in leadership and leadership development have become increasingly important in leadership literature. The reason behind this is that leaders are inherently part of leader-follower dyads, which are in turn nested in higher-level contexts such as teams, which are in turn, embedded in business units or other higher-level organizations. This multi-level view expands the scope of leadership across varied level of analysis, including self, groups, and society (Day & Harrison, 2007). In this vein, the processual view on leadership focusses on social construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of leadership over time and hence re-theorizes leadership as “a fluid process emerging from the communicatively constituted interactions of myriad organizational actors” (Tourish, 2014, p. 80).

2.2 Leader Identity and Leadership Identity

In the past, identity was considered a personality trait deeply rooted within a person and corresponding to the “core” of an individuum, hence a permanent and consistent self-perception which can be recognized through behavioral patterns. In modern identity research this view has been increasingly

questioned: it is no longer understood as a stable structure that, once developed in early childhood and adolescence, remains unchanged but rather a lifelong process which continuously evolves over time and through interactions, adapting to different situations and requirements (Schreyögg & Lührmann, 2006).

For decades, the classical hierarchy within organizations was the foundation of a leader's self-perception and provided the basis and definition for their leadership understanding. Hence, the question of identity was clarified by the organizational structure itself, meaning that the individual's leader(ship) identity did not play an important role. As new modes of organizing organizations have advanced, the mode of operation has changed for leaders, for example in project organization, in leading external staff or when it comes to leading experts, which has led to more complex and sometimes contradictory expectations towards leaders (Schreyögg & Lührmann, 2006).

The conceptualization of identity itself is based on a myriad of theoretical frameworks. It is the lens through which individuals develop an understanding of themselves and the world, and a valuable tool to help make sense of the people with whom we interact (Thwaite, 2022). Identity can be defined as "the culmination of an individual's values, experiences, and self-perceptions" (Day & Harrison, 2007, p. 365). It is a multidimensional construct, meaning that individuals have multiple sub-identities rather than a univocal self (Day & Harrison, 2007) and construct *situated identities* in organizations and settings to give meaning and guidance to their actions depending on the social context, i.e., whether they interact with their direct reports or top management, for example (Epitropaki et al., 2017). As identity is dynamic and develops continually throughout the life span, identities can be developed, acquired or even lost. Furthermore, individuals can form identities around "future possible or ideal selves" that vary across time and context (Hammond et al., 2017). Possible selves, i.e., the images one has about who one might become, would like to become, or fear to become are an important component of the self-concept and play a key-role in identity change as these images act as

motivational devices and serve as incentives for future behavior (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Other scholars emphasize the meanings attached to identity through social roles and personal attributes. Ibarra et al. (Ibarra et al., 2010) define identity as the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others, the meanings being based to the *social identities* (based on the social roles and group memberships a person holds) as well as the *personal identities* (the personal traits the person displays). A professional identity combines both personal and social identities, as “the relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role” (Ibarra et al., 2010, p. 4).

In recent years, research exploring the links between leadership and identity has grown rapidly, and even increased by the factor 25 since the turn of the millennium (Haslam et al., 2022). A first explicit link between identity and leadership development came with Lord and Hall in 2005, according to the scholars Hastings & Sunderman (2023):

“because opportunities for developing leadership skills usually involve proactive behaviors in which individuals attempt leadership, at some risk to status and social acceptance, they are facilitated by seeing oneself as a potential leader and adopting a provisional leadership identity” (Lord & Hall, 2005, p. 596).

Throughout literature the terms “leader identity”, “leaders self-identity” or “leadership identity” have often been used interchangeably. However, some works distinguish between leader identity and leadership identity, while other scholars differentiate between leader identity and identity leadership (Haslam et al., 2022; Sunderman & Orsini, 2024).

Identity is crucial when it comes to setting priorities as a leader, focusing more on technical tasks, management activities or visionary development projects. It largely determines which priorities are set at which leadership level (Güttel & Kleinhanns-Rollé, 2023). It frames and prescribes what environmental cues leaders attend to, how they process information, as well as their leadership behavior. Identity also shapes how much a leader depends on or utilizes the

talent of other people, and guides the direction actions are taken (Zheng & Muir, 2015).

Leadership identity can be viewed from two perspectives: the self-image and the external image. Leadership behavior can only reflect the self-image if it is cognitively and emotionally anchored and the self-image needs to be reciprocated by subordinates and colleagues in order to be sustained (Schreyögg & Lührmann, 2006). However, the fact that others see a person as a leader does not necessarily mean that the person defines themselves as a leader ('leadership in the eye of the beholder'), so identity work is essential for the self-definition of a leader (Epitropaki et al., 2017).

Leader identity can be defined as "... the sub-component of one's identity that relates to being a leader or how one thinks of oneself as a leader". It provides an anchor for leaders and grounds them in "understanding whom they are, their major goals and objectives, and their personal strengths and limitations" (Day & Harrison, 2007, p. 365) and is established through a personal narrative that creates meaning over time (Day & Harrison, 2007; Miscenko et al., 2017). Leadership can be described more as "a way of being rather than a set of skills or competences" (Kohonen, 2005, p. 27). Accordingly, understanding how leaders (and followers) see and define themselves and understanding how these self-definitions develop and change can offer insights on the drivers of leader and follower behavior. While some scholars emphasize the individual and internal aspects of identity, others highlight its relational and socially co-constructed nature. From this latter perspective leader(ship) identity is shaped not only internally, but also relationally, through interactions where leadership roles and activities are recognized and endorsed by others. This makes leader(ship) identity a dynamic process of shifting identities in response to social interactions (Day, 2000; DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

The conscious self-construal process creates a self-identity that can incorporate factors such as one's own organizational role, subordinates or colleagues, how they react to leadership attempts, or one's work tasks. Hence, a self-identity "is constructed by consciously integrating the working-self-

concept with other information to answer two questions: 'Who am I in this situation?' and 'what should I do?'" (Epitropaki et al., 2017, p. 107).

As such, the leader identity is a repository for information and knowledge attached to a leadership role (Lord & Hall, 2005). As a knowledge structure, identity guides individual behavior and provides information about skills and competences underlying these behaviors and serves as an internal compass. This guiding function is closely linked to the working self-concept, which derives from the set of self-conceptions that are presently active in thought and memory (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The number of identities an individual holds, as well as the content, centrality, and importance of each identity, differs among individuals and contexts (Priest & Middleton, 2016). Only one sub-identity or identity type is activated at any given point in time and individuals can switch back and forth between sub-identities depending on social context with ease (e.g., the sub-identity of parent is activated when attending a child's school play, but de-activated and replaced by a leader sub-identity if the person receives an urgent request from work during the play (Day & Harrison, 2007)). Leaders switch between multiple roles on a daily base, each role including specific duties and responsibilities (Thwaite, 2022).

Güttel et al. distinguish between three leadership identities, depending on the leader's self-concept and the focus the leader places on leadership in their activities. Accordingly, individuals can act as *a technical expert in a leadership position* (the focus of the activities being primarily highly detailed operational tasks), *a manager* (an increasingly strategic approach; empowering employees and delegating responsibility to develop and manage teams well) or as a *leader* (inspiring employees as visionaries, communicating a clear picture of goals). Leaders with a consolidated leadership identity are primarily leaders in their self-perception and are aware that they are responsible for the development of their people and teams (Güttel & Kleinhanns-Rollé, 2023).

Haslam distinguishes two strands in research linking leadership and identity: one strand focusing on the identity of leaders *as individuals* (work on *leader identity*); the other strand focusing on the identity of leaders as group members (work on *identity leadership*). As a consequence, in the leader identity

approach, leadership is considered a process that is facilitated and furthered by individuals who have a well-developed sense of “me as a leader” while the latter approach focusses on “we-ness” and in creating a sense that the leader and the followers are bound together by a common cause (Haslam et al., 2022).

In sum, identity is no longer viewed as a fixed personality trait but as a dynamic and context-sensitive construct that evolves across the life span. Leadership research increasingly recognizes the importance of identity in shaping how leaders see themselves, how others see them, and how they act in organizational settings. The review shows that leader(ship) identity has been conceptualized in diverse ways ranging from relatively stable self-perceptions to dynamic, context-sensitive processes of meaning making. Similarly, the terms leader identity and leadership identity are used differently across the literature, sometimes interchangeably and sometimes with distinct emphases on the individual or the relational dimension of leadership. Despite these varying perspectives and definitions, scholars largely agree that identity is central to understanding leadership behavior and development, providing the conceptual foundation for the following subchapter.

2.2.1 Leader Identity Development and Leadership Identity Development

As previously laid out, identities are no longer considered as permanent but rather a life-long process (Schreyögg & Lührmann, 2006). Leader identity development can be described as the process of schema change and growth, by which individuals come to define “who they are as a leader”, the growth occurring when individuals go through varied experiences and actively engage in meaning-making of those experiences. Through the meaning-making process, individuals determine the value, usefulness, and relevance of an experience, and distill learnings that guide subsequent thinking and action (Zaar et al., 2023a).

There are various models regarding the development and changes of a leader and leadership identity. Within the fields of leadership education and college

student leadership development, Komives et al.'s leadership identity development (LID) model has been most extensively cited (over 1700 citations for the ground theory and model articles in 2005 and 2006 combined) (Hastings & Sunderman, 2023). While Komives et al. (2005) emphasize a stage-based trajectory of leadership identity, Lord & Hall (2005) extend this view by showing how leaders shift from individual to relational and collective identities as their experience grows.

In Komives et al.'s conceptual model (2005) leadership identity is developed through six stages. Developing a leadership identity is connected to developmental influences, developing self, group influences, changing view of self with others, and a broadening view of leadership over (see figure 1 below). Each of the six stages ends with a transition, signaling the end of that stage and the beginning of the next stage. Developmental components influence development such as adults, peers, other opportunities for involvement or reflective learning.

Stage One, Awareness: this view of leadership is external to self and refers to the early recognition that leaders exist. Individuals do not personally identify as a leader or differentiate group roles.

Stage Two, Exploration / Engagement: in this stage, individuals are intentionally involved in the immersion in group experience; it is a time of learning

Stage Three, Leader Identified: leadership is viewed as the actions of the positional leader of a group; individuals are aware of the hierarchical nature of relationships in groups

Stage Four, Leadership Differentiated: leadership is also viewed as non-positional and as a shared group process

Stage Five, Generativity: commitment to developing leadership in others; having a passion for issues or group objectives

Stage Six, Integration / Synthesis: continual, active engagement with leadership as a daily process, as part of self-identity (Komives et al., 2005, 2009)

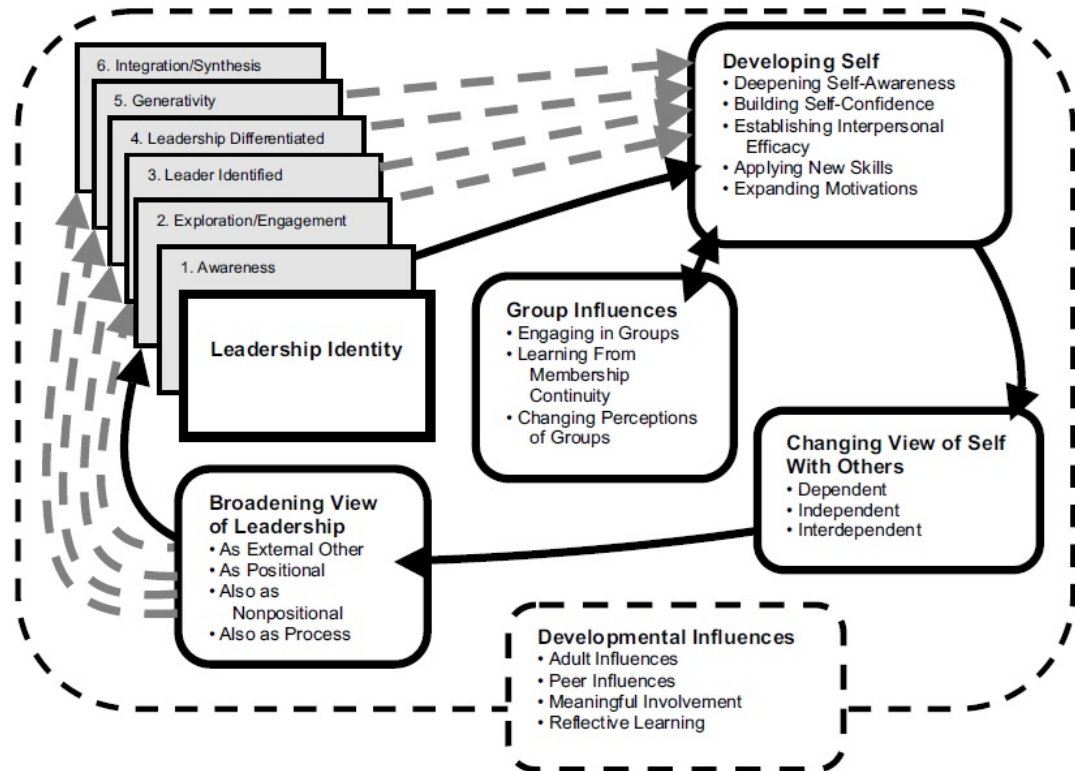


Figure 1: Developing a Leadership Identity (Komives et al. 2005, p. 599)

The development of a leader identity is considered critically important in the ongoing and continuous development of a leader. To be able to act as a leader and for further developing leadership skills it is important to think of oneself of a leader, as this is an important motivator for acting as a leader and further developing leadership skills. Individuals are more likely to seek out experiences to enact and develop the leader aspect of their identity, the more salient and crystallized this leader identity is (Day & Harrison, 2007). Several scholars have addressed the role of identity development in leadership development and suggest that “leader development occurs as a leader sub-identity becomes differentiated, more complex, and ultimately integrated with a global identity”. Effective leader development is therefore “the differentiation

and integration of leadership and personal experiences, values, and sense of self” (Day & Harrison, 2007, p. 366) and a process through which the fit between the requirements of the leader role and the personal identity of the leader is enhanced (Day & Harrison, 2007).

Lord & Hall (2005) argue that the leader identity develops with increasing experience from *individual level identities* to *relational identities* and finally *collective identities*, the self-view as a leader becoming a more central aspect of one’s identity as a leader solidifies. The identity level of a novice will emphasize on the individual identity as a leader, differentiating self from others and they will most likely have a generic way of approaching leadership. The identity level of an intermediate leader will include other individuals (relational identity) and groups (collective identity), and an expert will possess a value-based identity grounded in abstract principles. The shifts in level of identities are parallel with the development of leadership knowledge structures and social processes and it can be argued that shifting from an individual to a collective identity would reframe development from self-focused to group-focused, and as such be more aligned with leadership development rather than leader development. A leader with a collective self-concept will define their identity according to group membership and is more likely to prioritize collective welfare. The scholars argue further that there are qualitative changes in both process and knowledge, as an individual develops skills from a novice to an intermediate to an expert level in leadership (Lord & Hall, 2005).

As leaders develop identities at higher levels, the complexity and inclusiveness of the leadership understanding will increase, an identity on a higher-level transcending rather than replacing the lower-principal level. Leaders with the most complex or sophisticated identity may integrate individual, relational, and collective identity in their overall identity allowing them to flexibly draw from any of these depending on the leadership situation (Day & Harrison, 2007).

Skill level	Knowledge use	Knowledge content	Knowledge access cued by
Novice	Heavy reliance on working-memory-dependent processing to compose novel responses that integrate generic knowledge with situation	Implicit leadership theories and heuristics representing generic leadership and problem-solving behavior	Surface level problem features Self-view as leader, with emphasis on individual level identities
Intermediate	Fewer uniquely created solutions, more use of connectionist networks Integration with meta-cognitive processes	Domain-specific productions for leadership and problem-solving behavior Greater knowledge of others	Same as above, plus ... Match of social situation to patterns in connectionist networks
Expert	Greater dependence on understanding of situation More collaboration with others	Principle-level knowledge	Same as above, plus ... Principled understanding of situation and others, often in terms of values, emotions, and identities

Figure 2: Differences in the content, access and use of knowledge for novice, intermediate and expert leaders (Lord & Hall 2005, p. 594)

Taken together, Komives et al. (2005) and Lord & Hall (2005) highlight the progressive nature of identity development – whether framed as stages or as expanding identity levels. Both emphasize intrapersonal growth and increasingly complex self-views as critical drivers of leadership develop. However, these models were largely developed in student or early-career contexts and may therefore not fully capture the more iterative, non-linear identity work of experienced professionals. For Executive MBA participants, who often already hold established managerial roles, the relevance of this models lies more in illustrating the kinds of identity refinements and shifts that may occur when moving from primarily managerial orientations toward broader, systemic leadership identities.

In the progression of a person through the ranks of an organization, some key passages in a work role transition entail significant quantitative and qualitative leaps in the development. The role passage from producer to manager for example, or from functional to a general manager requires not only skill development but significant changes in the work values and time allocations that reflect the manager's assessment of what kind of work is important: focus on fundamentals of management, organizational and strategic topics or managing change processes and key stakeholders, for example. These changes are tied to one's identity as new leadership behaviors might entail focusing less on the activities and relationships that have defined a person's

professional identity to that point and hence lead to an identity loss. As the individual develops and acquires new skills, behaviors, attitudes and patterns of interactions, they adapt aspects of their identity to meet the demands of the role (Ibarra et al., 2010).

Other scholars focus on the relational and dynamic leadership identity construction within organizations. DeRue & Ashford (2010) argue that leadership *relationships* are co-constructed through social interactions where individuals claim and grant leader and follower identities. Through these claiming-granting processes individuals internalize their identity as leader or follower and are recognized within the organizational context through reciprocal role adoption and collective endorsement (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The claiming and granting process as depicted below is iterative and generative. According to the scholars the claiming and granting tactics vary on the dimensions verbal/nonverbal” and direct/indirect, e.g., making a statement claiming a leader identity or claiming or granting a leader identity by sitting at the head of a meeting table. In this model, the leadership identity comprises individual, relational and collective identities and the identity is not necessarily related to a formal role or position as a leader within an organizational hierarchy (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

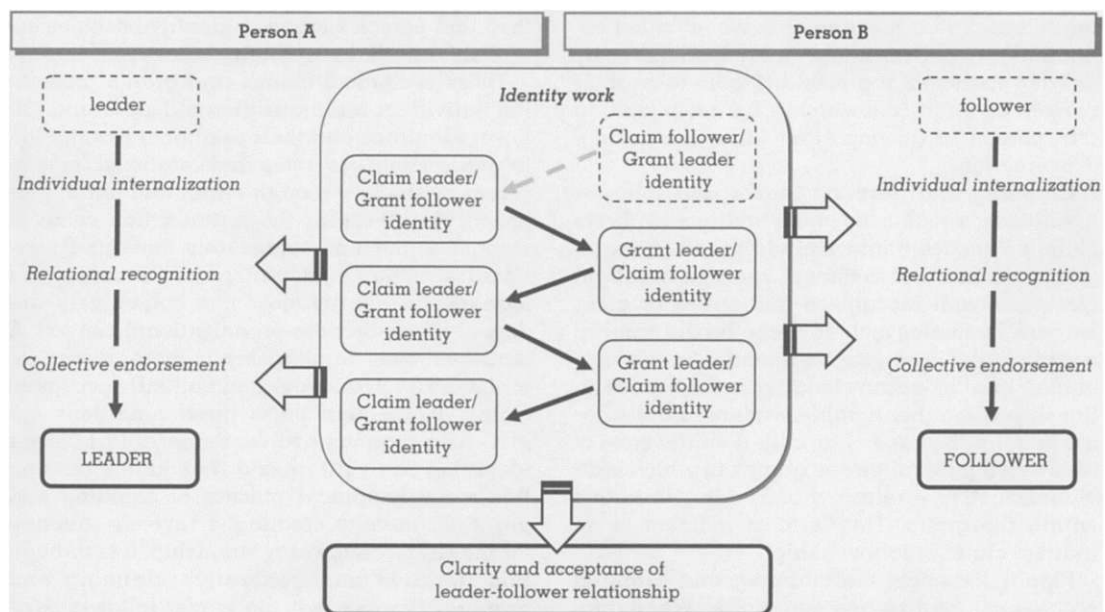


Figure 3: Leadership Identity Construction Process (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 631)

Zheng and Muir (2015) view leader identity as a process of meaning construction and set up a model subsuming already existing models, referring to the multi-facet nature of the leader identity development. In their model, confidence is a key motivator for change and the incorporation of a leader identity. The scholars show three key facets of identity development (see figure below): expanding boundaries, recognizing interdependencies, and discerning purpose. Throughout the process, the understanding of leadership is changed, and an individual's identity is reframed on three levels. First, the relationship with the environment (within what bounds should I act?), secondly, the relationship with other people (Where do I stand in relation to others?) and last, one's identity goals (Why do I lead?) (Zheng & Muir, 2015).

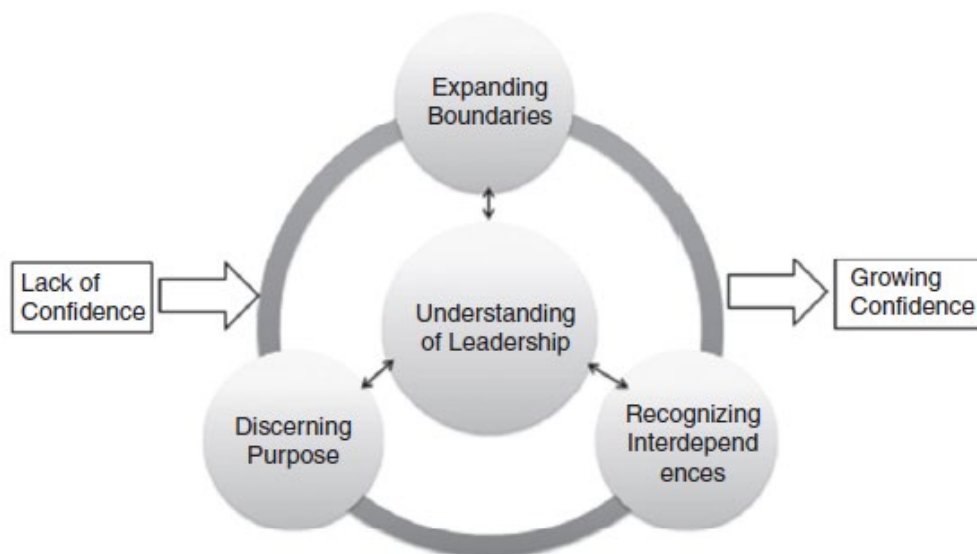


Figure 4: Model of Leader Identity Development (Zheng & Muir, 2015, p. 643)

Hammond et al. build on the concept of sensemaking focused on identity work and describe four components of a leader's identity that can develop which are rated on a scale from low to high for an individual: strength of identity, integration within one's broader self-concept, level of identity orientation, and

the meaning of being a leader. In this framework (see table below), *strength* refers to the extent to which an individual sees themselves as a leader (from strong, moderate, to low), while the *integration* refers to the extent to which the leaders has integrated the leader identity within a self-concept. The *level of inclusiveness* refers to the identity ranges (collective, relational, or individual) while the *meaning* is based on the understanding an individual holds of leadership (Hammond et al., 2017).

Level of Development	Strength	Integration	Level of Inclusiveness	Meaning
High	<i>Strong</i> (I very much see myself as a leader)	<i>Fully integrated into global self-concept</i> (A leader is part of who I am in all areas of my life)	<i>Collective</i> (I am a leader for the good of a group in which I belong)	<i>Shared leadership</i> (Leadership is about group members collaborating.)
Medium	<i>Moderate</i> (I see myself as a leader to some degree.)	<i>Integrated across some domains</i> (I am a leader in work and community, but not at home.)	<i>Relational</i> (I am a leader because of the close relationship I have with important others.)	<i>Interpersonal influence</i> (Leadership means influencing others to achieve goals.)
Low	<i>Weak</i> (I do not see myself as a leader.)	<i>Splintered (domain specific)</i> (I am only a leader at work).	<i>Individual</i> (I am a leader because I possess leadership abilities, talents, and skills):	<i>Dominance</i> (Leadership means taking charge of a situation.)

Table 1: Components of Leader Identity at Various Levels of Development (Own Representation based on Hammond, 2017, p. 483)

The scholars also stress the relevance of development through participation in leadership across multiple life domains (such as work, community, friends, and family) rather than through one environment and posit that development occurs not only from the characteristics of the leadership experiences but also from the cross-domain sensemaking of connections and disconnections of such experiences. Developmental triggers might be planned or unplanned,

minor or major, and appreciative or challenging. Examples of such developmental triggers can be found in figure 5 below.

	Planned	Unplanned
Appreciative	<p>Major: The leader attends a formal event (e.g., retirement party) that initiates a process of reflecting on leadership in multiple domains.</p> <p>Minor: An informal get-together with colleagues from multiple domains initiates a process of reflecting on leadership in multiple domains for the leader.</p>	<p>Major: The leader, who is successful in one domain (e.g., work), is unexpectedly offered a formal leadership role in a different domain (e.g., chair of the board of a major not-for-profit).</p> <p>Minor: The leader, who is successful in one domain (e.g., family/friends), receives an offhanded affirming comment about his/her leadership in a different domain (e.g., work).</p>
Challenging	<p>Major: The leader seeks a formal leadership role in a new domain for the purpose of overall development.</p> <p>Minor: The leader offers to help in a new domain for the purpose of developing a particular skill.</p>	<p>Major: The leader experiences complete failure in a role while engaging in leadership across domains.</p> <p>Minor: The leader has an unexpected lack of success in one domain when exercising a particular leadership skill that was honed in a different domain.</p>

Figure 5: Examples of Cross-Domain Development Triggers (Hammond et al., 2017, p. 498)

These scholars enrich the discussion by framing leader(ship) identity as a fluid and multifaceted process that extends across multiple life domains. They emphasize confidence-building, meaning-making, and integration as central to sustainable identity development. These perspectives highlight the importance of cross-domain triggers and appear particularly relevant for professionals who balance multiple roles, this study does not explicitly examine identity development beyond the professional sphere. Their relevance here lies in underlining the broader fluidity and multifaceted character of leader(ship) identity, which provides a useful contrast to more stage-oriented models.

Epitropaki et al. adopt a multilevel view and distinguish three *Levels-Of-Analysis of leader* (and follower) identity work and three *Levels-of-Self*. The

Levels-of-Analysis encompass the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group level.

- The *intrapersonal* level addresses to the within-person identity work, i.e., processes that influence the self-views, self-concepts and self-identities of leaders and/or followers;
- the *interpersonal* level refers to the dynamic interplay between the leader and followers' identities and
- the *group level* refers to social identity processes.

Building on other scholars, the *Level-of-Self* distinguishes the individual, relational, and collective level.

- The *personal self* is differentiated, driven by self-interest, and uses traits as the basis of self-evaluation.
- The *relational self* is derived from connections, and role relationships with significant others.
- The collective self is derived from meaningful group memberships.

An individual's self-identity comprises all three selves (Epitropaki et al., 2017).

A foundational element in the construction and evolution of leader(ship) identity is the motivation to lead, as it influences the decision to assume leadership roles and shapes how individuals internalize, enact, and sustain those roles over time (Guillén et al., 2015). Miscenko et al. link the importance of identity in the leader development process to the motivation it creates in individuals to seek out developmental experiences and opportunities to practice relevant leadership behaviors. They propose that a leader development program "presents a new set of identity meanings, which motivates participants to re-construct their currently held meaning of leader identity, and this will manifest in changing strength of leader identity" (Miscenko et al., 2017, p. 606).

According to Ibarra et al. possible selves and future selves play a key role in identity change as they act as incentives for future behavior and shape one's interpretation of, and responses to opportunities or constraints in

developmental situations. They provide the structure around which relevant knowledge can be organized (Ibarra et al., 2010).

It has not yet been fully explored how people change their identity. While some scholars frame the development of an authentic self-concept shaped by key events or “crucibles”, the specific processes behind how individuals reshape their identities remain underexplored. Radical changes in the leader identity may occur in transitions or in response to demanding situations. But scholarly work has yet to clarify the mechanisms driving identity change or how this understanding could guide structured development efforts (Ibarra et al., 2010). Avolio & Hannah (2020) refer to “trigger moments” that positively shape leadership development which can occur when reading, observing people interacting with each other, watching a movie, or observing a leader in action.

Ibarra et al.’s identity-based view of leader development posits that leader development unfolds as an “identity transition in which people disengage from central, behaviorally-anchored identities while exploring new possible selves, and eventually, integrating a new, alternative identity” (Ibarra et al., 2010, p. 8). In an interim phase, old and new identities coexist, as individuals refine their provisional selves through task, social and emotional feedback or abandon it if it proves ineffective or inauthentic. The leader identity development processes are therefore a transformation in what people “think, feel and value” (Ibarra et al., 2010, p. 7). Identity changes are not linear but follow a J-shaped developmental trajectory with an initial negative dip in leader identity development followed by an upturn in the development experience. The decrease in the identity corresponds to the phase when leaders deconstruct, review and discard outdated identities (Day & Sin, 2011; Miscenko et al., 2017). Other scholars stress the reciprocal and recursive relationship between leader identity and leader development, the development process taking on a helix-like form, as positive (or negative) leadership experiences further develop the leader’s skills or expertise and enhance or expand the person’s view of self as leader (Priest & Middleton, 2016).

In sum, existing frameworks portray leader(ship) identity development in diverse ways: as a staged progression from awareness to integration (Komives

et al., 2005), as shifts from individual toward relational and collective orientations (Lord & Hall, 2005), or as socially co-constructed and provisional identities negotiated in context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Ibarra et al., 2010). More recent perspectives emphasize meaning-making across domains and the importance of confidence, interdependence and contextual triggers (Hammond et al., 2017; Zheng & Muir, 2015). Taken together, these views underscore that leader(ship) identity development is best understood as a dynamic, iterative process shaped by experience and reflection. This synthesis provides the basis for examining how identity work can be enabled through leadership development programs, which will be central to the present study.

2.2.2 Measuring Leader Identity and Leadership Identity

Despite the popularity of Komives' et al. LID model, no psychometric measure has been fully developed, as assessing leadership identity development assessment involves numerous complexities and leader and leadership development is a dynamic and iterative process (Hastings & Sunderman, 2023). Existing measures of leader identity are limited and inconsistent (McCombs et al., 2024). Most papers on the intrapersonal and interpersonal level of leader (and follower) identity work have been conceptual, while substantial empirical work focused on the collective level. Self-concept research has been relying traditionally on self-report measurements. Various self-report measures have been developed such as the 5-item Leaders Identity Scale by Hiller in 2005, capturing the extent to which a "leader" identity is descriptive of and important to the respondent, i.e., conceptualized and measured in terms of "more" or "less" leadership identity. The scholars Ashford, DeRue & Lee have developed a short 4-item scale for leadership identity (Epitropaki et al., 2017; Grøn et al., 2020). As in other fields of research, self-report data can be biased, participants of studies discussing leadership in a way that would indicate one stage, while the actual leadership behavior indicates an earlier stage (Hastings & Sunderman, 2023). As an alternative approach to assessing leader identity Vogel et al. suggest to first capture the respondent's implicit leadership theory and second, to ask the

respondent to rate themselves on the traits and behaviors they have previously indicated (Vogel et al., 2021).

2.2.3 Relevance of Leader(ship) Identity

Leader(ship) identity has emerged as a central construct in leadership research because it connects who leaders believe they are with how they behave in practice. Unlike traditional trait- or skill-based views of leadership, identity-oriented perspectives highlight that leadership effectiveness depends not only on competencies but also on the degree to which individuals internalize leadership as part of their self-concept (Day & Harrison, 2007; Miscenko et al., 2017). This makes leader(ship) identity a key driver of leadership behavior, a leader's choices, and outcomes.

A leader's self-perception – whether they see themselves primarily as a technical expert, a manager or a leader (Güttel, 2023) – deeply influences how they act in practice. Leader(ship) identity becomes visible in how leaders interpret situations, position themselves in meetings, frame goals, prioritize decisions, and engage with others, for example.

From an organizational perspective, the relevance of leader(ship) identity lies in its ability to explain variation in leadership beyond skills and knowledge. Leaders with a clear and consolidated identity are more likely to act authentically, remain resilient in uncertain environments, and sustain motivation over time. This may translate into higher employee trust, stronger team cohesion, and more effective alignment of organizational goals (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Guillén et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2021). In this sense, identity-focused development can become a competitive advantage, particularly as organizations increasingly require leaders to master complex challenges, adapt across contexts, and engage relationally (Vogel et al., 2021).

Leader(ship) identity processes are also closely interlinked with the motivation to lead and the enactment of leadership behaviors. A stronger internalization of leadership as part of one's self-concept has been shown to increase motivation to lead (Guillén et al., 2015), while motivation to lead can also drive

individuals to seek experiences that reinforce their leader(ship) identity (Miscenko et al., 2017). This dynamic further underlines the strategic value of identity-focused development.

A well-developed identity fosters authenticity, confidence, and adaptability, encouraging leaders to embrace complex challenges and sustain long-term development (Day & Harrison, 2007; Guillén et al., 2015). Conversely, a weak or fragmented identity can result in inconsistent behavior, role confusion, or diminished credibility among followers. Overly rigid identities may lead to limit a leader's capacity to adapt to new roles or contexts (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), while identity conflicts – for instance between professional and personal roles – can create stress and undermine effectiveness.

In the context of leadership development programs, addressing leader(ship) identity fosters deep structures of competence rather than merely enhancing knowledge, skills, and abilities. Effective programs therefore integrate leadership experiences, values, and the “sense of self” (Day & Harrison, 2007, p. 366), thereby strengthening the fit between the requirements of the leader role and the leader's personal identity (Day & Harrison, 2007). Research confirms that identity-focused development initiatives enhance leadership effectiveness by aligning leadership skills and leadership identity through targeted interventions, such as peer exchange, and experiential learning (Güttel, 2023; Warhurst 2011, 2012; Zaar et al., 2021).

In sum, leader(ship) identity bridges leader(ship) practice and organizational performance. It offers organizations opportunities to strengthen leadership capacity through identity-focused developments, while also highlighting risks that must be addressed to avoid stalled growth, rigidity, or misalignment. Recognizing this duality underscores why examining leader(ship) identity is essential for both leadership scholarship and the design of effective leadership development programs.

2.3 Leader Development and Leadership

Development

This subchapter will focus on the topics of leader development and leadership development.

2.3.1 Definition of Leader Development and Leadership

Development

There is a conceptual confusion regarding the distinction between leader development and leadership development. The concepts of leader and leadership development are largely used interchangeably with no evident distinction between the two concepts. According to Dalakoura one explanation is the dominance of individualistic, non-systemic perspectives on leadership, and the focus of most empirical studies examining leadership as an individual phenomenon and therefore a result of the skills and competencies of individual leaders (Dalakoura, 2010). O'Toole differentiates the two concepts with the question that companies ask themselves when developing leadership capacities: whether to focus on "What qualities should we develop in our leader?" or on "What qualities should we develop in our organization?" (O'Toole, 2001).

A bibliometric review of the leadership development field shows that the majority of literature focuses on individual developmental outcomes, or changes at the individual level (i.e., the micro-level) and emphasize on individual outcomes for leadership competences, knowledge, skills, behaviors, abilities, and self-related outcomes (including identity, self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and self-regulation) (Vogel et al., 2021).

Day (2000) argues that there is a fundamental difference between leader development (focusing on developing human capital in organizations) and leadership development (focusing on developing social capital). Day's framework (Figure 6) illustrates this distinction by contrasting leader development as human capital with leadership development as social capital.

<i>Comparison Dimension</i>	<i>Development Target</i>	
	<i>Leader</i>	<i>Leadership</i>
Capital Type	Human	Social
Leadership Model	Individual Personal power Knowledge Trustworthiness	Relational Commitments Mutual respect Trust
Competence Base	Intrapersonal	Interpersonal
Skills	Self-awareness Emotional awareness Self confidence Accurate self image Self-regulation Self-control Trustworthiness Personal responsibility Adaptability Self motivation Initiative Commitment Optimism	Social awareness Empathy Service orientation Political awareness Social skills Building bonds Team orientation Change catalyst Conflict management

Figure 6: Differences between Leader Development and Leadership Development (Day 2000, p.584)

The emphasis in leader development is on individual-based knowledge, skills, and abilities associated with formal leadership roles and leader development results as a function of an organization's investment in human capital. The aim is to build the intrapersonal competence needed to perform effectively in any number of organizational roles, forming an accurate model of oneself, engaging in a healthy attitude and identity development. Leadership development focuses primarily on building and using interpersonal competence. Day states that effective development can only occur if leader development is linked with leadership development "such that the development of leadership transcends but does not replace the development of individual leaders" (Day, 2000, p. 605) and focuses on the interpersonal context, considering the relationships between individuals as well (Day & Harrison, 2007).

Leader and leadership development focus on efforts aiming at expanding both the individual and collective capacity to be effective in leadership roles. Some scholars distinguish between *leader development* (i.e., the expansion of the capacity of individuals to be effective in leadership roles and processes) and

leadership development (i.e., growth of a collective's capacity to produce direction, alignment, and commitment. Day & Dragoni (2015) extend this view in their multi-level framework, shown in Figure 7. Leadership development may be enhanced through experience, practice, support, and interpersonal interactions. The impact of time is shown as proximal or distal indicators on each level. In this framework (see figure below), leader identity is a proximal developmental indicator on the individual level, together with leadership self-efficacy, self-awareness and leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities (KPAs) (Day & Dragoni, 2015).

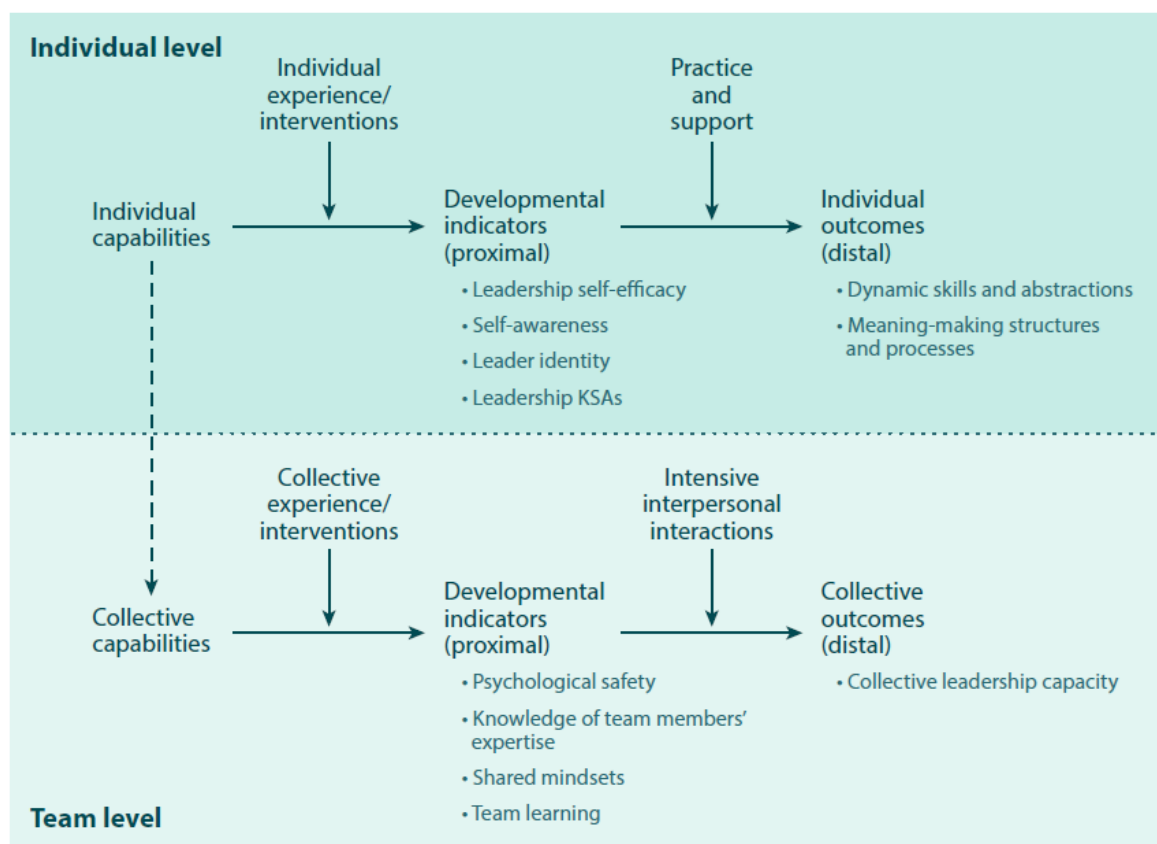


Figure 7: Multilevel Summary Framework of Leadership Development Processes and Outcomes (Day & Dragoni, 2015, p. 136)

In the development of leadership skills leader identity development is considered particularly important, as it is increasingly likely that an individual will be motivated to attempt new leadership activities and to practice the relevant leadership skills that have been acquired, as their leader identity

develops. This creates potential for further learning of leadership skills and identity development (Day & Dragoni, 2015).

Leadership development is considered a multilevel process, and it is essential to take into account the leader itself (first level), the second level (relationships with followers, peers, and superiors), and the third level (organizational climate and culture). If an organization wants to sustain leadership development over time, including the team and organizational contexts can greatly increase the likelihood of successful development. Effective leadership development is therefore based on profound individual leader development but also focusses on the relationships between individuals (Day & Harrison, 2007).

According to Ibarra et al. leadership development changes “a person’s capacity to exercise interpersonal influence to move and shape complex social systems by aligning and motivating diverse stakeholders”. It encompasses skill improvements but also entails an evolution of the system of personal values and motivations (Ibarra et al., 2010, p. 11).

Rocco & Priest (2023) emphasize a multi-level and evolving perspective, summarized in Figure 8. They posit that contextual influences shape the focus of leadership as a construct and the development of leadership and leadership identity at different levels-of-analysis. From their multi-level view the individual and group or collective are relational rather than distinct or separate and views, behaviors and skills transcend the individual. In this vein, the scholars use the term “leader/ship” development “to illustrate the complex relationship between a focus on the individuals (leader) and a focus on the dynamics, activity, and outcomes of groups or collectives they are part of (leadership)” (Rocco & Priest, 2023, p. 110).

Level of identity	View of leader/leadership	Leadership practices/behaviors	Skill level/expertise	Leadership development focus
(Self) Personal Individual characteristics that make us distinct from others.	Positional; role-based authority; Simplistic; Least Inclusive; Hierarchical	Getting things done; organizing tasks	Novice—reliance on implicit theories related to leadership and problem solving	Trying out new roles; Individual skill development; Explore passions, values, vision; Take on more complex challenges; Understand others
(Others) Relational Self in relation to dyadic relationships	Influence process; One can be a leader with or without a title; Participatory; Shared between leaders and followers	Joining with others in shared tasks for shared purpose/vision; Relationship building; Coaching/developing others	Intermediate—integrate knowledge of others and context	Learning and practicing different styles; Group/team skills Exposure to "heat experiences," colliding perspectives and engaged meaning-making; Support from coaches and mentors
(Community/Society) Collective Self in relation to group memberships and systems	Shared; interdependency between individuals, teams, organizations, and society; Most advanced, complex, inclusive views of leadership	Transformational approaches	Expert—situational perspectives and collaboration; systemic views	Leading change, collaborative approaches, systemic change Coaching and mentoring others

Source: Adapted from: Brewer and Gardner (2006); Day and Harrison (2007); Drath and Palus (1994); Komives et al. (2005, 2006, 2009a); Lord and Hall (2005); Petrie (2013, 2015).

Figure 8: Summary of multi-level/evolving perspectives on leader/ship development (Rocco et al. 2023, p.111)

2.3.2 Antecedents of Leadership Development

A wide variety of contextual and personal factors or conditions can be found which might help understand the mechanisms, modes, and sources of leadership development. *Contextual antecedents* are external to the developing individual (group, or collective) and include organizational interventions such as training, feedback, coaching, reflection, action learning or mentoring as well as more informal or experiential antecedents like learning on the job, and personal history, life experiences, trigger events, and adversity. *Personal antecedents* refer to sources of development that are internal to the developing individual or group, including self-related antecedents (identity, self-efficacy, self-awareness, and self-regulation), learning attitude and motivation and finally personality/individual attributes (such as openness, affect, implicit theories) (Vogel et al., 2021).

2.3.3 Leadership Development Models

Zaar et al. (2021) integrate identity and learning in their framework (Figure 9) bridging leadership development, leader identity, and learning from experiences. They argue that developing leaders and leadership is a matter of change in knowledge, skills, and identity.

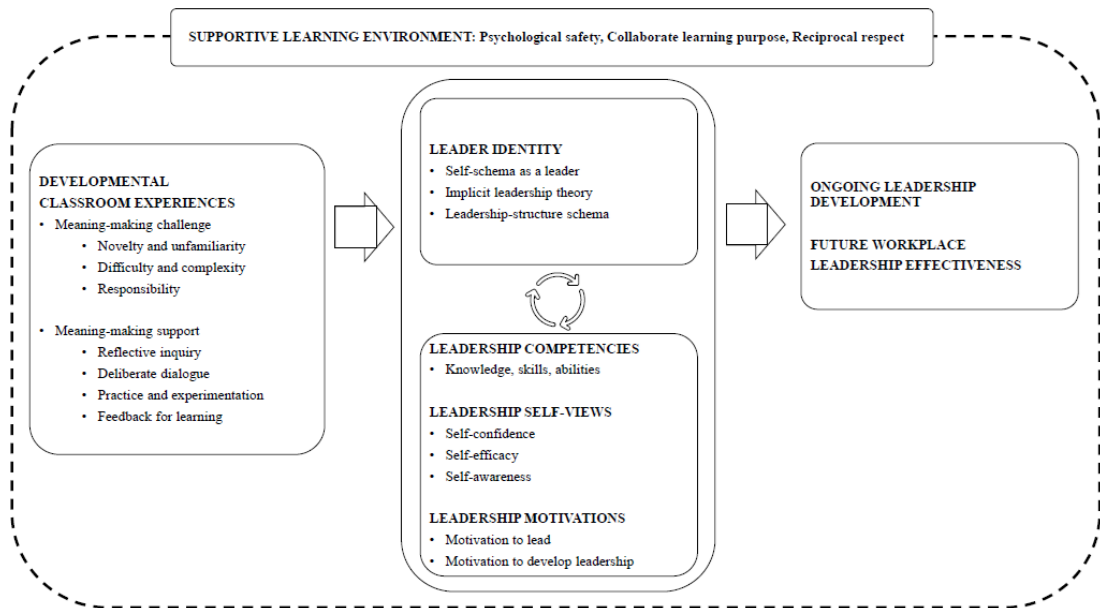


Figure 9: Framework for Students' Leader Identity Development (Zaar et al. 2021, p. 76)

This model places leader identity at the core of leadership development, positioning it as both a proximal outcome of classroom experiences and a key mediator linking those experiences to future leadership effectiveness. Leader identity reflects the degree to which individuals see themselves as leaders, shaped by one's self-schema as a leader ("Who am I as a leader?"), one's perspective on leadership or leadership-structure schema ("What is leadership to me?"), and one's perspective about others as a leader or implicit leadership theory ("Who do I consider to be a leader?"). Individuals claim a leader identity based on their understanding of leadership and compared to who they view as a leader (Zaar et al., 2021).

The scholars argue that shaping and developing students' leader identity requires a social setting in which experiences are offered that challenge current ways of conceptualizing leadership and being a leader, providing support in meaning-making of new perspectives on leadership (Zaar, 2021). Petriglieri et al. introduce "identity workspaces", i.e., physical or psychological environments where individuals can reflect, experiment, and develop in an organizational context with little risk of harming themselves, physically or psychologically (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). Drawing on previous research,

the setting of the learning environment could be a “holding environment” for identity development, assisting in identity stabilization or identity transition (Zaar et al., 2021).

According to Güttel et al. (2023) leadership development programs have an impact on two levels: leadership skills and leadership identity. Leaders enhance their interpersonal, intercultural and change management skills and increase their reflection and self-efficacy. They illustrate the interplay of cognitive, behavioral, and systemic training in their scientific leadership development framework for learning and training (Figure 10). It that aims at enhancing a leader’s effectiveness in three force fields and combines three types of training as essential components of a leader’s growth and development: cognitive-technical training, behavior training, and systemic training.

Cognitive-technical training enhances analytical and methodical skills, teaching theories, concepts, methods, and best practices but often focuses little on self-reflection about leadership experience or leadership identity.

Behavioral trainings foster knowledge acquisition through iterative experiential learning relying heavily on the participants’ existing experiences. Through exchange of experience and feedback or by engaging in new experiences knowledge is interactively expanded. In a reflexive context, behavioral training can provide an opportunity to reconstruct the leadership identity.

Systemic trainings encourage training from a systemic-constructivist perspective and uses participants’ experiences from their professional lives or from group dynamic exercises. It focuses on expanding individuals’ theoretical and conceptual repertoires and on fostering divergent thinking. This enables leaders to develop an awareness of their role within social contexts (such as teams, and organizations) and reflect on possibilities and limitations of their leadership choices, leading to a well-defined leadership identity (Güttel et al., 2023).

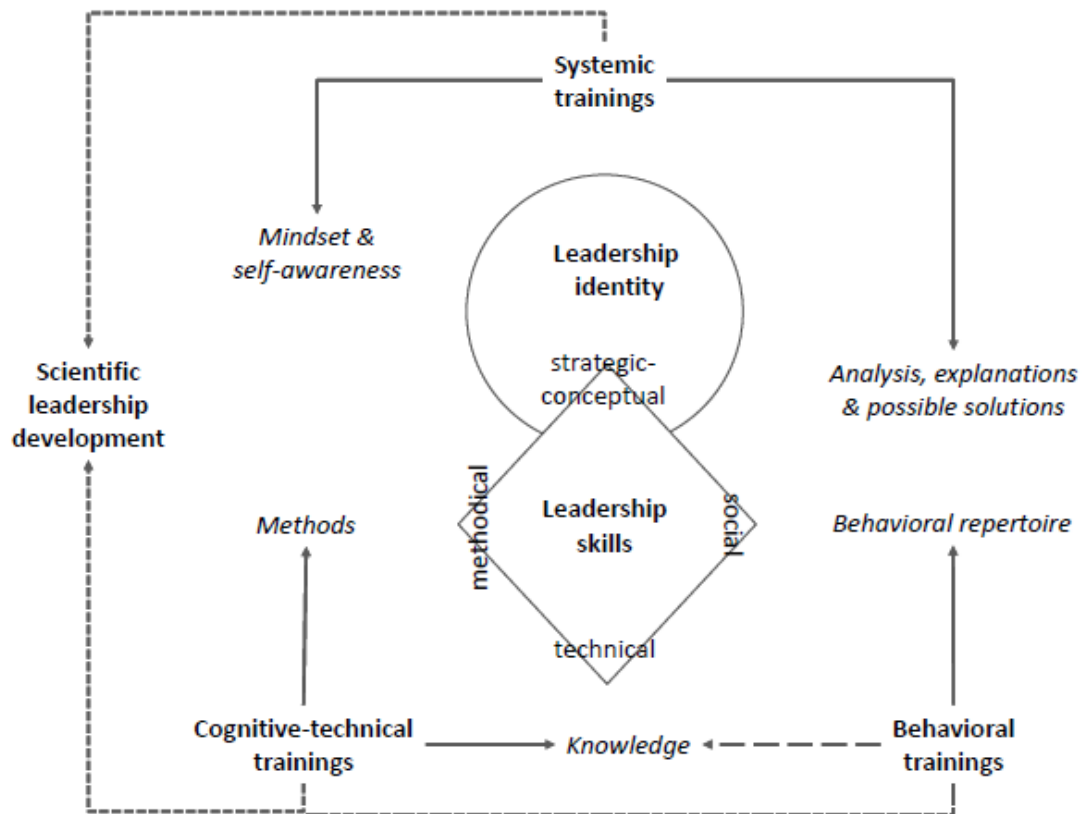


Figure 10: Scientific Leadership Development (Güttel et al. 2023, p. 391)

2.3.4 Methods in Leadership Development

A variety of practices are used to develop leaders and leadership in the context of work in an organization (Day, 2000). While Ibarra et al. note a growing emphasis on “relational methods” for leader development (e.g., coaching, mentoring programs, using company executives as faculty in in-house programs) the relational context for leadership development has been understudied (Ibarra et al., 2010). Scholars stress the importance of considering the team and organizational context into the design of a developmental intervention and moving beyond the narrower focus on the individual leader (Day & Harrison, 2007).

Commonly used practices in leadership development include 360-degree feedback, coaching, and mentoring (from top executives, line managers or external consultants), networking, action learning, specific job assignments,

case studies, simulations, experiential learning and classroom-based leadership training (Dalakoura, 2010; Day, 2000).

In summary, leadership development practices range from highly individualized approaches such as coaching and feedback, to collective formats such as action learning, peer exchange, and group simulations. What unites these methods is their potential to trigger reflection, identity experimentation, and relational learning. Yet, the depth of identity impact depends on how these practices are combined and embedded within broader program architectures.

2.3.5 Impact of Leadership Development on Leader(ship) Identity

Although leadership is often based on the assumption that effective leaders possess inherent personality traits, research shows that leadership development initiatives enhance leadership effectiveness by aligning leadership skills and leader(ship) identity. This makes leadership development increasingly important in today's dynamic and complex competitive environments (Güttel et al., 2023).

Identity change is generally rare unless there is an external event ("trigger event") or other experience that initiates this process. Leadership development programs can serve as such triggers, presenting individuals with novel examples of leadership and prompting identity work – the process of "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising the constructions [i.e., the identity] that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 626). Such work requires at least some degree of self-doubt and self-openness. Through sensemaking (Weick, 1995), individuals frame these experiences as personally meaningful, notice discrepancies between their current and ideal selves, and begin to enact new leadership behaviors. Over time, enactment aligns the self with the new

identity, resulting in identity growth and refinement (Hammond et al., 2017; Kwok et al., 2021).

Executive MBA programs in particular can provide forums for such experimentation with alternative selves and represent an opportunity for identity work and reshaping the person (Warhurst, 2012). Critics note that MBA programs offer limited development impact for young adults with little prior management experience, yet in executive they can often lead to significant personal learning. Still, transferring these learnings back to the workplace – to the team, unit, or organization – can be difficult (Ibarra et al., 2010). Part-time formats may mitigate this effect by allowing immediate application of new perspectives in parallel with professional practice (Warhurst, 2011). Warhurst also emphasizes that MBA studies in general, and leadership development programs in particular, might contribute to the emergence or consolidation of a leadership identity in two ways: through the formal curriculum and through the informal learning process. Moreover, participation itself may affirm identity, as organizational selection for advanced training is symbolically significant in establishing a leadership identity (Warhurst, 2012).

Ibarra argues that people who are engaged in self-exploration and experimentation need to feel that others similar to themselves are experiencing similar issues. People are more likely to seek support from others and form a network for potential future support if they are uncertain about their beliefs and if they are in a situation of high ambiguity about the future (Ibarra et al., 2010).

Leadership trainings have been shown to affect leadership practices and leadership identity. Such trainings offer idealized descriptions of the leadership role in which individuals can mirror their leadership practices and reflect on their leadership identity. Through discussions, participants are exposed to others' leadership views and meanings and engaged in guided self-reflection (Miscenko et al., 2017). Other scholars stress the importance of experiences, managers have had with influential leaders of their past or present, to understand their meaning of leadership. They argue that individuals use their own experiences to develop leadership prototypes that boost or hinder their leadership motivation (Guillén et al., 2015).

Research also shows that the mere exposure to or participation in any experience does not guarantee that learning occurs, regardless of whether it is part of a formal education or job assignment. Experiences need to be conducive to learning and development, i.e., assist in change and growth by being embedded in a learning environment that fits the learner's developmental needs and requirements (Zaar et al., 2023b).

Taken together, studies underscore that leadership development can shape leader(ship) identity when embedded in conducive contexts, but its impact depends on both individual openness and program design.

2.4 Conclusions for the further proceedings in this thesis

Leader(ship) identity is not merely a theoretical construct but has profound consequences for leadership practice and organizational performance and should be taken into consideration when designing leader(ship) development programs. Understanding why identity matters bridges the gap between leadership theory and practice and highlights the added value of investigating identity development in education settings.

Over the past two decades, leadership research linking leadership and identity have grown substantially. The literature review has shown that leader identity or leadership identity is not a fixed personality trait but rather a dynamic, socially constructed, and experience-driven process. Various theoretical frameworks such as the LID-Model (Komives et al., 2005), Ibarra's identity transition model (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) or the social constructionist perspective by DeRue and Ashford (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) highlight the role of experiences, sensemaking and identity work in the evolution of a leader identity.

Research indicates that structured leadership development interventions – particularly those that combine cognitive, behavioral, and systemic training components – can initiate and support identity-related changes. However, the concrete influencing factors through which such programs affect the self-

perception of leadership and identity development remain insufficiently understood, especially in real-world educational contexts like Executive MBA programs. Furthermore, while several studies conceptualize the link between identity and leadership effectiveness, few empirically investigate how individuals themselves describe and make meaning of their identity changes following structured interventions.

To address this research gap, this thesis empirically explores how participants of the TUW Executive MBA leadership modules perceive and describe their leader(ship) identity post-program, which program elements they find most impactful and what changes this report. The analysis will focus on identifying recurring patterns and influential factors across individual cases to derive transferable insights for the design of leadership development programs. Building on the conceptual framework, the empirical study will use selected models – particularly Komives et al.'s stages, Lord & Hall's identity orientations, and Güttel's typology - as reference points for analyzing participants' descriptions.

The following chapters outline the methodological approach, including the qualitative case study design, data collection procedures, and analytical framework. This design is well suited to capturing participants' lived experiences and translating insights into an empirically grounded understanding of leader(ship) identity in a structured learning context.

3 Methodology

This chapter provides information about research design, research context, as well as the process of data collection and data analysis.

3.1 Research Case

The case study at TU Wien was purposefully selected for two reasons: first, the author is enrolled in the program and conducting this thesis as part of the study requirement, but secondly, the author is also professionally affiliated with the TU Wien Academy. This dual role provides unique access to the structure, the participants, and the design logic of the program. At the same time, it generates a practice-oriented interest in insights: it might generate impulses for further program development, the refinement of leadership development programs, or the creation of new offerings within the TUW Academy. Thus, this research combines inquiry with applied relevance, while maintaining a clear methodological and theoretical framework.

Given the author's professional affiliation with the TUW Academy and insider perspective, it is crucial to acknowledge and reflect on the potential influence of this role on the research process. On the one hand, this position enables a deeper contextual understanding of the program and its participants. On the other hand, it requires heightened awareness of potential bias, particularly in data interpretation and the framing of potential positive impacts of the program on participants. To mitigate role-related bias, the study adheres to established qualitative research principles, including transparent documentation of methods, systematic coding procedures, and the use of theoretical frameworks as anchors for interpretation. Also, reflexive notes, critical self-questioning and attention to alternative interpretations support the integrity of the analysis. Before and during the interviews participants were assured of anonymity and their responses would only be used for the purpose of this study, and would not influence their standing in the program in any way.

3.2 Research Context

The research questions shall be answered by analyzing the leadership meaning of participants of an Executive MBA program at the TU Wien Academy and their experience of the leadership development program. The research setting is a three-module leadership program which is part of the curriculum of the Executive MBA program with different trainers and co-trainers for three modules, with input on leadership, organizational behavior, group dynamics, and strategic change.

The program is founded on the Scientific Leadership Development Framework. The learning architecture harmonizes “knowledge and methods transfer with experiential reflection, fostering comprehensive pattern recognition for the purpose of analyzing and generating possible solutions” (Güttel et al., 2023, p. 392). The didactic model follows a structured cycle and aims at developing leadership skills and strengthening leadership identity. At the level of cognitive leadership skills, new theories, concepts, leadership knowledge, methods, tools, and strategic-conceptual skills should be acquired, thus supporting the leadership process. At the identity level, the program provides space to clarify one’s role as a leader, strengthen reflective capacity and set personal priorities (Güttel et al., 2023).

The leadership development program is conducted twice per academic year, with each cohort comprising around 12 and 22 participants on average, the majority of whom are enrolled in various Executive MBA programs. The language of instruction is either German or English, depending on the cohort. The program encompasses a diverse range of theoretical and methodical inputs, including group dynamic exercises, case studies, simulations, discussions and reflective practices. It is usually structured into three modules, each lasting 3 days, for a total duration of nine days. For one cohort, the program was exceptionally structured in an eight day-long setting, with an individual consultation a few weeks after the group course.

Unlike other MBA modules held at TU Wien, the Leadership Development Program takes place at external seminar venues outside of Vienna. These off-

site settings are intentionally selected to foster a conducive learning environment that supports both indoor and outdoor group activities. The goal is to create a protected and immersive space that facilitates deep peer-to-peer exchange, self-reflection, and critical examination of professional practice. Informal interactions, such as morning and evening discussions during the training days, further enhance the learning experience. A key objective of the program is to cultivate lasting professional networks among participants, encouraging continued engagement and mutual support beyond the formal completion of the program.

3.3 Research Design

As a first step, the research process of the master thesis started with a literature review exploring research on the research threads leader identity, leadership identity as well as leader and leadership development, and finally leadership development programs to introduce the conceptual background. For the literature search various research tools and databases of the TU Wien and academic search engines such as Google Scholar, Elsevier, ScienceDirect, Elicit, and Perplexity were used, utilizing relevant keywords in various combinations. Primarily, literature written in English was considered and selected based on the titles, abstracts, and tables of contents.

During the literature review it was noted that the link between leader(ship) identity development and leadership development programs is still under researched. While various theoretical models and empirical research address identity formation or identity development and leadership learning independently, few studies systematically explore how participants in structured programs perceive and articulate changes in their leader(ship) identity.

Based on the identified research gap, this thesis addresses the following questions:

1. How do Executive MBA participants describe their leader(ship) identity after completing the TUW leadership modules?

2. Do Executive MBA participants describe changes in their leader(ship) identity following the leadership modules and if so, what changes do they report?
3. Which specific learning experiences or program elements do participants identify as most impactful to the development of their leader(ship) identity?

To answer these questions, the thesis employs a qualitative, exploratory research design using a single-case approach as defined by Yin (2014). The TUW Executive MBA program serves as a bounded case, allowing for in-depth investigation of leader(ship) identity development in a real-world leadership education context. Case study research was selected over other social science methods such as experiments, surveys, histories, or archival analyses because it is particularly well-suited to exploring a contemporary and complex phenomenon (the development of leader(ship) identity), within their natural settings (a structured Executive MBA leadership development program). The research focuses on “how” and “why” questions, making case study design especially appropriate (Yin, 2014). While various previous research has used quantitative scales to measure leader or leadership identity, this study takes a qualitative perspective, focusing on participants’ own narratives and sense-making processes.

To generate a rich and contextualized understanding of identity development processes multiple sources of evidence are used, including interviews with participants, program documentation, and expert input.

As primary data source for answering the research questions qualitative theme-focused, semi-structured, single-person interviews with participants of the Executive MBA Programs were chosen. The interviews were designed to elicit in-depth reflections on how participants describe their leader identity post-program participation, any shifts they experienced in their leader(ship) identity, and which program elements they considered the most impactful.

The interview guide provided support and served as a thematic framework for collecting the qualitative, verbal data. It listed all relevant topics that needed to

be covered in the interview, assuring better comparability of data and structures the communication process. The questions were formulated preferably as open questions to allow the interviewee to speak freely about their experiences, or feelings. Even though the interview guide serves as a structure it needs to leave room for new developments in the interview process (see Misoch, 2019).

According to scholars, a semi-structured guide should fulfill the following principles for qualitative research:

- openness (i.e., aiming at analyzing subjective experiences, or perspectives, not testing hypotheses);
- process-orientation (e.g., analyzing past-present-processes), and
- communication (i.e., as the information from qualitative interviews is obtained through communication, and to strengthen this interdependence between interviewer and interviewee, some points should be observed, such as clarity of the questions and asking one question at a time (Misoch, 2019)).

An interview guide should follow the rule of thumb “from general to specific”: the interview should start with a broad, if possible narrative introductory question. Further questions can then follow the statements that were generated by relatively open stimuli. These questions should build on what was already hinted on at the initial account but not yet elaborated in detail by the interviewee (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021). In this vein, the interview guide (see appendix) was arranged according to themed blocks which open with general questions. As recommended, interviews followed the following phases: introductory phase (informing about the study and the aim of the interview), warm-up phase (introductory question), main interview phase (focusing on the theme questions), closing and wrap-up phase (closing the interview and inquiring about anything the interviewee would like to add) (Misoch, 2019). Furthermore, a positive atmosphere was created in small talk manner before the initial introductory phase (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr,

2021) and the interviewer focused on sustaining a positive atmosphere throughout the interview.

3.4 Data Collection

The interview process was carried out in June 2025. Out of all participants who have completed the leadership development program since winter term 2023/24 a total of 17 possible interview candidates were preselected and invited to a personal one-one-one interview. The pre-selection was made regarding their mother tongue (to minimize possible misunderstandings between the interviewer and the interviewee because of language barriers), management and leadership experience, as well as gender. Potential interview partners were contacted by email with a minimal description of the project, the focus of the interviews, and contact information of the author. Interested interview partners could get in touch with interviewer by email or phone in case of questions and confirm interest in taking part in the research for the thesis. Interviewees could choose between one-on-one interview in person or online.

A total of 11 participants from three different leadership cohorts (winter term 2023/24; summer term 2024; winter term 2024/25) responded and agreed to an interview. All participants were in different phases of their MBA studies, either at the end of their second, third, or fourth (and final) semester of studies. None of the participants had already fully completed the MBA program.

The interviews were conducted 5-18 months post-program to allow sufficient time for the integration of learnings into (professional or personal) practice while ensuring valid recall. This time frame is considered particularly suitable by scholars for capturing changes in self-perception and leadership practice (Hammond et al., 2017; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Miscenko et al., 2017). The retrospective nature of the design introduces potential recall bias. However, the recency of the educational experience helps mitigate these concerns and findings are expected to be exploratory and contextual rather than broadly generalizable.

Prior to the interview, participants were informed about the venue of the interview and, in case of live-online-interviews asked to find a private and quiet space to be able to speak freely and without interruptions during the interviews. Within the scope of this thesis 11 interviews were conducted: 3 in person at the TUW Academy, and 8 online via MS Teams video call.

The interviews varied in duration between 40 and 62 minutes. After securing approval, the interviews were transcribed automatically using the transcription tool in MS Teams and additionally, audio of the interview was recorded with a smartphone. The digital setting of the interviews via MS Teams did not influence the quality or atmosphere of the interviews, all interview partners had a strong internet connection, were in a calm environment without any interruptions, and had an activated camera throughout the interview.

As stated before, the interviews were carried out in German to make sure that a natural flow of conversation could be maintained throughout the interview. The interview guide served as an anchor and the previously defined questions were asked, but not always word for word and not necessarily in the same order. Hence, the sequence of the questions was adapted and varied depending on the situation.

The automated transcriptions were revised directly after each interview to assure highest possible precision of each transcript and accuracy of the transcription was verified with the audio recording. To ensure a consistent data base, all interviews were transcribed according to the rules as established by Kuckartz (for details see Kuckartz, 2016, pp. 166–169).

An overview of the interviews carried out can be found below (Table 2). Because of the anonymity of the interview process, the interview data is presented in anonymized form and the interviews carried out are not stated chronologically but sorted by age of the interviewee.

One interviewee changed roles since the completion of the leadership program. The sample comprised 11 participants (8 male, 3 female), aged between 27 and 55 years with 9.9 years of average leadership experience

(range 3.5 – 26) and 5 to 25 direct reports. The number of direct reports refers to the number of reports at the time of completion of the program.

Program completion	Format	Age	Gender (m/f/other)	Leadership Experience (in years)	Direct Reports (plus indirect reports)
June 2024	In person	27	f	4,5	5
June 2024	Online	35	m	3,5	12
June 2024	Online	36	f	7	5
January 24	Online	37	m	5	8 (40)
January 2025	In person	38	m	6	10
June 2024	Online	45	m	15	6 (26)
January 2025	Online	46	f	10	25
January 2024	Online	47	m	5	5
June 2024	Online	49	m	12	14 (70)
June 2024	In person	54	m	15	13
January 2025	Online	55	m	26	7 (43)

Table 2: Overview of conducted interviews with MBA participants (own illustration)

To enhance the credibility and depth of the case study, a key informant interview was conducted with the academic director responsible for designing the TUW leadership modules. This interview provided insight into the intended identity development outcomes and pedagogical rationale. Additionally, program syllabi and module descriptions were analyzed to establish the formal structure and educational context of the leadership modules, supporting triangulation of data from participant interviews.

	Type of document	Source
Internal Source 1	Module descriptor and course syllabi of the leadership modules	TUW Academy
Internal Source 2	Personal interview	Academic Director, Leadership Development Program

Table 3: Overview of information on the TUW Academy leadership development program (own illustration)

3.5 Data Analysis

After transcription, all interview data were analyzed following Mayring's principles of qualitative content analysis. All interviews were transcribed and used for the analysis. The coding process was carried out without a predefined category system. Instead, categories were developed inductively in an initial step followed by a deductive refinement informed by existing theories and models. During this process, some codes and subcodes were redefined to better capture the meaning of the material.

The table below presents the final coding system, including codes, subcodes, and definition.

Subcode(s)	Definition
Code: Leader(ship) Identity	
Leadership Meaning	What leadership means to the interviewee, definitions and conceptual understanding of leadership
Good Leadership / Bad Leadership	Statements about what the interviewee considers good or bad leadership, including values, behaviors, or leadership characteristics they aspire to or reject.
Self-Perception as a Leader	How the interviewee perceives himself/herself as a leader (e.g., identity, metaphors, typologies).
Leadership Style / Behavior	The interviewee talks about his/her behavior as a leader, descriptive insights into how the person leads: communication, routines, decision-making.
Values and Principles	The interviewee talks about values and / or principles that guide him/her in leadership practice
Motivation to Lead	The interviewee talks about the intrinsic or extrinsic reasons why he/she wanted or wants to be a leader
Leadership Development Beliefs	Beliefs about whether leadership can be learned, developed, or improved; includes references to growth mindset, coaching orientation, or fixed views.
Leadership Forcefields	The interviewee talks about the forcefields in which he/she exerts influence through leadership, i.e. self-leadership, team-level or organizational level
Role Models	The interviewee refers to specific people (positive or negative) who influenced the interviewee's leadership style, motivation, or identity.
Code: Development and Change	
Identity Shift	The interviewee talks about perceived changes in leadership identity since the program (e.g., self-concept, leadership mindset).
Behavioral Change	The interviewee talks about new or modified leadership practices (e.g., meetings, feedback, delegation).
Confidence and Self-Efficacy	The interviewee talks about increased confidence, inner security or assertiveness as a leader

Role Clarity / Focus Shift	The interviewee talks about a shift in leadership focus (e.g., from technical expert to people leader).
Delegation and Empowerment	The interviewee talks about examples where leadership behavior shifted toward more trust and responsibility-sharing.
Reflection and Awareness	The interviewee talks about increased self-reflection, or recognition of leadership-related patterns.
Code: Program Influence	
Transformative Moments	The interviewee talks about aha-moments or specific situations during the program that triggered personal learning.
Peer Learning and Exchange	The interviewee talks about experiences of learning through peer interaction and exchange within the cohort.
Reflection Spaces	The interviewee mentions time, methods, or settings that encouraged self-reflection.
Content, Methods, Tools	The interviewee refers to theories, tools, or models used in the program that were impactful.
Course Material and Documentation	The interviewee talks about course material and / or documentation of the courses that were impactful
Storytelling	Mentions of storytelling and narrative reflection during the program.
Transfer to Practice	The interviewee talks about how and what elements were transferred to day-to-day-leadership.
Critical view / barriers	The interviewee mentions perceived limitations or obstacles in the learning or application process.

Table 4: Codes and Subcodes (own illustration)

To facilitate data management and ensure systematic coverage the software program MAXQDA was used to assign text segments to the developed codes and subcodes, as well as to generate an overview of the codes and subcodes over all interviews. In line with Mayring's principles of structured qualitative content analysis, descriptive thematic labels were inductively developed by the researcher to capture shared patterns across coded segments. While grounded in participants' language, these labels reflect an interpretive process by the researcher and serve as structuring devices rather than as established

In a subsequent step, the coded segments were exported and further analyzed in Excel. Here, the material was iteratively reworked, clustered, and synthesized to identify broader patterns and cross-case themes. This second-level analysis moved beyond the descriptive codes to higher-order thematic interpretation. Accordingly, the findings presented in chapter 4 are not a direct reproduction of the initial codes but rather the result of this second-level analysis. This approach ensured that the analysis captured both the detail of

the participants' accounts and the conceptual patterns relevant to the research questions.

The AI-based language model ChatGPT (GPT -4.5, developed by OpenAI) was used as a technical aid to organize and cluster coded material. Specifically, it was applied to generate preliminary thematic clusters and assist in synthesizing extensive coded material. However, all interpretations, theoretical judgements and validation of the analytical outcomes were conducted manually and critically by the author. The use of the model thus served as supportive tool, without replacing the researcher's central role in interpretation.

4 Findings

In this chapter, the empirical findings of the explorative, qualitative case study are described. The chapter begins by outlining participant's self-perceptions and identity-related narratives. It then describes shifts in leader(ship) identity and changes in leadership practice and finally examines impactful program elements and experiences during the leadership development program.

The nature of the study is exploratory, and findings represent nuanced personal narratives, not generalizable truths. Representative quotes from the interviews are used to illustrate and support the findings. All quotes from the interviews were translated into English to make the quotes immediately understandable to the broadest audience, including leaders who may not read German. Hence, readers do not need to switch languages or guess meaning. The original quotes in German may be found in footnotes.

4.1 Leader(ship) Identity

This subchapter explores how participants describe their leader(ship) identity across the 11 interviews. First, the participants' understanding of leadership meaning and the diverse orientations of leader(ship) identity that emerged from the interviews are presented. Second, key identity facilitators that shape and sustain these identities are examined. Finally, the findings are mapped against theoretical frameworks in order to situate the participants' leader(ship) identities within existing scholarly perspectives.

4.1.1 Leadership Meaning and Leader(ship) Identity

Orientations

To understand the self-concept of the interviewed leaders, each participant's leader(ship) identity core was analyzed with the goal to capture the central and defining essence of the individual's leader(ship) identity, encompassing their core beliefs about leadership, values and guiding principles. The results were structured into thematic clusters derived from cross-case analysis, which

reflect how participants experienced and made sense of their leader(ship) identity.

The analysis across the 11 interviews reveals that participants construct their leader(ship) identity through overlapping but distinguishable orientations. These orientations were clustered into three overarching dominant orientations: (1) Leadership as Purposeful Alignment, (2) Leadership as Relational Empowerment, and (3) Leadership as an Integrative Balancing Act. These orientations represent dominant identity patterns within leaders, not mutually exclusive categories. Most leaders express elements of multiple orientations, though one orientation typically prevails as the primary lens through which they understand and enact leadership.

Leadership as Purposeful Alignment

This orientation is centered on clarity, structure, direction, and strategic coherence. Leaders who align with this orientation see themselves as anchors within systems, responsible for defining vision, aligning goals, and providing operational reliability. They emphasize clarity of purpose, goal transparency, and creating coherence across teams and the organization. Leaders in this cluster are typically motivated by a desire to create meaningful structure, shape outcomes, and ensure performance through direction.

Interviewee 2 articulated this orientation clearly:

"On the one hand [a leader is], an anchor, a fixed point, a point of contact (...) the person I can approach if I need something. But also, the person who leads the way to a certain extent, the one who has the goal in mind, so to speak, and who, together with the motivation, makes the goal transparent for everyone. And thus, clearly outlines the common path." (Interview 2)¹

Similarly, interviewee 11 underscored the visionary and developmental responsibilities of leadership:

"First of all, leadership means showing a vision, it means employee development, it means employee development and, of course, it also means defining goals and task

¹ „Zum einen einmal Anker, Fixpunkt, Anlaufstelle ja, so quasi derjenige, den ich ansprechen kann, wenn ich was brauch, ja. Aber auch, der oder diejenige, die vorangeht ein Stück weit, ja quasi das, das das Ziel vor Augen hat. Gemeinsam mit der Motivation, das Ziel auch allen transparent darstellt und damit den gemeinsamen Weg klar umreißt.“ (Interview 2)

management and checking whether the goals have been achieved. But primarily, it's inspiring, motivating and developing." (Interview 11)²

Other participants added a pragmatic tone, emphasizing fairness, reliability, and predictability as leadership hallmarks. Interviewee 9 reflects:

"Reliability, that's always a super important point, because they [leaders] need reliability upwards, but also reliability downwards, so to speak, towards the employees, and I think they need to be approachable. So, I think you should be able to flag things, bring them to the attention of your leader, so to speak, so that a leader can step in if things go wrong and a leader should not say "that's your problem, so take care of it from that level of detail onwards", I'm very much against that, so be approachable, be reliable [as a leader]." (Interview 9)³

Across this orientation, leadership is framed as a systemic, outcome-focused responsibility anchored in discipline, transparency, and dependable communication.

Leadership as Relational Empowerment

This orientation emphasizes leadership as a relational, developmental and emotionally grounded process. Leaders who identify with this orientation frame their role as enabling others through autonomy, trust, and coaching. Leadership is not seen as directive control, but as facilitation of growth and the ability to support, empower, and develop team members. This orientation is rooted in values such as authenticity, openness, and trust, and marked by a strong belief in shared responsibility, and participative decision-making. Motivation to lead often stems from the wish of helping others to grow or contributing to collective development.

² „Führung bedeutet zunächst einmal eine Vision geben, bedeutet Mitarbeiterentwicklung, bedeutet Mitarbeiterentwicklung und natürlich auch Zieldefinition und Aufgabenmanagement und Zielerreichungsmanagement. Aber primär ist es Inspirieren und motivieren sowie entwickeln.“ (Interview 11)

³ „Verlässlichkeit, das ist immer ein super wichtiger Punkt, weil sie (Führung) braucht Verlässlichkeit nach oben, aber auch Verlässlichkeit quasi nach unten, gegenüber den Mitarbeitern, und ich finde, sie muss ansprechbar sein. Also ich finde, man sollte Dinge flaggen können, quasi auch zu ihrer Attention bringen, wo sie dann quasi einspringt im Falle des Falles und nicht sagen ja, das ist dein Problem also kümmer' dich darum ab dem Detailgrad interessiert mich nicht, da bin ich sehr dagegen, also ansprechbar sein, verlässlich sein.“ (Interview 9)

Interviewee 1 illustrated this clearly:

“rather giving autonomy or an independence and that decision-making happens in the teams. This should also be made conscious at this level and that the leader ultimately only supports and guides the employee in the sense of a lot of delegation and then of course also regularly checks in. But ultimately the team itself is responsible” (Interview 1)⁴

Interviewee 11 similarly shared:

“I love to recognize the strengths of my employees and to distribute the work according to their strengths and interests as far as possible. I believe that every employee wants to be successful and as a leader you have to enable them to be successful. Yes, I have to convince them that what they are doing is important and right, and if I manage to do that, then, to put it bluntly, they run themselves and I only have to make a few corrections every now and then.” (Interview 11)⁵

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of valuing their employee’s expertise, treating them as equals and maintaining open and respectful collaboration (“eye-to-eye”).

“Every one of my employees is simply an expert in certain areas and they can do it better than I can and that’s exactly how you should treat your employees from my point of view, because that’s what people get.” (Interview 8)⁶

Many leaders stressed the critical role of psychological safety in leadership and the importance of a working environment and climate characterized by mutual trust and openness, such as interviewee 4 who mentioned the necessity “to create the space, in which all employees feel safe”⁷.

The importance of communication was emphasized in almost all interviews. Communication is viewed not only as an informational tool, but as a relational

⁴ "eher eine Autonomie oder eine eine Selbstständigkeit und und dass eben auch die Entscheidungsgrundlage des Teams dann auch auf der Ebene eben bewusst gemacht werden kann und dass die Führungsperson das Führungspersonal letztendlich lediglich unterstützt und leitet im Sinne von ja viel Delegation und das dann natürlich auch regelmäßig abfragt. Aber dass letztendlich das Team selber die Verantwortung hat" (Interview 1)

⁵ „Ich liebe es, die Stärke meiner Mitarbeiter zu erkennen und und entsprechend ihren Stärken und Interessen möglichst die Arbeit zu verteilen. Ich bin der Meinung, dass jeder Mitarbeiter gerne erfolgreich sein will und als Führungskraft muss man ihm es ermöglichen, erfolgreich zu sein. Ja, ich muss sie überzeugen, von dem das, was Sie tun, dass das wichtig ist und richtig ist und wenn mir das gelingt, dann salopp gesagt, dann laufen sie von selbst und ich muss nur ein bisschen in der Richtung hin und wieder korrigieren.“ (Interview 11)

⁶ „Jeder meiner Mitarbeiter ist in in in gewissen Punkten einfach Experte und der kann das besser als ich und genauso sollte man grundsätzlich mit seinen Mitarbeitern umgehen ne aus meiner Sicht, weil das einfach ein diese diese diese diese Wertschätzung das das kriegen die Leute schon mit.“ (Interview 8)

⁷ „diesen Raum zu schaffen, den alle Mitarbeiter sicher empfinden“ (Interview 4)

act and interviewees frequently reference transparency, open dialogue, and eye-level interactions as key components of good leadership. Their leadership identity is enacted through ongoing engagement, emotional intelligence, and mutual respect. communication, which was emphasized across nearly all interviews and considered a relational tool by several leaders.

Interviewee 6 reflected:

"I believe in transparency and clear communication. (...) I think that one quality [of a good leader] is that you are predictable as a leader, so the employee has to know where he stands, whether the performance is right. (...) what he should achieve at all, yes. Clear communication, a certain resilience is also important, I think." (Interview 6)⁸

Several interviewees consider themselves facilitators, responsible for removing obstacles, fostering learning, and enabling others. Interviewee 2 described this [role as a leader] clearly as "More of a motivator and well, a colleague, maybe a colleague in the lead" (Interview 2)⁹.

Similarly, Interviewee 7 noted:

"Then it's my job to keep the road clear so that the team can run and everything that actually adds to it, whether that's removing certain obstacles, where you say OK, the employee doesn't know what to do, or whether that's promoting the employee in that respect (...)" (Interview 7)¹⁰

Communication in this context is not only about instruction, but about reinforcing psychological safety, supporting feedback, and cultivating mutual respect.

Leadership as an Integrative Balancing Act

Some participants show a hybrid identity that balances task orientation and people orientation, clarity and flexibility, structure and emotion. Leaders in this

⁸ „Ich glaub Transparenz und klare Kommunikation... ich glaub, dass eine Eigenschaft ist, dass man als Führungskraft berechenbar ist, also der Mitarbeiter muss wissen, woran er ist, ob seine Leistung passt. Ob hm, was, was man, von was man was, was er überhaupt erreichen soll, ja. Klare Kommunikation, eine gewisse Resilienz ist, glaub ich auch wichtig.“ (Interview 6)

⁹ „Eher Motivator und na, Kollege, vielleicht führender Kollege“ (Interview 2)

¹⁰ „Dann ist es mein Job, die Straße freizuhalten, dass das Team laufen kann und alles was, was dazu eigentlich hinzufügt ob das, ob das jetzt ist, dass man gewisse Hindernisse entfernt, wo man sagt OK, da weiß der der Arbeitnehmer nicht weiter, oder ob das ist, dass man fördert in Hinsicht.“ (Interview 7)

group recognize the need to balance competing demands and navigate leadership as a dynamic process.

Several leaders display a dual focus in leadership: setting high expectations and performance standards, and balancing them with empathy, fairness, and attentiveness to individual development. This reflects a commitment to both results and relationships, driven by accountability and human development. Mutual respect and constructive feedback are considered essential for (personal) growth and good performance.

Interviewee 3 exemplified this view:

“If I am a good leader, then I am able to motivate people to a maximum performance, to perform very well through my personality and, on the other hand, to create a harmonious team that is characterized by trust and appreciation” (Interview 3)¹¹

In line with this, interviewee 6 reflected:

„Leadership is shaping things, providing a framework, formulating a goal, taking responsibility. But also to a certain point, well, I am a representative of the company, so to speak, which means that the performance aspect is involved also, meaning that I have a mission and my goal is both to fulfill the mission for the company and to allow for employee leadership, so that everyone can develop, flourish, feel comfortable, and achieve a work-life-balance, i.e., to reconcile these two aspects”¹².

Leaders in this group often see themselves as bridges between expectations and relationships. Their leadership is grounded in ongoing learning and reflection, with motivation stemming from a desire to manage complexity, and lead authentically in dynamic environments.

¹¹ „wenn ich eine gute Führungskraft bin, dann bin ich in der Lage, durch meine Personality die Leute zum maximalen, (...) zu einer sehr guten Leistung einmal zu motivieren und auf der anderen Seite aber auch ein harmonisches Team zu kreieren, was geprägt ist durch Vertrauen und Wertschätzung“ (Interview 3)

¹² “Führung ist das Mitgestalten, einen Rahmen geben, ein Ziel formulieren, Verantwortung übernehmen. Ja, aber auch eine gewisse, also ich bin Vertreter des Unternehmens sozusagen, das heißt ich, da ist auch dieser Performance Gedanke drinnen, das heißt, ich habe einen Auftrag und mein Ziel ist, sowohl den Auftrag fürs Unternehmen zu erfüllen, als auch eine Mitarbeiterführung zuzulassen, so wo sich jeder entwickeln kann, entfalten kann, sich wohlfühlt, Life-Work Balance leben kann also diese 2 Themen miteinander zu vereinbaren.“ (Interview 6)

To sum up, this overview highlights both the common foundations and the nuanced, multi-dimensional expressions of leader(ship) identity across the 11 interviews. While many interviewees share core values such as clarity, empowerment, trust, and open communication, they often embody multiple orientations simultaneously. Hence, a leader might position themselves as a facilitator, while also emphasizing strategic direction and systemic alignment. However, in most cases, one orientation tends to be more strongly expressed or visible than others, shaping the dominant tone of a leader's leader(ship) identity. These identity orientations provide insights into how leadership is internally framed, socially enacted, and potentially developing among participants in the executive education context.

4.1.2 Key Identity Development Antecedents: Motivation and Beliefs about Leadership

The orientations described in 4.1.1 are not self-standing: they are anchored in deeper motivational drivers and participants' beliefs about leadership as a learnable process. These elements are deeply intertwined with how each individual constructs their identity, influencing their goals, behaviors, and relational stance. Therefore, two leader(ship) identity antecedents were analyzed across the 11 interviews to illuminate why individuals choose to lead and whether they understand leadership as a dynamic and learnable capability. These elements help explain openness to growth, reflection, and transformation. This finding aligns with leadership development research that emphasizes motivation to lead, and developmental self-beliefs as precursors to leadership development (Avolio & Hannah, 2020; Day & Harrison, 2007).

Participants expressed a range of motivations that support and shape their leader(ship) identity. These motivational anchors were often closely intertwined with how participants described leadership roles, behaviors, and values in practice. Across the interviews, three motivational patterns emerged:

- **People-Development motivation** where leaders found fulfilment in enabling others' growth, fostering autonomy, and building psychological safety
- **System-Shaping motivation** where leaders describe their motivation as rooted in structuring organizations, creating clarity, and aligning efforts to achieve broader strategic outcomes
- **Self-growth motivation** where participants value leadership as a way to learn continuously and find personal meaning through reflection and experience.

Several leaders expressed satisfaction through creating impact and collective performance, highlighting the team as a source of motivation.

Interviewee 4 described the scaling effect of good leadership:

"At some point it was motivating to say, actually, if I do it right and if I do my leadership well or do it well, then it has a scaling effect, because if I do it well and suddenly 3 people can do it instead of just one, (...) then I really get a lot more work done, then it works much better overall and the impact of what I do is of course completely different." (Interview 4)¹³

Several leaders wanted to take decisions themselves rather than being told what to do. Interviewee 11 describes it in the following:

"Yes, it's quite simple: either you shape things yourself or you're assigned to do something, and I've always preferred to be able to shape things myself, take responsibility and set things up the way I think is best for the company, rather than doing tasks that I can only partially identify with or not at all, because I always try to understand the big picture. And then when tasks come up as an employee where you say, actually this should be done more substantially or differently, then at some point I decided for myself no, I want to take the reins myself so that the right things are done." (Interview 11)¹⁴

¹³ „irgendwann war das dann schon motivierend, auch zu sagen, eigentlich, wenn ich das richtig mache und wenn ich da jetzt meine Führung gut tu oder gut mache, dann hat das ja einen Skalierungseffekt, weil, wenn ich das gut vorgebe und das können plötzlich dann 3 statt nur einer, (...) dann kriege ich ja wirklich viel mehr Arbeit weiter, dann funktioniert das ja in Summe viel besser und der Impact von dem was ich tue ist natürlich ein ganz anderer.“ (Interview 4)

¹⁴ „Ja, es ist ganz einfach entweder gestaltet man selbst, oder man wird zu irgendwelchen Tätigkeiten eingeteilt und mir war immer lieber ich kann selbst gestalten, Verantwortung übernehmen und die Dinge so richten, wie ich es für optimal fürs Unternehmen halte und nicht irgendwelche Aufgaben ausführen, mit denen ich mich nur teilweise oder gar nicht identifizieren kann, weil ich eigentlich immer das große Gesamte Versuche zu verstehen. Und wenn dann Aufgaben kommen als Mitarbeiter, wo man sagt, eigentlich gehört das so was substanzieller oder anders gemacht, dann habe ich irgendwann für mich entschieden nein, ich will ich, will selbst das Ruder in die Hand nehmen, damit die richtigen Dinge getan werden.“ (Interview 11)

In parallel to motivation, participants' beliefs about the nature of leadership, whether it is fixed or developable shapes their openness to identity and leadership development. Across interviews, most participants shared the view that leadership is not innate but can be learned and developed through practice, reflection, and feedback. This belief reflects a developmental mindset. Even interviewees who do not explicitly articulate leadership development beliefs mention leadership behaviors in ways that suggest they see leadership as dynamic and evolving, for example, by fostering learning cultures or supporting other's development. Overall, the data indicates that beliefs about leadership development are integral to the participant's leader(ship) identity and often aligned with their motivation to lead.

Interviewee 4 highlighted how leadership development is a deliberate goal:

"But on the other hand, it also ensures that we always make sure when recruiting new staff that people have a certain potential so that we can make them team leaders later on." (Interview 4)¹⁵

This belief in leadership as dynamic and developable underpins not only identity construction, but also participants' openness to engage in leadership development. As such, it may serve as an antecedent to identity refinement and development engagement, supporting research that links learning orientation with identity transformation.

Taken together, motivation to lead and beliefs about leadership development help explain participants' readiness for identity work: they served both the inner drive to lead and the mental framework that leadership could be learned, practiced, and refined over time. They also serve as gateways for potential identity refinement, clarifying why some leaders embraced delegation and relational depth while others emphasized systemic clarity and structural coherence.

¹⁵ aber auf der anderen Seite stellt es auch sicher, dass wir in der Rekrutierung immer darauf achten, dass die Leute auch ein gewisses Potenzial mitbringen, damit wir eben später dann die zu einem Teamleiter machen können." (Interview 4)

4.1.3 Leader(ship) Identity: Theoretical Mapping

The previous section highlighted how participants articulated their leadership meaning, motivational drivers and guiding beliefs. To consolidate these insights, Table 5 provides a synthesis of each interviewee's identity core, summarizing leadership meaning, motivation to lead, values and principles, and beliefs about leadership development. This overview illustrates the multifaceted ways in which participants frame their leader(ship) identity.

Inter view	Leadership Meaning	Leadership Orientation	Motivation to Lead	Values and Principles	Leadership Development Beliefs	Identity Core Summary
11	Leadership is seen as achieving goals together. It is not rooted in hierarchy, but in joint action and support.	Relational Empowerment	Fulfillment in team growth and responsibility	Punctuality, Reliability, Trust	Growth-oriented mindset shaped by experience and reflection	Empowering facilitator focused on autonomy and growth
12	The leader is a "fixed point" who provides direction, motivation, and clarity. Leadership is about making the direction visible.	Purposeful Alignment	Enabling performance and shared success	Transparency, Goal orientation	Leadership can be learned	Anchor between system and people; structure and adaptation
13	Leadership is the ability to motivate others to perform at their best while simultaneously creating a harmonious, trusting team environment.	Integrative Balancing Act	Team growth and interpersonal impact	Mutual respect, Loyalty, Honesty	Continuous learning orientation	Authentic motivator balancing empathy and results
14	Leadership is a tool for achieving success and coherence. It ensures goal alignment and creates shared vision.	Purposeful Alignment (with Integrative Balancing Elements)	Responsibility for system and people	Openness, Psychological safety, Reliability	Leadership skills can be grown with support	Strategic orchestrator with structural clarity and empathy
15	Leadership aligns motivated individuals toward goals, providing direction, cohesion, and care.	Integrative Balancing Act	Creating meaning and motivation in work	Diversity, Discipline, Reliability	Development recognized through talent and potential	Meaning-maker combining performance, clarity, care
16	Leadership means creating structure, aligning strategy with team actions, and owning responsibility while empowering individuals.	Relational Empowerment	Shaping environments and learning from others	Loyalty, Respect, Non-judgment	Implicit belief in learning by doing and supporting others	Passionate people developer and connector
17	Leadership is seen as a dual responsibility: fulfilling the company mission while creating spaces for personal growth and team well-being. The leader translates vision into actionable goals and a supportive framework.	Integrative Balancing Act	Pragmatic leadership with clear expectations	Loyalty, Team respect, Honesty	Not explicitly discussed, but oriented toward creating learning environments	Stabilizing communicator of clarity and reliability
18	Leadership is a dual mandate: advancing organizational goals and	Relational Empowerment	Shaping systems with	Fairness, Openness, Loyalty	Leadership shaped through formative	Intuitive facilitator, relational and empowering

	ensuring people can unfold in a balanced, life-compatible environment. The leader is a translator of corporate objectives into human reality.		authenticity and trust		support and experience	
19	Leadership means taking responsibility, providing orientation, and balancing task-fulfillment with individual development. It requires foresight, clarity, and contextual awareness.	Purposeful Alignment	Driving performance and growth	Fairness, Performance orientation	Leadership is nurtured through feedback and reflection	Strategic realist focused on clarity and performance
110	Leadership means creating a structured environment, aligning individual responsibilities clearly with organizational objectives, and ensuring autonomy combined with accountability.	Purposeful Alignment	Enabling success through clarity and trust	Responsibility, Trust, Fairness	Structured development via roles and feedback	Systematic enabler of structure and autonomy
111	Leadership involves enabling individual and collective growth through clear communication, psychological safety, and personal authenticity. It's about empowering others to act autonomously within clear frameworks.	Relational Empowerment	Intrinsic motivation through learning and enabling others	Trust, Psychological safety, Fairness	Strong belief in reflection, dialogue, and authentic growth	Reflective coach fostering growth and openness

Table 5: Overview of Leadership Meaning and Leader(ship) Identity (own illustration)

Building on this synthesis, Table 6 positions participants' self-descriptions within established theoretical frameworks of leader(ship) identity development. This mapping allows the empirical accounts to be systematically compared with scholarly models as described in chapter 2.2. The purpose of this mapping is to highlight where the participants' identities converge with theoretical expectations and thereby provides a bridge to the broader theoretical discourse on leader(ship) identity development.

Interview	Level of Identity (Hammond; Hall & Day)	Komives	Strength (Hammond)	Meaning (Hammond)
I1	Collective	Stage 5/6	Strong	Shared Leadership
I2	Relational	Stage 4	Moderate	Interpersonal Influence

I3	Relational	Stage 4	Strong	Interpersonal Influence
I4	Collective	Stage 5/6	Strong	Shared Leadership
I5	Collective	Stage 5/6	Strong	Shared Leadership
I6	Relational	Stage 4	Strong	Shared Leadership
I7	Relational	Stage 4	Moderate	Interpersonal Influence
I8	Collective	Stage 5/6	Strong	Shared Leadership
I9	Relational	Stage 4	Moderate	Interpersonal Influence
I10	Collective	Stage 5/6	Strong	Interpersonal Influence
I11	Collective	Stage 5/6	Strong	Shared Leadership

Table 6: Theoretical Frameworks and Interviewee's Leader(ship) Identity (own illustration)

Continuum of leader(ship) identity levels

Drawing on scholars (Day & Harrison, 2007; Lord & Hall, 2005) leader(ship) identity can be assessed along a continuum from individual to relational to collective. Most participants in this study demonstrate a rather strong or strong leader(ship) identity on both the **relational, and collective level of identity** – which are both considered indicators of a more advanced and internalized leader(ship) identity. Their self-descriptions emphasize trust, communication, and systemic responsibility, consistent with relational and collective orientations. What is noteworthy here is that no clear individual-level / novice profile were observed, even among participants with fewer years of leadership experience. This suggests that MBA participants typically enter programs with

an already relatively consolidated leader(ship) identity, which is then refined further through the program.

Komives' stage model

According to Komives' et al. (2005), leadership progresses through six stages, from awareness to full integration. The majority of participants described leadership as a shared, dynamic process of enabling others, indicating highly developed leadership identities, situating them at **stage 4** (leadership differentiated), **Stage 5** (generativity, focusing on developing others, shared responsibility, or leadership as a process) with some indications of **Stage 6** (integration/synthesis). This mapping confirms that participants operate from relatively mature identity positions. However, in contrast to Komives's assumption of stepwise transitions, the narratives in this study suggest a process of sharpening and integration. Participants consistently framed the program as a way to gain clarity and refine convictions, rather than as a turning point that marked a stage change.

Hammond's dimensions

Hammond et al., (2017) describe leader identity along four dimensions: strength, integration, level of orientation, and meaning, the mapping in this study focuses on strength and meaning. Most participants exhibit strong leader identities, with high salience of "being a leader" in their self-concept. None described leadership primarily in terms of *dominance* (i.e., taking charge of a situation), instead their accounts emphasized *interpersonal influence* (i.e., influencing others to achieve goals, but including dominance), or *collaborative leadership* (i.e., group members collaborating, but also including interpersonal influence and dominance). This suggests an advanced identity construction consistent with Hammond's developmental spectrum.

Güttel's Typology

Applying Güttel's typology of leadership orientations (Güttel, 2023), participants were spread across the continuum from **expert** to **manager** to

leader. Some participants continue to operate partially in an expert mode (emphasizing technical detail and operational structure), others displayed managerial traits (empowering employees, delegating responsibility and applying a strategic approach in their leadership practice), while several expressed a leader orientation (vision, inspiration, and systemic impact). This spread highlights that while leader(ship) identity is internalized, the translation into practice varies considerably, depending on role context and personal orientation. A few participants seemed to be in transition from managerial to leader orientation, reflecting ongoing identity work.

Across frameworks, the findings suggest that participants do not merely enact leadership behavior but have an internalized leader(ship) identity, which forms a strong basis for continued personal development. Across models – including level of identity, identity stage and meaning/strength) – most participants demonstrate mature leader(ship) identities characterized by relational or collective orientation, a strong sense of responsibility, and an understanding of leadership as collaborative and developmental.

4.2 Changes in Leader(ship) Identity and Practice

4.2.1 Leadership Ideals and Role Models

A central mechanism in identity development is the contrasts between one's current self and ideal or possible selves – future oriented images of who one might become, or fears to become (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In the context of leader(ship) identity these imagined selves serve as powerful motivational drivers and can initiate processes of identity construction and refinement.

To capture such possible or desired selves, participants were asked about role models and their understanding of good and bad leadership. These narratives offer insight into aspirational leader(ship) identities and the values participants seek to embody or avoid.

The overall analysis of the interviews suggests that good leadership is not viewed as monolithic. Across interviews, two overarching dimensions

consistently emerged as core to the participants' conceptions of good leadership:

- **Clarity and direction**, including strategic vision, consistent behavior, and structural reliability
- **Empowerment and emotional intelligence**, including psychological safety, authentic communication, and personal growth orientation.

Interviewees frequently rejected micromanagement and describe ideal leaders as those who provide space for autonomy, delegate responsibility, and avoid excessive control. Empowerment was closely linked to delegation, confidence-building, and non-controlling support. Most ideal leaders were described as coaches or facilitators of growth, with critical leader attributes including emotional intelligence, authenticity and communication skills.

The interviews also reveal that participants strive to act according to their definition of good leadership, while simultaneously avoiding behaviors associated with their negative role models. These ideals function less as radical alternatives and more as directional guides for refinement, encouraging leaders to strengthen selected aspects of their current practice.

The table below summarizes the participants' leadership ideals, role model references, and the resulting conceptualization of the "ideal leader".

Interview	Good Leadership / Bad Leadership	Role Models	Summary of the Ideal Leader
I1	Criticizes frequent controlling as poor leadership; values autonomy and letting others "own" their responsibilities.	Admires leaders who offered space and autonomy; rejects micromanagement — these contrasts have shaped core values.	A leader who empowers others with autonomy, sets clear expectations, and avoids micromanagement.
I2	Values consistency, transparency, and clarity; criticizes erratic or reactive leadership behavior. Refers positively to a former CEO as a model of strong, authentic, and directive leadership in challenging contexts	Mentions a former CEO as a model of authentic, respectful, and motivating leadership.	A leader who is consistent, transparent, authentic, and can lead through challenges.
I3	Authentic motivator navigating emotional connection and performance orientation	Drawn to empathetic, emotionally intelligent individuals who communicate openly.	An emotionally intelligent leader who connects with others, adapts situationally, and values fairness.
I4	Good leaders communicate goals clearly, support employee development, and act as coaches.	Values leaders who lead by example and support others; believes in participative decision-making.	A supportive leader who creates safety, communicates clearly, and develops team potential.

15	Good leadership includes clarity, support, and development. Bad leadership lacks vision or engagement.	Values support, clarity, and participative decision-making in leadership role models.	A leader who enables through support and vision, with high expectations and respectful behavior.
16	Intuitive developer fostering autonomy and team growth.	Values leaders who intuitively support development and foster confidence in others without controlling them.	A leader who communicates clearly, empowers others, and maintains psychological safety.
17	Good leadership requires transparent, predictable communication and emotional resilience. Employees should always know how their performance is viewed by their leader.	Describes a transformational leader who empowered them with trust and intuitive support – a key inspiration for their own leadership confidence and development focus.	A calm and transparent leader who gives clear signals and creates stability through trust.
18	Good leadership requires transparency, resilience, and predictability. The leader should act as a reliable reference point and be emotionally stable and communicative.	Mentions a transformative role model who enabled confidence and development without micromanagement. This role model introduced the idea that leadership can be intuitive, trusting, and supportive.	A reliable leader who communicates honestly, supports growth, and balances emotion with structure.
19	Good leadership is clear, direct, consistent, and authentic. Bad leadership is vague, inauthentic, or emotionally inconsistent. Leaders should not “try to be liked,” but aim to be trusted.	Values role models who are consistent, calm, emotionally mature, and results-driven. Avoids overly emotional or controlling leadership figures.	A fair and consistent leader who builds trust through clarity and disciplined performance.
110	Good leadership is transparent, consistent, fair, and expectation-driven. Leaders must avoid unpredictability, emotional inconsistency, or micromanagement.	Admires consistent, clear, and calm leaders who exemplify maturity and stability. Rejects emotionally volatile or overly hierarchical leadership role models.	A structured and fair leader who communicates clearly and avoids emotional inconsistency.
11	Good leadership is characterized by transparent, authentic, and reflective communication. Poor leadership fails to establish trust, openness, or psychological safety.	Inspired by authentic, reflective, emotionally intelligent leaders who foster trust, safety, and openness. Rejects authoritarian or emotionally distant leadership styles.	A relational leader who fosters trust, learning, and emotional awareness through openness.

Table 7: Overview of leadership ideals and role models (own illustration)

While most participants already demonstrate relatively mature and well-developed leader(ship) identities, their descriptions of ideal leaders reveal aspirations for further refinement rather than fundamental change. In many cases, the envisioned ideal aligns closely with their current self-concept but emphasizes selected identity dimensions more strongly – such as greater consistency in empowerment, enhanced strategic clarity, or deeper relational presence. The ideal leader thus functions less as an alternative model but more as a direction-setting construct, guiding identity refinement.

The two ideal leadership dimensions described – clarity and direction on the one hand, and empowerment and emotional intelligence on the other – map

closely onto the three leader(ship) identity orientations identified earlier in chapter 4.1.1. Participants who emphasized systemic thinking, strategic focus, and structural clarity align with the Purposeful Alignment orientation. Those who described emotionally intelligent, empowering leadership ideals reflect the Relational Empowerment orientation. The Integrative Balancing Act orientation reflects the attempt to combine both poles.

This convergence between the ideal self and current identity orientation suggests orientation toward refinement and integration rather than wholesale transformation, within the limits of self-report.

4.2.2 Changes in Leader(ship) Identity and Practice

The following chapter analyzes how participants describe changes in their leader(ship) identity and leadership practice following the leadership development program. As discussed earlier, leader(ship) identity development involves the internalization of a leader(ship) self-concept – the extent to which individuals see themselves as leaders and integrate leadership meaningfully into their personal and professional identity (Day & Harrison, 2007). While all participants were in formal leadership roles at the time of the program, suggesting a baseline level of identity salience, the interviews offer insight into how identity and associated practice continue to evolve.

To assess these changes, all interviews were analyzed along a spectrum of identity development, ranging from unchanged to transformed. The category *unchanged* indicates a stable self-concept, with no new insights or notable behavioral shifts; *confirmed* refers to the program validating and strengthening the existing identity, the participant gaining reassurance, increased confidence or deeper understanding of leadership; *refined* leader(ship) identity indicates a nuanced development or increased clarity about their leader(ship) identity with subtle shifts in self-concept, values, or role clarity and improved alignment with leadership principles, expanded perspectives, or heightened self-awareness. The most significant change would be a *transformed* leader(ship) identity, referring to a radical redefinition of the leader's self-perception as a leader or major paradigm shifts.

Assignations were made based on participant's explicit self-descriptions and their described behavioral examples in the transcripts. For instance, cases coded as confirmed included statements affirming pre-existing convictions combined with increased confidence, whereas refined identities were evidenced by nuanced adjustments in role understanding or adaptation of leadership practices. Transformed would have required a radical redefinition of leader(ship) self-concept, but no such cases were observed.

Most participants reported **refined** identities, characterized by a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their leadership role and incremental behavioral adjustments. A smaller number reported **confirmation** of their existing identity. None described a complete transformation – an absence that itself is noteworthy, given that it highlights the consolidating rather than disruptive effect of executive education at this career stage.

As Interviewee 2 explained: "Well, not fundamentally, but it [the leadership program] has sharpened my view on leadership (Interview 2)".¹⁶

The reported changes can be grouped into four thematic clusters: (1) Role Clarification and Strategic Focus, (2), Relational Awareness and Communication Adaptation, (3) Empowerment and Delegation, (4) Self-Reflection and Identity Consolidation.

Role Clarification and Strategic Focus

Participants described a clearer distinction between operational and strategic responsibilities. Several emphasized a growing awareness for the systemic and relational dimensions of leadership and a broadening view from a task-focused to an organization-wide focus. This represents a deepened, more complex view of a leader's influence and responsibility within organizations, reflecting a broader conceptual refinement of the leader(ship) identity.

¹⁶ „Also jetzt nicht grundlegend, aber es hat das Bild geschärft (Interview 2)“

"From my perspective, leadership doesn't just extend to my own area of employees, yes, that is pre-defined due to the organizational structure, but can also go further, can also go outside the company if I influence other people in some way. And I think the idea has changed somewhat in that the reach of my leadership is theoretically much wider than I originally thought." (Interview 5)¹⁷

Interviewee 10 reflected on the need to step back from hands-on project work: "Leadership can't work if I'm involved in projects 90% [of my time] so I want to pull myself out more and more [from operational tasks]. (...)" (Interview 10).¹⁸

This cluster reflects a clearer distinction between strategic leadership and operational tasks, with increased emphasis on alignment, delegation, and leadership as systemic impact.

Relational Awareness and Communication Adaptation

Many participants reported becoming more attuned to individual differences and the emotional dynamics of leadership. They described adapting communication styles and leadership to better engage team members and build stronger interpersonal relationships.

Interviewee 2 described their learning as follows: "This, this recognition of what the employee needs and how to communicate with these specific employees" (Interview 2)¹⁹.

Interviewee 7 reflected:

¹⁷ „Führung reicht ja auch aus meiner Perspektive jetzt nicht nur in diesen eigenen Mitarbeiterinnen Bereich, ja, also wird der quasi vordekliniert ist aufgrund der Aufbauorganisation, sondern kann auch weitergehen, kann auch außerhalb des Unternehmens gehen, wenn ich andere Leute damit beeinflusse, in irgendeiner Art und Weise. Und ich glaub, die Vorstellung hat sich dann insofern etwas verändert, dass eben die Reichweite theoretisch wesentlich weiter ist, dass ich ursprünglich mir gedacht habe.“ (Interview 5)

¹⁸ „(...), dass Führung eben nicht funktionieren kann, wenn ich zu 90% in den Projekten stecke... also ich möchte mich mehr und mehr rausziehen“ (Interview 10).

¹⁹ „Dieses, dieses Erkennen von was braucht der der Mitarbeiter und wie kommuniziere ich mit diesen spezifischen Mitarbeitern“ (Interview 2)

"The other thing I still do today, whether it's with customers or in a team, is that I always look at who is opposite me, and that was also the classification, OK is he blue, red, green or yellow? And then actually change immediately, ok, how do I deal with them? But very important: how do I communicate information so that it reaches the other person, all the other people? And that helped me an incredible amount" (Interview 7)²⁰

This shift was also reflected in a broader relational orientation and a stronger focus on the social aspect of leadership:

"Simply think about this social mindset a little more and give it a little more weight. (...) yes, so it's certainly much more on this individual leadership of employees, I certainly invest a lot more time now, because I previously neglected it." (Interview 8)²¹

Participants emphasized the importance of purpose-driven communication, using clarity and meaning to motivate others: "and that's what I try to bring into every type of communication and every task, to communicate clearly, why are we doing this?" (Interview 1)²².

Empowerment and Delegation

Numerous participants described a deliberate effort to step back and empower their teams – either by giving up control or by delegating decision-making: "I left more room for other [peoples'] ideas" (Interview 11)²³.

These adjustments demonstrate a growing commitment to trust-based leadership, with an emphasis on autonomy, shared ownership, and team growth.

"I gave the team more responsibility and accordingly withdrew further from various things, including technical matters, and in this respect, it has changed so that

²⁰ "das andere und das mache ich auch heute noch egal ob das mit Kunden ist oder im Team, dass ich immer schaue, wer ist da gegenüber, und das war auch so diese Klassifizierung, OK ist der blau rot, grün oder gelb? Und dann eigentlich sofort umstelle, ok, wie gehe ich mit dem um. Aber ganz wichtig: wie kommuniziere ich Informationen, dass es bei der anderen Person, allen anderen Personen ankommt? Und das hat mir wahnsinnig viel geholfen" (Interview 7)

²¹ "diesen den sozialen Mindset einfach ein bisschen mehr mitdenken und ein bisschen mehr gewichten. (...) ja also es ist sicher stark mehr auf diesen auf dieser Einzelführung von Mitarbeitern, investiere ich jetzt sicher viel mehr Zeit, weil es zu kurz gekommen ist vorher." (Interview 8)

²² "und das versuche ich jetzt bei jeglichen Kommunikationsarten und bei jeglichen Aufgaben halt ja mit reinzubringen klar zu kommunizieren, warum machen wir das?" (Interview 1)

²³ „Ich habe mehr Raum gelassen für andere Ideen“ (Interview 11)

management actually takes up more time than operations and I think that should actually be the case. The strategic side could be more" (Interview 1)²⁴

Self-Reflection and Intentional Identity Integration

Across interviews, participants articulated an increased level of self-reflection, and intentional leadership behavior. For some, the program raised the awareness of leadership as a long-term development journey:

"This awareness-raising, I think that's what did it the most. The module raised awareness and also the awareness that it has to be sustainable and not just one-off peaks, like, 'oh, for a week now, I will focus on leadership'. (Interview 10)²⁵

Others described becoming more grounded in their convictions and more deliberate in navigating social or organizational pressure.

Some participants emphasized the importance of pausing and reflecting before acting, signaling a more mindful, grounded leadership approach. Interviewee 4 reflects:

"(...) I also try to pass this on to my employees, that they take this short step back beforehand. Take a break before you rush off, think about what possibilities there actually are (...)" (Interview 4)²⁶.

Several participants reported increased confidence and self-efficacy in their leadership behavior:

"I think I've become more self-confident, definitely. That has certainly changed. The relationship, that is, you understand or I understand more about decisions, strategic

²⁴ „Eben dem Team mehr Verantwortung übergeben und dementsprechend mich aus verschiedenen Sachen auch aus technischen Sachen mich dann weiter zurückziehen und dahingehend hat sich das geändert, dass das Management eigentlich mehr in Anspruch nimmt als das Operative und das, denke ich sollte eigentlich auch so sein.

Das Strategische könnte mehr sein“ (Interview 1)

²⁵ „dieses Bewusstmachen, das ist glaub ich das, was es am meisten gemacht hat. Das Modul hat das Bewusstsein geschärft und auch das Bewusstsein, dass es nachhaltig sein muss und nicht nur einmalige, so Spitzen, was sagt man lebt jetzt mal ,ne Woche ,nen Fokus auf Leadership“. (Interview 10)

²⁶ „Genau also ich versuch das auch meinen Mitarbeiter mitzugeben, dass sie diesen kurzen Schritt davor machen. Einmal Pause machen, bevor wir losstürmen, überlegen, was gibt es eigentlich alles für Möglichkeiten (...)" (Interview 4)

decisions, can understand them, but can also question them and I think I've become more self-confident overall in my behavior towards my supervisor" (Interview 1)²⁷

This reinforces the broader pattern of identity maturation, especially as leaders transition from compliance or insecurity to self-directed leadership behavior.

A summary of the identity development types, associated role shifts, and reported changes in practice can be found in table 8 below.

Type of Identity Development	Role Shift / Role Clarity	Changes in Leader(ship) Identity and Leadership Practice
Refined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased focus on strategic task over operational tasks • More nuanced understanding of leadership • Increased focus on team orchestration rather than operational detail • Increased focus on leadership role • Broader understanding of leadership and leadership levels • Better understanding of leadership role • More theoretical clarity about leadership, confirmation about intuitive leadership behavior from the past 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase delegation and empowerment of team members • Active listening • Purpose-driven communication • Adapt communication to personality types • Motivational leadership through dialogue and relational attention • "First listen, then talk" • Encourage employees to take time to think before acting • Empowering team members and increasing autonomy • Focus on delegation • Increased self-awareness • Increased focus on social dimension of leadership • Increased self-efficacy • Consider situations from different perspectives • Increased reflection and self-reflection • Importance of Psychological Safety • Stay true to own convictions, even if they are against group consensus • Increase autonomy for team members
Confirmed	No change in understanding of leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased self-reflection • No changes in leader(ship) behavior

Table 8: Overview of leader(ship) identity development (own illustration)

Leadership Tenure and Identity Development

No clear correlation emerged between years of leadership experience and the degree of identity changes, where more years of **leadership experience** always equals greater or less identity change. Both highly experienced leaders

²⁷ „ich denke schon, ich bin selbstbewusster geworden, auf jeden Fall. Das hat sich mit Sicherheit geändert. Das Verhältnis, das heißt man versteht oder ich verstehe vielmehr von auch Entscheidungen, strategischen Entscheidungen, kann das nachvollziehen, kann das aber auch hinterfragen und ich glaube, da habe ich bin, bin ich insgesamt selbstbewusster geworden in meinem Auftreten gegenüber meinem Vorgesetzten“ (Interview 1)

(e.g., I6 with 25 years) and less experienced leaders (e.g., I2 with 14 years or I1 with 6 years) reported refinements. However, leaders with a longer tenure generally describe more subtle, conceptual refinements, whereas less experienced leaders report more visible behavioral adjustments such as delegation initiation or adaptation of meeting structures. This is in line with scholars who posit that more experienced leaders have a more complex leadership identity and already a solidified understanding of their leadership role, i.e., a strong alignment of the leadership role and their leader identity. (Kragt & Guenter, 2018).

In summary, the findings show that the program did not lead to radical identity transformations but rather facilitated refinement, clarification, and consolidation. Role model narratives highlight ideals of clarity, direction, empowerment, and emotional intelligence, which closely align with the orientations identified earlier and function as guiding benchmarks for identity work. Changes in practice are largely incremental, sharpening strategic focus, adapting communication, strengthening delegation, and deepening reflection. These refinements collectively reinforced a more grounded and intentional sense of leader(ship) identity. In this way, the program served as a space for sharpening convictions and integrating insights, leading to behavior shifts that align with participants' ideals of leadership in everyday leadership practice.

4.3 Impactful Program Elements and Learning Experiences

While the previous sections focused on how participants described their leader(ship) identity and perceived changed in practice, this section focuses on the contextual factors that participants themselves associated with these changes. During the interviews, the participants were invited to reflect on which elements of the leadership development program left the strongest impression or supported their learning process. This perspective aims at identifying program features and learning experiences that participants

themselves perceived as meaningful in shaping their engagement with leadership and their ongoing identity work. This accounts to the conditions that can foster reflection, confidence, and consolidation or refinement of leader(ship) identity in an executive education setting.

Across all eleven interviews, participants described a **multifaceted learning experience**, in which the integration of theoretical content, experiential methods, peer learning, and reflective opportunities created the space for new insights and development.

As Interviewee 9 summarized:

"Actually, having a relatively open exchange about what their experiences have been so far, coupled with a few content-related impulses, but then also a wide variety of games or methods. A wide variety of methodological concepts that have somehow loosened things up and then simply provided the space for reflection and exchange among ourselves. (Interview 9)²⁸

Based on the analysis, five clusters of impactful elements emerged: (1) Learning Environment and Program Design, (2) Theory as Reflective Stimulus, (3) Peer Interaction and Social Learning, (4) Experiential and Group Dynamic Learning, (5) Structured and Informal Reflection.

Learning Environment and Program Design

Participants highlighted the program's **offsite location**, the facilitators (teaching staff), and course pacing as impactful conditions for learning. The offsite environment was praised for creating a focused, immersive atmosphere fostering connection between the peers, conducive to open dialogue and trust-building. This setting enabled participants to step outside their daily routines and engage in dialogue with fewer constraints, resembling what scholars term a "holding environment" or "identity workspace" (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010; Zaar et al., 2023b), offering the space and context for participants to be

²⁸ „eigentlich einen relativ offenen Austausch darüber führen, was ihre bis dato Erfahrungen waren gepaart mit ein paar quasi inhaltlichen Impulsen aber dann eben auch verschiedensten Spielen oder Methoden. verschiedensten methodischen Konzepten, die halt irgendwie Auflockerung reingebracht haben und dann einfach an eigentlich den Raum für Reflexion und Austausch untereinander waren. (Interview 9)

exposed to new information about leadership and leader(ship) identity and to reflect about their identity.

Facilitators or lecturers were repeatedly described as motivating, knowledgeable, and supportive, encouraging discussion and linking experiences to conceptual frameworks: playing a key role in enabling learning and reflection:

“When you go out there, in a module like that, then the trainer in the module is a, I'll say a moderator, yes, a catalyst too, so a nucleus for discussions with everyone, yes, and then you suddenly see aspects from completely different areas.” (Interview 2)²⁹

Participants also valued the clear structure and pacing of the modules, which allowed for continuity and integration of content and learning across sessions. By shaping context and atmosphere, the program design created the conditions for identity reflection that would have been unlikely in a regular classroom or in everyday work settings.

Theory as Reflective Stimulus

Theoretical content and frameworks were consistently cited as powerful triggers for reflection. Participants valued the clarity provided by structural leadership models (e.g., self-leadership, team-leadership, and organizational leadership) and practical tools such as delegation maps and personality typologies. These inputs were not only perceived as knowledge but served as stimuli for participants to reflect on themselves and their leadership behavior.

“It was actually always the combination of the theoretical or almost academic approach with a practical implementation that helped a lot, for example from Professor Güttel, the frameworks, they were very structured, so after today, what is still visually somehow in front of my eyes, with the cards he worked with, where we just really built up the knowledge and now I have an understanding.” (Interview 7)³⁰

²⁹ „wenn man dann da rausgeht, in so n Modul, dann ist der Trainer in dem Modul ein, ich sag mal Moderator, ja ein ein auch Katalysator, also eine Keimzelle für Diskussionen mit allen ja und dann sieht man plötzlich Aspekte aus komplett anderen Bereichen.“ (Interview 2)

³⁰ „Es war eigentlich immer die Kombination vom theoretischen oder fast akademischen Ansatz mit einer praktischen Umsetzung, das sehr geholfen hat, zum Beispiel vom Herrn Professor Güttel, die Frameworks, die waren sehr strukturiert, also nach heute, was mir noch visuell so irgendwie vor dem Auge steht mit den Karten mit denen er gearbeitet hat, wo wir das einfach wirklich aufgebaut haben und das Verständnis da ist.“ (Interview 7)

The integration of theory with practical exercises supports meaningful application in the own professional context and “the literature was a bit of a bridge over the last 12 months or 14 months” (Interview 10)³¹.

For some, theory made tacit knowledge explicit:

“Well, for me it was a lot of aha experiences in the sense that I have already experienced this and now it is written on the pinboard in a such a clear way, where then, how should I put it? All the knowledge that I have acquired over the years, partly intuitively or, or experientially, is suddenly on a pinboard from Mr. Güttel with all the different aspects and then I thought, that was very impressive for me” (Interview 11)³²

Theoretical input served as instruction but also as a reflective scaffold, enabling participants to integrate their experience and leadership behavior into a clearer, more intentional leader(ship) identity.

Peer Interaction and Social Learning

Peer learning emerged as one of the most powerful mechanisms and was frequently highlighted as a major catalyst for learning. Participants emphasized the value of exchanging experiences and reflecting on the content through different peer learning methods (through group work and collegial coaching) provided both exchange of experience and transfer of knowledge. In this manner, the participants were exposed to other leadership views and meanings and described the exposure to this wide diversity in backgrounds, across industries, roles, and seniority as highly impactful. These new perspectives introduced contrasting or confirming viewpoints to the individual’s own experience or understanding of leadership related aspects, leading to the challenging one’s own assumptions and broadened perspectives.

“Everything that happened somewhere in the exchange with the other colleagues (...) and and where this was enabled, this exchange, was really very, very positive and you could take a lot of learnings with you, because the framework was, so to speak, the

³¹ „die Literatur war da schon auf so n bisschen ‚ne Brücke über die letzten 12 Monate oder 14 Monate“ (Interview 10)

³² „Na, es waren für mich sehr viele aha Erlebnisse im Sinne von das habe ich schon erlebt und jetzt steht es in einer in einer Klarheit an der Pinnwand, wo dann, wie soll ich das sagen? All das Wissen, was ich über die Jahre zum Teil intuitiv oder oder oder erfahrungsgemäß erworben habe, vom Herrn Güttel auf einmal auf einer Pinnwand draufsteht mit allen Aspekten und dann habe ich gesagt, das war für mich schon sehr beeindruckend“ (Interview 11)

topics were determined, a bit of context was given and then you work it out in pairs or in small groups." (Interview 6)³³

Interviewee 10 described his experience in the following:

"but I also talked a lot with my fellow students (...) afterwards and it actually did or fulfilled exactly what it should do in an MBA, so we were all very motivated, learned a lot, applied a lot, directly and exchanged a lot and also exactly at the level where you want to exchange ideas, so leaders from very different areas came together, who learned something about leadership and at the same time also contributed their daily experiences and learnings over the last few years, and of all the MBA courses, this was actually the best, regardless of the teaching staff, because it had exactly this MBA character, because it hit the target exactly" (Interview 10)³⁴

Informal peer exchanges during breaks are also cited as deepening trust and fostering mutual learning. Taken together, peer interaction provided both relational validation and identity contrast, enabling participants to adjust their leader(ship) identity through comparison and dialogue.

Experiential and Group Dynamic Learning

Experiential components such as outdoor exercises, and storytelling were often mentioned as memorable and impactful and helped with transferring theory into practice.

"What we experienced first-hand were the most formative moments, especially when paired with the theory, to see what actually happens and then trying it out again, perhaps in a more controlled setting. That was very memorable."³⁵

³³ „Alles, was irgendwo im Austausch so mit den anderen Kollegen (...) war und und und wo das zugelassen worden ist, dieser Austausch, war wirklich sehr, sehr positiv und man konnte sich sehr viel mitnehmen, weil der Rahmen war, die Themen wurden sozusagen vorgegeben, ein bisschen Kontext vorgegeben und dann erarbeitet man sich das zu zweit oder in kleinen Gruppen.“ (Interview 6)

³⁴ „aber ich mich da auch viel mit den mit den Kommilitonen (...) auch im Nachgang noch ausgetauscht und das eigentlich durchweg genau das gemacht hat oder erfüllt hat, was es erfüllen sollte in einem MBA, also wir sind alle sehr motiviert hin, haben vieles gelernt, vieles angewandt, direkt und sich viel ausgetauscht und auch eben genau auf der Ebene, wo man sich austauschen möchte, also aus ganz unterschiedlichen Bereichen sind Führungskräfte zusammengekommen, die etwas über Führung lernen und gleichzeitig aber auch ihre täglichen Erfahrungen, aber auch Learnings über die letzten Jahre mit eingebracht, eingebracht haben und von all den MBA Kursen war das, unabhängig vom vom Lehrpersonal, war das eigentlich der Beste, weil es genau diesen MBA Charakter hatte, weil es genau das Ziel getroffen hat“ (Interview 10)

³⁵ „Wo wir am Leib erlebt haben, das waren die prägendsten Momente, das vor allem gepaart, dann auch mit der Theorie, was geht dann eigentlich ab, und dann noch mal probieren in vielleicht einem kontrollierteren Setting? Das war sehr einprägsam.“ (Interview 4)

Group dynamic exercises allowed participants to observe team theories in action:

"If you think about team theory now, there are certain phases that a team goes through and that affects me very much in my day-to-day work as a project organization, how a team works, how it forms, so to speak, and then there are certain phases of storming, norming, performing and so on. And in this exercise, from an observer's perspective, we were able to see the theory incredibly well. I really saw this team theory happening in real life right in front of me. Which also means, conversely, that these theories are not just the figments of some professor's imagination or are not just wow, someone locked themselves in a little room and thought about how this could be but really have a very strong practical character. And you can take this knowledge into your everyday life." (Interview 5)³⁶

While many participants emphasized the learning effect these exercises had, others stress that these methods added variety or fun to the leadership modules but did lead to real new learnings or reflection. While peer diversity and theoretical input were consistently valued, views on outdoor exercises were mixed, and some participants experienced these more as variety than as meaningful for learning.

Several interviewees explicitly mention storytelling as a reflective and emotional learning experience, facilitated by the special atmosphere of sitting around a campfire together. This narrative exchange reinforced cognitive learning and built group cohesion and trust, making the leadership lessons more personally meaningful and memorable for these participants.

"I really liked the storytelling, for example. I found that very, very valuable. I also liked the experience of being together (...) in this tiny little wooden house where we told stories... very memorable, it showed how strong a story can actually be if it's told well." (Interview 4)³⁷

³⁶ „Wenn man jetzt an die Teamtheorie denkt, gibt es gibt es gewisse Phasen, die ein Team und das betrifft mich sehr stark in meiner alltäglichen Arbeit als Projektorganisation wie ein Team funktioniert ja, wie sich das formt quasi und dann gibt es gewisse Phasen storming, norming, performing und so weiter. Und in dieser Übung also nach Beobachterperspektive, haben wir die Theorie unfassbar gut sehen können. Hab wirklich diese diese diese diese Team Theorie quasi im echten Leben da vor mir gerade gesehen, wie sie passiert. Was was auch heißt im Umkehrschluss diese Theorien, die sind jetzt nicht nur Hirngespinnste von irgendwelchen Professoren oder sind auch nicht nur jetzt wow da hat sich jemand in ein Kämmerchen eingeschperrt und sich überlegt, wie das sein könnte, sondern das hat wirklich sehr starken Praxischarakter. Und diese Erkenntnis kann man gut in seinen Alltag mitnehmen.“ (Interview 5)

³⁷ „mir hat das Storytelling zum Beispiel sehr gut gefallen. Das fand ich sehr, sehr wertvoll. Auch die Erfahrung, dann gemeinsam (...) in diesem winzigen kleinen Holzhaus, wo wir Geschichten erzählt haben, sehr einprägsam, hat gezeigt, wie stark so eine Story eigentlich sein kann, wenn das gut erzählt ist, fand ich sehr schön ja.“ (Interview 4)

Structured and Informal Reflection

Structured reflection opportunities are reported central to the learning process and described by all participants. The program facilitated moments for both individual and group reflection – through guided sessions, peer conversations, and informal settings – prompting reconsideration of leadership assumptions or nuanced adaptations of leader(ship) identity. Self-reflection gave leaders the possibility to think about their own leadership practice:

“How do I also assess myself in the structure, i.e., self-management in general, but not (...) in such a way that you have heard it for the first time in this form, but rather that you have looked at it more deeply, reflected on it again, thought about it once more” (Interview 2)³⁸

This self-reflection was referred to on an individual level, but also as a common reflection with the group and other leaders:

“Actually, an introspection, then a joint introspection and reflection on one's own way of working, one's own collaboration models with colleagues, with other leaders and with all other institutions and roles.” (Interview 2)³⁹

These reflective spaces - combined with theoretical models - foster increased self-awareness and encourage participants to align their behaviors, as noted by interviewee 8:

“yes, so these mindsets, that was just really a lot, where you can think about how you actually do it yourself, how would you categorize yourself, where is your focus and does it perhaps make sense to somehow shift the focus a bit now.” (Interview 8)⁴⁰

³⁸ „Wie schätze ich auch mich selbst ein, in dem Gefüge, also Selbstführung im Allgemeinen, aber nicht (...) so, dass man das zum ersten Mal gehört hat in der Form, sondern eher, dass man es noch einmal tiefergelegt hat, noch einmal reflektiert hat, noch einmal sich überlegt“ (Interview 2)

³⁹ „ein in sich gehen eigentlich, dann ein Gemeinsames in sich gehen und reflektieren der eigenen Arbeitsweise, der eigenen Zusammenarbeitsmodelle mit mit Kollegen, mit Führungskräften und mit allen anderen Institutionen und Rollen.“ (Interview 2)

⁴⁰ „ja also diese Mindsets das war einfach wirklich viel, wo du schön drüber nachdenken kannst wie legst du es eigentlich selber an, wie würdest du dich da einordnen, wo ist da dein Fokus und macht es vielleicht Sinn, jetzt irgendwie den Fokus ein bisschen verschieben.“ (Interview 8)

Reflecting on current challenges in leadership practice in homework assignments is a value added for several applicants, as this represents an additional, structured opportunity to apply learnings from classroom to a personal and / or professional challenge and supports the transfer of theory into real-world leadership contexts.

Even seemingly small interventions, such as analyzing the movie “12 Angry Men” were described as powerful triggers for reflection on values and convictions. This recalls Avolio and Hannah who posit that “trigger moments” can positively shape leadership development and that they may occur when reading, observing people interacting with each other, watching a movie, or observing a leader in action (Avolio & Hannah, 2020).

Reflection acted as the integrative mechanism that tied together theoretical input, experiential practice, and peer exchange, ensuring insights translated into leader(ship) identity work.

The table below provides an overview of the key program elements and the participants’ learning experiences.

Cluster	Program Element	Learning Experiences and Identity Work Processes
Learning Environment and Program Design	Offsite Location & Psychological Safety	Immersive, distraction-free setting fostered openness and trust; enabled deeper reflection
	Facilitators	Described as motivating, and enabling peer dialogue, discussion and reflection
	Pacing and Structure	A clear structure across modules enabled integration of content and progressive learning
Theoretical Input and Conceptual Clarity	Structured Leadership Models	Helped make tacit knowledge explicit; supported clearer leadership understanding
	Tools and Frameworks (e.g., delegation maps, personality typologies)	Provided structure for self-analysis and application in practice
	Integration of Prior Experience within new input	Resulted in “aha moments” and clarified intuitive understanding of leadership
Experiential Learning	(Outdoor) Group Exercises	Safe testing ground for team dynamics; conflict handling, and applying theory; made theory tangible

	Simulation of Team Phases	Demonstrated real-life applicability of theory
	Storytelling (Campfire Format)	Created emotional learning moments; strengthened group cohesion and empathy
	Trigger Moments (e.g., “12 Angry Men” Movie)	Fostered value alignment and insight into authentic leadership under pressure
Peer Interaction and Social Learning	Heterogenous Cohort	Peer diversity enabled challenge and validation or questioning of leadership views and experiences
	Structured Peer Interaction	Facilitated dialogic reflection; expanded leadership perspectives
	Informal Exchange (breaks, evenings)	Built trust and extended learning through informal reflection
Reflection Practices	Guided Individual Reflection	Supported critical self-assessment of leadership (identity)
	Group Reflection Sessions	Created shared introspection moments and helped challenge assumptions
	Homework & Personal Case Work	Enabled application of content to real-life leadership challenges
	Mindset Self-Assessment	Helped reevaluate focus areas and identity alignment

Table 9: Overview of Impactful Program Elements and Learning Experiences (own illustration)

Participants consistently emphasized that no single element was responsible for learning; rather, impact emerged from the **synergy of environment, theory, peers, experience, and reflection**. The combination of offsite immersion, facilitator guidance, and structured program design created an environment conducive to open dialogue, critical self-reflection, and learning. Theoretical inputs and frameworks served not only as knowledge enhancers but as reflective stimuli that enabled participants to validate prior experience and develop new conceptual clarity. Peer interaction emerged as key trigger for identity work, offering a platform to test assumptions, broaden perspectives, and gain relational feedback in a trusted setting. Experiential methods such as outdoor exercises and storytelling allowed leadership concepts to be internalized on an emotional level. Structured reflection enabled participants to integrate insights into their own leader(ship) identity.

Overall, the TUW leadership modules were experienced as impactful because they combined **conceptual clarity, relational exchange, experiential practice, and reflective integration** in a way that enabled participants to critically engage with, consolidate, and refine their leader(ship) identity. Importantly, participants noted variation in which elements were most valuable to them, underscoring that identity development is not driven by a single mechanism but supported by a constellation of conditions that encourage reflection and growth.

As Interviewee 10 concluded:

“So, there's a lot of perspectives, but there's also a lot of information broadening your own horizons and yes, perhaps that was one of the biggest benefits of the whole MBA program as a final statement.” (Interview 10)⁴¹

To sum up, the findings address the research question by showing not only how participants perceive and refine their leader(ship) identity, but also which program features they identify as supportive in this process. The following chapter discussed these results in light of existing theories, highlighting both areas of convergence and aspects where this study offers new insights into executive education practice.

⁴¹ „Also sehr viel Perspektive gibt es, aber auch sehr viel (...) über (...) den eigenen Horizont erweiternden Informationen und ja, das vielleicht noch mal so als Abschlussstatement ist sicher dem alltäglich eines der größten Benefits von dem ganzen MBA Programm gewesen.“ (Interview 10)

5 Discussion and Limitations

The following chapter will interpret and discuss the findings from the interviews in more detail, linking them to existing literature. Also, the research question is answered by contrasting existing theory and empirical findings from the interviews. Subsequently, implications for theory and practice will be discussed, as well as limitations of this study and suggestions for future research.

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study explored how Executive MBA participants describe their leader(ship) identity after completing the TUW Academy's leadership modules, whether they report changes in their leader(ship) identity and which specific learning experiences and program elements they perceive as most impactful. The findings contribute new evidence that leader(ship) identity development among (experienced) leaders is a dynamic, **ongoing process of refinement**. This nuance is significant, because it adds to an ongoing debate in the literature. While some models conceptualize identity development as staged progression through increasingly complex levels (Komives et al, 2005; Lord & Hall, 2005), other scholars emphasize identity construction as recursive, socially embedded, and iterative. This study aligns more closely with the latter perspective by showing that for leaders with (substantial) leadership experience, identity development took the form of incremental refinement, where new insights are integrated into an already established self-concept.

The empirical analysis across the 11 interviews identified three dominant orientations through which participants articulated their leader(ship) identity: **Leadership as Purposeful Alignment, Leadership as Relational Empowerment, and Leadership as Integrative Balancing Act**. These orientations often co-exist within individuals and mirror dual demands participants face and recurring paradox in leadership practice: systemic rationality on one side (clarity, alignment, performance) and relational authenticity on the other (empowerment, trust, psychological safety). The

integrative orientation represents leader's efforts to reconcile these poles. This tension also illustrates the complex nature of leader(ship) identity in practice, reflecting calls within leadership scholarship to embrace complexity and ambiguity in leadership development (Day & Dragoni, 2015). While these dimensions can be experienced as competing demands, participants in this study often describe attempts to integrate them and seek to reconcile rationality and empowerment in practice.

The findings also demonstrate that leader(ship) identity work does not occur in isolation. At the **individual level**, participants' **motivation to lead** and their belief about **leadership as a learnable capacity** act as antecedents. These factors shape openness to reflection and identity work, consistent with research on leader motivation and learning beliefs as precursors of developmental engagement (Guillén et al., 2015; Vogel et al. 2021).

At the **contextual level**, participants highlighted specific program characteristics – Learning Environment and Program Design; Theory as Reflective Stimulus, Peer Interaction and Social Learning, Experiential and Group Dynamic Learning; Structured and Informal Reflection – as enabling conditions. This aligns with what scholars describe as *identity workspace* or *holding environment* (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010; Zaar, 2021).

Crucially, these program elements did not directly alter leader(ship) identity. Instead, participants engaged in a set of identity work processes – including reflection, dialogue, integration, experimentation and values work. Through these processes, leadership meaning was re-articulated and leadership practices adjusted.

The outcomes reported in the interviews can be described as leader(ship) identity refinements, including greater role clarity and strategic focus; increased relational awareness and adaptive communication; stronger orientation toward empowerment and delegation, and increased self-reflection and identity consolidation. Importantly, none of the participants experienced major hierarchical role changes during the period strengthens the interpretation that identity refinements reported in the interviews were primarily

associated with the program experience, rather than with external triggers such as new responsibilities or organizational transitions.

The processes through which **leader(ship) identity refinement** unfolds in the context of an Executive MBA program are depicted in the model below (see figure 11). Building on the conceptual foundations of Zaar (2021), the model illustrates how participants enter with (relatively) mature leader(ship) identities, shaped by prior experiences and underpinned by antecedents such as motivation to lead and openness to learning, encounter a holding environment (the leadership development program), engage in identity work (reflection, integration, dialogue), and leave with refined leader(ship) identities that manifest in leadership practice through role clarity, relational awareness, empowerment, and reflection. The model therefore focuses on a specific segment of the broader leadership identity development cycle: participants' engagement in the leadership development program and the subsequent refinement.

The leadership program provided the conditions for identity refinement by providing a holding environment. The analysis revealed **five clusters of impactful program elements** that did not directly alter leader(ship) identity but operated through **identity work processes**, such as deep reflection and self-analysis, dialogue and discussion, and the integration of conceptual input with prior experience. Through these processes, participants re-articulated leadership meaning and adjusted their leadership practices.

Importantly, refinement is positioned both inside and outside the holding environment, underscoring its dual nature: scaffolded by the program but extended into professional and personal contexts where new ways of leading are enacted and tested. Refinement does not conclude with the program itself but continues beyond the program as an ongoing trajectory of self-integration and practice refinement.

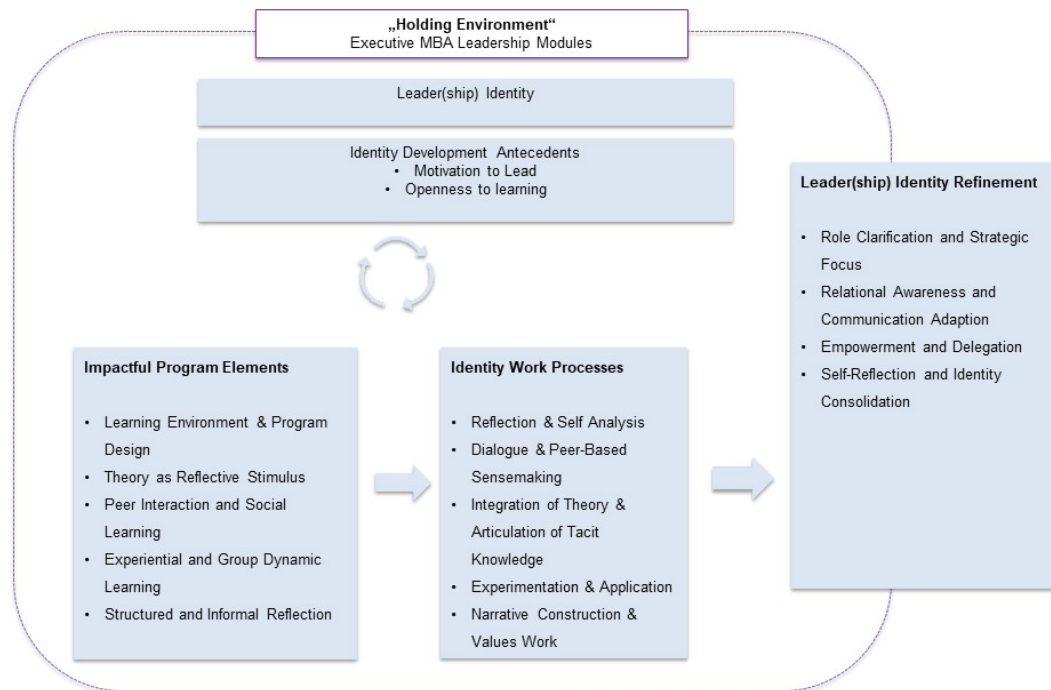


Figure 11: Leader(ship) Identity Refinement within Executive Education (own illustration, adapted from Zaar 2021, p.76)

Taken together, these findings suggest that executive education programs for experienced leaders serve less as space of identity construction and more as spaces of identity consolidation and refinement. They provide opportunities for reflection, recalibration, and integration. This refined understanding provides the foundation for both the theoretical implications and the practical implications which will be discussed in the following sections.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The empirical results contribute to the existing leader identity and leadership identity literature by confirming and complementing existing models of identity development in several ways.

First, the findings support the notion of leader(ship) identity as an **iterative process of meaning-making**, emerging from lived experience and social interaction (Komives et al., 2005, 2009). Participant's narratives describe a movement from (technical) expert toward managerial orientations and ultimately, more relational and systemic leader identities, which corresponds

closely to the trajectory outlined in Güttel et al.'s typology and stage model (Güttel, 2023). However, in contrast to stage-based models that emphasize distinct transitions, the findings of this study suggest a more **incremental process of refinement**, in which (experienced) leaders sharpen and integrate their existing identities through executive education rather than undergoing radical transformation. As one participant explained: "Well, not fundamentally, but it [the leadership development program] has sharpened my view on leadership (Interview 2)".⁴²

Second, the data reveal evidence of **incremental experimentation** with new behaviors within participants' existing identity frameworks. For example, one interviewee reflected: "So I want to pull myself out more and more" (Interview 10)⁴³, describing a shift from operational involvement toward a more strategic role. Another interviewee emphasized his experimentation with adapted communication strategies: "This, this recognition of what the employee needs and how to communicate with these specific employees" (Interview 2)⁴⁴. These findings resonate with Ibarra's concept of **provisional selves**. However, MBA participants did not disengage from their core identity anchors but rather engaged in small-scale trials that refined and enriched their existing identities, suggesting a moderated form of identity experimentation in executive education. This suggests a moderated form of identity experimentation in executive education, extending Ibarra's model to contexts where (experienced) leaders already possess well-established professional and leader(ship) identities.

Third, participants described the **integration of new inputs with prior tacit knowledge**, producing greater clarity in their leader(ship) identity. One participant explained:

⁴² „Also jetzt nicht grundlegend, aber es hat das Bild geschärft (Interview 2)“

⁴³ „also ich möchte mich mehr und mehr rausziehen“ (Interview 10)

⁴⁴ „Dieses, dieses Erkennen von was braucht der der Mitarbeiter und wie kommuniziere ich mit diesen spezifischen Mitarbeitern“ (Interview 2)

“It was actually always the combination of the theoretical or almost academic approach with a practical implementation that helped a lot (...) and now I have an understanding.” (Interview 7)⁴⁵.

Similarly, another interviewee reflected: “All the knowledge that I have acquired over the years, partly intuitively or, or experientially, is suddenly on a pinboard (...), that was very impressive for me” (Interview 11)⁴⁶. These accounts highlight integration as a distinct mechanism of identity work. These findings suggest that executive education can foster identity clarification through the re-organization of tacit knowledge when confronted with new conceptual frameworks. This adds nuance to the theoretical understanding of identity work by positioning integration and sensemaking as central processes in leader(ship) identity refinement. In this context, executive education can serve as a potential site of “knowledge crystallization”.

Forth, the findings underline **the role of peer learning and program design** in enabling identity development. The centrality of peer exchange aligns with prior research on social learning and experience as mechanism for leadership development (Day & Dragoni, 2015; Komives et al., 2009). This study adds to the literature by demonstrating how specific program design features – such as peer diversity, safe reflection spaces, and experiential learning triggers – operated as concrete enablers of identity refinement. Participants emphasized how reciprocal feedback, shared challenges, and heterogenous perspectives created dialogic spaces in which assumptions could be challenged. This goes beyond abstract notions of social learning by identifying design-level mechanisms that make identity work possible in practice. Furthermore, the interplay between cognitive, behavioral, and systemic program components provides empirical support for integrated program designs. Consistent with adult learning theory, effective executive education blends experience, reflection, and conceptualization; the findings illustrate how these dimensions

⁴⁵ „Es war eigentlich immer die Kombination vom theoretischen oder fast akademischen Ansatz mit einer praktischen Umsetzung (...), wo wir das einfach wirklich aufgebaut haben und das Verständnis da ist.“ (Interview 7)

⁴⁶ „All das Wissen, was ich über die Jahre zum Teil intuitiv oder oder oder erfahrungsgemäß erworben habe (...) auf einmal auf einer Pinnwand draufsteht (...) das war für mich schon sehr beeindruckend“ (Interview 11)

interacted in this program to enable behavioral experimentation and identity consolidation.

Taken together, these findings extend leader(ship) identity theory by showing that executive education facilitates both incremental experimentation in leadership behavior and integrative refinement of leader(ship) identity and that program design features play a decisive role in fostering identity work, thereby bridging leader(ship) identity work with adult learning and leader(ship) development. In this light, identity development in executive education can be understood as a dynamic process of identity refinement that reinforces, sharpens, and contextualizes leader's self-concepts rather than transforming them wholesale.

5.3 Practical Implications for Leadership Education

The findings hold practical implications for leadership educators and program designers aiming to promote authentic and effective leader(ship) identities. Participants consistently emphasized the synergy of program design elements as central to their learning experience and leader(ship) identity refinement. Several areas appear particularly relevant for sustaining and further enhancing the impact of the program.

First, Immersive **offsite settings and psychologically safe learning environments** were repeatedly seen as crucial for identity work. Offsite settings in executive education removed leaders from daily pressures, enabling focus, trust, and openness to reflection. Such environments foster the conditions for both identity experimentation in safe, reflective environment and integration. Second, participants described the role of **facilitators** as enabling: their ability to moderate discussion, link theory to practice, and enable dialogical exchange was highlighted as central to participants' learning. Faculty need not only subject expertise but facilitation skills that foster reflection and peer dialogue.

Third, the **integration of theory and tools with experiential learning** was valued for making abstract concepts tangible and transferable. Programs in

executive education should purposefully blend cognitive rigor with experiential immersion. Structured theoretical input must be complemented with hands-on exercises and simulations. As one participant emphasized: “It was actually always the combination of the theoretical or almost academic approach with a practical implementation that helped a lot (...) and now I have an understanding.” (Interview 7)⁴⁷. This integration facilitates deep understanding and changes in leadership practice. In this vein, participants especially appreciated frameworks that offered structure for reflection (e.g., delegation maps, personality typologies), suggesting that practical scaffolds support the transfer of learning into daily leadership practice.

Forth, **heterogenous cohorts and diversity** among participants in industry background, leadership seniority, and perspectives emerged as a major enabler of learning. In an executive education context, heterogeneity exposed participants to varied leadership challenges and models, enriching leader(ship) identity construction. The findings suggest that effective executive education incorporates these design features intentionally to maximize peer learning effects and create structured opportunities for cross-participant coaching, and (informal) exchange.

Fifth, **structured reflection opportunities** – both individual and collective, formal and informal – were experienced as essential for leadership education and support sustained change. Participants benefited from guided reflection sessions as well as spontaneous peer conversations that encouraged vulnerability, challenged assumptions, and refinement of self-concepts. One participant stated: “The module raised awareness (...) and the awareness that it [leadership] has to be sustainable and not just one-off peaks, like, ‘oh, for a week now, I will focus on leadership’”. (Interview 10)⁴⁸. Programs should

⁴⁷ „Es war eigentlich immer die Kombination vom theoretischen oder fast akademischen Ansatz mit einer praktischen Umsetzung (...), wo wir das einfach wirklich aufgebaut haben und das Verständnis da ist.“ (Interview 7)

⁴⁸ „dieses Bewusstmachen, das ist glaub ich das, was es am meisten gemacht hat. Das Modul hat das Bewusstsein geschärft und auch das Bewusstsein, dass es nachhaltig sein muss und nicht nur einmalige, so Spitzen, was sagt man lebt jetzt mal ,ne Woche ,nen Fokus auf Leadership“. (Interview 10)

therefore integrate structured reflection while also enabling informal, trust-based dialogue.

Sixth, a smaller group of participants described the balance between performance orientation and relational authenticity. One participant described leadership as the ability to simultaneously “motivate people to a maximum performance (...) and, on the other hand, to create a harmonious team that is characterized by trust and appreciation” (Interview 3).⁴⁹ This suggests that leaders may experience the balance between systemic rationality and relational authenticity not only as a behavioral challenge but as a defining element of their evolving leader(ship) identity. Program curricula should therefore encourage leaders to reflect on this duality.

Incorporating these principles can better equip leaders to navigate organizational complexity and continuously refine their leader(ship) identity.

Finally, the findings underscore that leader(ship) identity development is not confined to the duration of the program but continues as an ongoing developmental trajectory. Participants stressed the importance of sustaining reflection and peer exchange beyond the formal modules. Program designers could therefore consider creating post-program learning formats that extend an MBA’s impact. These might include alumni reflection workshops, peer-to-peer coaching circles, mentoring programs, or (digital) communities of practice that allow participants to sustain their exchange, revisit theoretical frameworks, and share new leadership challenges. Such activities would acknowledge the lifelong nature of leader(ship) identity work and extend the impact of executive education beyond the MBA program.

⁴⁹ „Wenn ich eine gute Führungskraft bin, dann bin ich in der Lage, durch meine Personality die Leute zum maximalen zu zu einer sehr guten Leistung einmal zu motivieren und auf der anderen Seite aber auch ein harmonisches Team zu kreieren, was geprägt ist durch Vertrauen und Wertschätzung“ (Interview 3)

5.4 Limitations

The study is subject to several limitations.

Methodological Limitations

Because no pre-program baseline was collected, identity changes could only be inferred retrospectively from participants' self-descriptions. Also, the reliance on self-reported interviews introduces potential bias such as social desirability or retrospective rationalization.

The interviews with the participants were conducted 5-18 months post-program participation to allow sufficient time for the integration of learnings into (professional or personal) practice while ensuring valid recall. This time frame is considered particularly suitable by scholars for capturing changes in self-perception and leadership practice (Hammond et al., 2017; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Miscenko et al., 2017). The retrospective nature of the design introduces potential recall bias. However, the recency of the educational experience helps mitigate these concerns and findings are expected to be exploratory and contextual rather than broadly generalizable.

Sample

Another limitation lies in the composition and scope of the participant sample. The relatively small and predominantly male sample restricts the generalizability of findings and limits exploration of gender variations in leader(ship) identity development. Also, the sample included only native German speakers from Austria and Germany, with similar cultural backgrounds. Including participants from non-German-speaking countries, and other neighboring countries would enrich the data with broader cultural perspectives on leader(ship) identity development, especially given the increasing globalization of leadership education.

Moreover, the sample predominantly consisted of experienced leaders; incorporating novice leaders or a greater number of individuals with limited

prior leadership experience could provide valuable insights into how early-career participants engage with identity development and program impact.

Transferability

In addition, the transferability of the findings is constrained by the study setting. The research was conducted within a single Austrian Executive MBA program, with a participant group composed largely of experienced, male leaders from the DACH region. While the patterns of leader(ship) identity refinement may resonate with other executive education contexts, they cannot be assumed to generalize across different cultural, institutional, or demographic settings.

Researcher's Role

Another limitation concerns the researchers' dual role as a professional affiliated with the TUW Academy. This positionality provided valuable contextual understanding of the program but may have also influenced data collection and interpretation. In particular, participants might have emphasized positive experiences due to social desirability, given the researcher's institutional connection. While this risk was mitigated through open-ended questions, reflexive note-taking, transparent coding and the use of theoretical frameworks as anchors, it cannot be ruled out that the researcher's perspective shaped the findings. Additional validation strategies, such as member checking were not employed in this study but could further strengthen credibility in future research.

Scope

Finally, this study's reliance on retrospective interviews conducted post-program limits understanding of the development trajectory. Collecting longitudinal data at multiple time points – prior to the program, during its progression, and following its conclusion, even years after program completion – would enable a more robust and dynamic analysis of leader(ship) identity evolution and program effects over time. Future research should seek to address these limitations to deepen the understanding of leadership development across varied contexts and career stages.

Role changes

As none of the participants experienced major hierarchical role changes during or immediately after the program, the findings cannot address how identity work might unfold under conditions of role transitions. This restricts the transferability of results to contexts where new roles trigger more radical identity shifts.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore how Executive MBA participants describe their leader(ship) identity after completing the TUW Academy's leadership development modules, whether they report changes in their leader(ship) identity, and which program elements they perceive as most impactful. Building on eleven qualitative interviews, the study contributes to leadership identity scholarship and to the practice of executive education.

The findings suggest that for experienced leaders, identity work does not take the form of wholesale reconstruction but rather incremental refinement. Participants entered the program with already mature leader(ship) identities, informed by their prior professional and leadership experiences and underpinned by antecedents such as motivation to lead and openness to learning. Within the program, identity work unfolded as a process of clarification, consolidation, and contextualization – sharpening perspectives on strategic focus, relational awareness, empowerment, and self-reflection.

A central contribution lies in showing that leader(ship) identity refinement is enabled through specific program elements that operate via identity work processes. Based on the interview analyses, five clusters of impactful program elements emerged: (1) Learning Environment and Program Design, (2) Theory as Reflective Stimulus, (3) Peer Interaction and Social Learning, (4) Experiential and Group-dynamic Learning, and (5) Structured and Informal Reflection. These elements supported identity work processes such as deep reflection, dialogue, integration of conceptual input with lived experience, experimentation and application, and narrative and values work. Through these processes, participants rearticulated leadership meaning and refined their practices. The conceptual model illustrates how executive program design, identity work processes and identity development are dynamically interconnected and offers practical insights for educators and organizations seeking to design impactful leadership programs.

Taken together, the study suggests that Leadership Development Programs in an executive education context can best be understood as spaces of identity consolidation and refinement. They function as holding environments where experienced leaders recalibrate, integrate, and strengthen their sense of self. Beyond program completion, leader(ship) identity remains a life-long trajectory, requiring sustained reflection, peer exchange, and ongoing experimentation to meet the evolving demands of complex organizational contexts. These findings suggest that program designers and leadership developers may consider moving beyond content delivery to intentionally curate spaces that foster identity reflection, and long-term integration into leadership practice.

List of References

- Alvesson, M., & Blom, M. (2019). Beyond leadership and followership: Working with a variety of modes of organizing [Article]. *Organizational Dynamics*, 48(1), 28–37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2017.12.001>
- Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (2002). Identity Regulation as Organizational Control: Producing the Appropriate Individual [Article]. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(5), 619–644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00305>
- Avolio, B. J., & Hannah, S. T. (2020). An enduring leadership myth: Born a leader or made a leader? [Article]. *Organizational Dynamics*, 49(4), 100730. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2019.08.002>
- Blom, M., & Alvesson, M. (2015). All-inclusive and all good: The hegemonic ambiguity of leadership [Article]. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 31(4), 480–492. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2015.08.001>
- Dalakoura, A. (2010). Differentiating leader and leadership development: A collective framework for leadership development [Article]. *The Journal of Management Development*, 29(5), 432–441. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02621711011039204>
- Day, D. V. (2000). Leadership development: A review in context [Article]. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 11(4), 581–613. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843\(00\)00061-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1048-9843(00)00061-8)
- Day, D. V., & Dragoni, L. (2015). Leadership Development: An Outcome-Oriented Review Based on Time and Levels of Analyses. In *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* (Vol. 2, pp. 133–156). Annual Reviews Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032414-111328>
- Day, D. V., & Harrison, M. M. (2007). A multilevel, identity-based approach to leadership development [Article]. *Human Resource Management Review*, 17(4), 360–373. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2007.08.007>

- Day, D. V., & Sin, H. P. (2011). Longitudinal tests of an integrative model of leader development: Charting and understanding developmental trajectories. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22(3), 545–560. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.LEAQUA.2011.04.011>
- DeRue, D. S., & Ashford, S. J. (2010). WHO WILL LEAD AND WHO WILL FOLLOW? A SOCIAL PROCESS OF LEADERSHIP IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN ORGANIZATIONS. In *Source: The Academy of Management Review* (Vol. 35, Issue 4). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29765008>
- Epitropaki, O., Kark, R., Mainemelis, C., & Lord, R. G. (2017). Leadership and followership identity processes: A multilevel review. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 28(1), 104–129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.LEAQUA.2016.10.003>
- Grøn, C. H., Bro, L. L., & Andersen, L. B. (2020). Public managers' leadership identity: concept, causes, and consequences [Article]. *Public Management Review*, 22(11), 1696–1716. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1645875>
- Guillén, L., Mayo, M., & Korotov, K. (2015). Is leadership a part of me? A leader identity approach to understanding the motivation to lead [Article]. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 26(5), 802–820. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2015.05.001>
- Güttel, W. H. (2023). *Successful in turbulent times: leadership, change management, and ambidexterity* (W. H. Güttel, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, & Verlag, Eds.; 1st edition). Nomos, Edition Rainer Hampp.
- Güttel, W. H., & Kleinhanns-Rollé, A. (2023). *Strategic Leadership Levers: Identity, Skills & Effectiveness* (W. H. Güttel, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, & Verlag, Eds.; 1st edition, pp. 105–126). Nomos, Edition Rainer Hampp.
- Güttel, W. H., Kleinhanns-Rollé, A., & Voglmayr, R. (2023). Scientific leadership development: Enhancement, methods & impact. . In W. Güttel

- (Ed.), *Successful in turbulent times. Leadership, change management & ambidexterity*. (pp. 381–399). Nomos.
- Hammond, M., Clapp-Smith, R., & Palanski, M. (2017). Beyond (just) the workplace: A theory of leader development across multiple domains [Article]. *The Academy of Management Review*, 42(3), 481–498. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2014.0431>
- Haslam, S. A., Gaffney, A. M., Hogg, M. A., Rast, D. E., & Steffens, N. K. (2022). Reconciling identity leadership and leader identity: A dual-identity framework. *Leadership Quarterly*, 33(4). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2022.101620>
- Hastings, L. J., & Sunderman, H. M. (2023). Assessing and measuring leadership identity [Article]. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 2023(178), 99–106. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20558>
- Ibarra, H., & Barbulescu, R. (2010). Identity as narrative: Prevalence, effectiveness, and consequences of narrative identity work in Macro work role transitions [Article]. *The Academy of Management Review*, 35(1), 135–154. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2010.45577925>
- Ibarra, H., Snook, S., & Ramo, L. G. (2010). Identity-Based Leader Development. In N. Nohria & R. Khurana (Eds.), *Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice* (pp. 657–678). Harvard Business Press.
- Kohonen, E. (2005). Developing Global Leaders through interactional assignments: an identity construction perspective. *Personnel Review*, 34(1), 22–36.
- Komives, S. R., Longerbeam, S. D., Mainella, F., Osteen, L., Owen, J. E., & Wagner, W. (2009). Leadership Identity Development: Challenges in Applying a Developmental Model [Article]. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 8(1), 11–47. <https://doi.org/10.12806/V8/I1/TF2>
- Komives, S. R., Owen, J. E., Longerbeam, S. D., Mainella, F. C., & Osteen, L. (2005). Developing a leadership identity: A grounded theory. *Journal of*

- College Student Development*, 46(6), 593–611.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2005.0061>
- Kragt, D., & Guenter, H. (2018). Why and when leadership training predicts effectiveness: The role of leader identity and leadership experience. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 39(3), 406–418.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-11-2016-0298>
- Kuckartz, U. (2016). *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung* (Juventa Verlag & Verlag, Eds.; 3., überarbeitete...). Beltz Juventa.
- Kwok, N., Shen, W., & Brown, D. J. (2021). I can, I am: Differential predictors of leader efficacy and identity trajectories in leader development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 32(5), 101422.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/J.LEAQUA.2020.101422>
- Lord, R. G., & Hall, R. J. (2005). Identity, deep structure and the development of leadership skill. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(4), 591–615.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/J.LEAQUA.2005.06.003>
- Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible Selves. *American Psychologist*, 41(9), 954–969. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.41.9.954>
- McCombs, K. M., Williams, E. A., Castro, S., & Deptula, B. (2024). Measuring Leader Identity: Conceptualization and Validation of a Multi-Dimensional Measure. *Journal of Leadership and Management*. 10 (2).
- Miscenko, D., Guenter, H., & Day, D. V. (2017). Am I a leader? Examining leader identity development over time. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 28(5), 605–620. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.LEAQUA.2017.01.004>
- Misoch, S. (2019). *Qualitative Interviews* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, Ed.; 2., erweiterte un...). De Gruyter Oldenbourg.
- O'Toole, J. (2001). When Leadership is an Organizational Trait. In T. Cummings, W. G. Bennis, & G. M. Spreitzer (Eds.), *The future of*

leadership: today's top leadership thinkers speak to tomorrow's leaders (pp. 158–174). Jossey-Bass.

Petriglieri, G., & Petriglieri, J. L. (2010). Identity workspaces: The case of business schools [Article]. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 9(1), 44–60. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMLE.2010.48661190>

Priest, K. L., & Middleton, E. (2016). Exploring Leader Identity and Development. In *New directions for student leadership* (Vol. 2016, Issue 149, pp. 37–47). <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20160>

Przyborski, A., & Wohlrab-Sahr, M. (2021). *Qualitative Sozialforschung: ein Arbeitsbuch* (M. Wohlrab-Sahr & De Gruyter Oldenbourg, Eds.; 5., überarbeitete...). De Gruyter Oldenbourg.

Rocco, M. L., & Priest, K. L. (2023). Extending the scope of leadership identity development [Article]. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 2023(178), 107–117. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20559>

Schreyögg, G., & Lührmann, T. (2006). Führungsidentität: zu neueren Entwicklungen in Führungskonstellationen und der Identitätsforschung [Article]. *Zeitschrift Führung + Organisation*, 75(1), 11–16.

Sunderman, H. M., & Orsini, J. (2024). Leader(ship) Identity Development and Meaning Making: A Scoping Review [Article]. *Journal of Leadership Studies (Hoboken, N.J.)*, 18(3), 23–47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21905>

Thwaite, S. V. (2022). Creating Identity Development Spaces for Leaders in Higher Education. In *International Journal of Organizational Leadership* (Vol. 11). <https://www.ijol.cikd.ca>

Tourish, D. (2014). Leadership, more or less? A processual, communication perspective on the role of agency in leadership theory [Article]. *Leadership (London, England)*, 10(1), 79–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715013509030>

Vogel, B., Reichard, R. J., Batistič, S., & Černe, M. (2021). A bibliometric review of the leadership development field: How we got here, where we

- are, and where we are headed [Article]. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 32(5), 101381. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2020.101381>
- Warhurst, R. (2011). Managers' practice and managers' learning as identity formation: Reassessing the mba contribution. *Management Learning*, 42(3), 261–278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507610387567>
- Warhurst, R. (2012). Leadership development as identity formation: Middle managers' leadership learning from MBA study [Article]. *Human Resource Development International*, 15(4), 471–487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2012.706428>
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Sage Publications.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: design and methods* (5. ed.). SAGE Publ.
- Yukl, G. (1989). Managerial Leadership: A Review of Theory and Research [Article]. *Journal of Management*, 15(2), 251–289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014920638901500207>
- Zaar, S. (2021). *Leader identity development: the role of schemas, meaning-making, and experiences*. <https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20240419sz>
- Zaar, S., Van den Bossche, P., & Gijsselaers, W. (2021). New avenues for leadership education and development: shaping leader identity through meaning-making from experiences. In A. Kjaergaard, E. Rosier, & A. Tuncdogan (Eds.), *Handbook of Teaching and Learning at Business Schools: A Practice-Based Approach* (pp. 249–263). Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.
- Zaar, S., Van den Bossche, P., & Gijsselaers, W. (2023a). *From Imposter to Original: How Organizational Leaders Shape and Develop a Leader Identity through Meaning-Making of Experiences*.
- Zaar, S., Van den Bossche, P., & Gijsselaers, W. (2023b). Meaningful Experiences for Leadership Development in Higher Education: Moments that Matter for Shaping Knowledge, Skills, and Identity. In *Leader Identity*

Development: The Role of Schemas, Meaning-Making, and Experiences
(pp. 95–135).

List of Figures

Figure 1: Developing a Leadership Identity (Komives et al. 2005, p. 599)...	13
Figure 2: Differences in the content, access and use of knowledge for novice, intermediate and expert leaders (Lord & Hall 2005, p. 594).....	15
Figure 3: Leadership Identity Construction Process (DeRue & Ashford, 2010, p. 631).....	16
Figure 4: Model of Leader Identity Development (Zheng & Muir, 2015, p. 643)	17
Figure 5: Examples of Cross-Domain Development Triggers (Hammond et a., 2017, p. 498).....	19
Figure 6: Differences between Leader Development and Leadership Development (Day 2000, p.584)	26
Figure 7: Multilevel Summary Framework of Leadership Development Processes and Outcomes (Day & Dragoni, 2015, p. 136)	27
Figure 8: Summary of multi-level/evolving perspectives on leader/ship development (Rocco et al. 2023, p.111)	29
Figure 9: Framework for Students' Leader Identity Development (Zaar et al. 2021, p. 76).....	30
Figure 10: Scientific Leadership Development (Güttel et al. 2023, p. 391) ..	32
Figure 11: Leader(ship) Identity Refinement within Executive Education (own illustration, adapted from Zaar 2021, p.76)	83

List of Tables

Table 1: Components of Leader Identity at Various Levels of Development (Own Representation based on Hammond, 2017, p. 483).....	18
Table 2: Overview of conducted interviews with MBA participants (own illustration)	44
Table 3: Overview of information on the TUW Academy leadership development program (own illustration).....	44
Table 4: Codes and Subcodes (own illustration).....	46
Table 5: Overview of Leadership Meaning and Leader(ship) Identity (own illustration)	58
Table 6: Theoretical Frameworks and Interviewee's Leader(ship) Identity (own illustration)	59
Table 7: Overview of leadership ideals and role models (own illustration)...	63
Table 8: Overview of leader(ship) identity development (own illustration) ...	69
Table 9: Overview of Impactful Program Elements and Learning Experiences (own illustration).....	78

Appendix Semi-structured interview guide

Interviewpartner_in	
Datum	
Zeit & Ort	
Dauer	
Anmerkungen zum Interview & zur Gesprächsatmosphäre	
Abschlussdatum des Leadership-Moduls	
Alter	
Geschlecht	

Einleitung

- Vorstellung und Ziele der Untersuchung bzw. der Befragung
- Beschreibung des Ablaufs
- Datenverwendung und Aufzeichnung sowie Anonymität

Fragen zur Person und Sozio-demographische Daten

Zum Einstieg würde ich Sie gerne etwas besser kennenlernen. Erzählen Sie mir bitte kurz, in welchem beruflichen Umfeld Sie tätig sind, in welcher Branche und welche Rolle Sie aktuell übernehmen.

- Wie lange haben Sie insgesamt Führungserfahrung? Wie viele Personen führen Sie derzeit direkt?
- Was war Ihre Rolle vor dem Leadership-Modul? Gab es seitdem Veränderungen?

Leader(ship) Identity

- Was bedeutet „Führung“ für Sie und wie würden Sie jemand beschreiben, der/die gut führt? Welche Eigenschaften sollte eine gute Führungskraft mitbringen?
- Was sind Ihrer Meinung nach die zentralen Aufgaben einer Führungskraft?
- Wie würden Sie sich als Führungskraft beschreiben? Was bedeutet dieses Bild für Ihre Führungsrolle? Welche Eigenschaften und Fähigkeiten bringen Sie mit?
- Was sind die Aufgaben und Schwerpunkte in Ihrer täglichen beruflichen Praxis?
 - Wie viel führen Sie (Fokus auf technische Aspekte / Operations; Fokus auf Managementfragen; Fokus auf Führungsfragen)?
 - Wen adressieren Sie mit Ihrer Führung? Wen führen Sie (sich selbst, Mitarbeiter_innen, Organisation)?

- Wie wurden Sie zur Führungskraft, die Sie heute sind? Gab es prägende Erfahrungen oder Wendepunkte in Ihrer Entwicklung, die Ihr heutiges Selbstverständnis als Führungskraft besonders beeinflusst haben?
- Haben oder hatten Sie Führungskräfte zum Vorbild?
- Wie beschreiben Sie Ihren Führungsstil?
- Gibt es bestimmte Werte, Eigenschaften oder Verhaltensweisen, mit denen Sie sich als Führungskraft heute besonders identifizieren?
- Wie kommt ihre Führungspersönlichkeit im beruflichen Leben zum Vorschein?
- Können Sie eine Situation beschreiben, in der Sie sich als effektive Führungskraft gefühlt haben?
- Warum führen Sie – was motiviert Sie, Verantwortung zu übernehmen?
- Was motiviert Sie in Ihrer täglichen Zusammenarbeit mit Ihren Mitarbeiter_innen?

Einflussfaktoren des Leadership Development Programms

- Wenn Sie an das Leadership-Programm zurückdenken: welches Bild haben Sie dabei vor Ihrem Auge, was kommt Ihnen dabei in den Sinn?
- Bitte erinnern Sie sich an Inhalte, Situationen, Aufgaben oder Ereignisse aus dem Programm. Was ist Ihnen besonders in Erinnerung geblieben? Warum genau das?
- Welche Teile des Programms waren für Sie und Ihre Weiterentwicklung besonders hilfreich?
 - Inhalt der Module (Themen, Methoden, Trainer)
 - Erfahrungsaustausch und Gespräche mit anderen Teilnehmer_innen
 - Zusammensetzung der Teilnehmer_innen
 - Unterlagen
 - Reflexionsarbeiten
- Welche Lernergebnisse konnten oder können Sie besonders gut im beruflichen Alltag umsetzen?
- Gab es Hindernisse, die einer Weiterentwicklung im Weg standen? Hat Ihrer Ansicht nach etwas gefehlt, das den Lerneffekt erhöht hätte?
- Was hatte Sie motiviert, am Leadership Programm teilzunehmen?
- Inwiefern haben Ihre bisherigen beruflichen Erfahrungen, Ihre Persönlichkeit oder Ihre berufliche Situation Ihre Lernerfahrungen beeinflusst?
- Hatten Sie den Eindruck, dass das Programm bei Ihnen anders gewirkt hat als bei anderen Teilnehmer_innen? Woran könnte das liegen?

Entwicklung der Leader(ship) Identity

- Hat sich Ihre Vorstellung von der Rolle als Führungskraft und Ihr Verständnis von Führung verändert?

- Gab es einen bestimmten Moment oder eine Situation während der Module, in der Sie sich besonders als Führungskraft erlebt haben? Können Sie diesen beschreiben?
- Gab es einen bestimmten Moment oder eine Situation während der Module, in der Sie Ihr Führungsverständnis in Frage gestellt haben?
- Gab es nach dem Programm eine Situation, in der Sie Ihr Führungsverhalten bewusst verändert haben?
 - Was hat diese Veränderung ausgelöst?
 - Wie haben Sie diese Impulse in Ihren Führungsalltag übertragen?
 - Waren diese Veränderungen kurzfristig oder wurden sie beibehalten?
 - Wurde das von anderen wahrgenommen oder thematisiert?
- Hat sich nach dem Programm der Fokus Ihrer Arbeit geändert (hinsichtlich Fokus auf Operativem, Management oder Führung?)
- Hat sich Ihre Vorstellung davon, wer zu Ihrem Führungskreis gehört im Laufe der Zeit erweitert oder verändert? Fühlen Sie sich heute stärker als Teil eines gemeinsamen Führungsverständnisses oder eher als Einzelverantwortliche_r?
- Hat sich Ihr Verhältnis zu Ihrer/Ihrem Vorgesetzten oder Ihren Mitarbeiter_innen verändert? Wenn ja, inwiefern? Wenn nein, wieso glauben Sie nicht?

Abschluss

Wir sind nun am Ende des Interviews angekommen.

Gibt es noch etwas, das Sie in Bezug auf Ihre Führungsidentität oder das Leadership-Programm als besonders wichtig empfinden und das wir bisher nicht angesprochen haben?

Möchten Sie mir noch etwas aus Ihrer Leadership Praxis erzählen?

Vielen Dank, dass Sie sich für das Interview Zeit genommen haben!