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## Embodied work and leadership in a digital age – what can we learn from theatres?

Donatella De Paoli

Norwegian Business School BI, donatella.d.paoli@bi.no

Sigrid Røyseng

Norwegian Business School BI, sigrid.royseng@bi.no

Grete Wennes

NTNU, grete.wennes@ntnu.no

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

This article is dedicated to the memory of Grete who passed away in July 2017. We would also like to thank the wonderful theatre directors amongst the leading public theatres in Norway for having shared generously of their time and experiences with us.

# **Embodied Work and Leadership in a digital age – what can we learn from theatres?**

**Donatella De Paoli**

Norwegian Business School BI

**Sigrid Røyseng**

Norwegian Business School BI

**Grete Wennes**

Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)

## **Abstract**

In this article, we seek inspiration from the performative theatre arts to better understand creative work and leadership in a digital age. Theatre artists work and lead creative processes toward theatre performances without any digital distractions. Theatres are a physical manifestation of art. The aesthetic and embodied creative work and leadership is essential for a play that engages and touches the audience. While theories and research about embodied leadership scarcely address digitalization or technology, research about digital and virtual leadership oversees the importance of embodied processes and leadership. Through insight acquired by interviewing theatre directors, we describe how these creative work and leadership processes are about developing and maintaining embodied, emotional and mental focus. We explain and analyse this phenomenon through a description and analysis of theatre art and theatre leadership, where we argue that theatre productions resemble many kinds of temporary creative projects in regular work organizations. Theatre directors lead people in a way that makes theatres one of the last frontiers of digitalization. We also explain what there is to learn from theatres in a digitalized work life, where smart phones, I-pads, PCies or other digital devices never are turned off.

**Keywords :** Embodied; leadership; creativity; work; theatre; digital.

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## **Embodied work and leadership in a digital age – what can we learn from theatres?**

We live and work in a technological world in which we are always communicating through our smart phones, I-pads and PC's, yet we have sacrificed embodied, physical interaction, conversation and leadership for mere digital connection (Turkle, 2015, Wasson, 2004, Kleinman, 2010). This paper addresses the importance of physical, embodied work and leadership relations in a digital age.

Aesthetic, embodied leadership research is taking inspiration from the arts to enrich both the understanding and analysis of leadership and organizations through studies of the theatre world (Biehl-Missal, 2010, Ladkin and Taylor, 2010), orchestras (Koivunen, 2003, Koivunen and Wennes, 2010) and dance (Ropo and Sauer, 2008, Biehl-Missal and Springborg, 2016). In an arts-in-business research tradition, the theatre has offered novel, inspirational and alternative understandings of leadership. One example is the analysis of aesthetic, emotional and embodied aspects of directing theatre plays (Sauer, 2005), another looks more closely at critical interaction through increased aesthetic awareness from a follower's perspective (Biehl-Missal, 2010). Ladkin and Taylor (2010) sought inspiration from the theatre and Stanislavski's acting theory to develop the notion of authentic leadership. It was shown that it is through embodiment of that 'true self' that leaders are perceived as authentic or not (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010). It may be both timely and relevant to see how this stream of research might enrich the digitalized organizational reality we are living in. The research on embodied and aesthetic leadership is overlooking arguably the biggest factor influencing work life over the last 15 years, namely digitalization.

While most organizations and businesses have become truly digital, fully embracing the new communication technology, creative work and leadership processes in theatres have changed very little during the last 100 years. The play may contain video and complex stage technology, but the staged performance is still dependent on the creative interactions of people. In theatres you find highly embodied work and leadership processes free of digital devices and digital interruptions during the intense rehearsal process leading to a performance on stage (Sauer, 2005, Ropo, De Paoli and Bathurst, 2017). Theatres are stages for bodily performance, senses and feelings, which make them a natural and obvious place to study embodied leadership in a digital age.

Researching the creative work processes leading to theatre performances may shed light on a neglected aspect in today's organizations and help us to better understand what is gained and what is lost in a predominantly digitalized work environment. This paper draws on and connects two different organizational areas: the aesthetic and embodied leadership research and the research on virtual or digital work and leadership. The insight into work processes in theatres is a contribution to existing research on virtual leadership (e.g. Avolio et.al., 2014, Das Gupta, 2011, Caulat, 2012), as well as research on embodied leadership (Ladkin, 2008, Ladkin and Taylor, 2010, Ladkin and Taylor, 2015, Ropo and Sauer, 2008, Sinclair, 2005). By exploring and describing work processes in theatres from an embodied perspective, not only can this 'rare island' of work in a digital age be better understood, but potential benefits for other workplaces may also be discovered:

1. *What characterizes work and leadership processes in creating the theatre production from an embodied perspective?*
2. *Why is embodied presence so important, and alternatively, why is digital and virtual communication less prevalent than elsewhere?*

3. *What is to be learned regarding embodied work and leadership processes in creating the theatre production relevant for other kinds of work and organizations?*

Theatre leadership is generally both about what is going on in the overall larger theatre houses as well as the production leading to a play. In this paper, we study the processes of theatre rehearsals in creating a final theatre performance on the stage. Our understanding of leadership draws from the perspective of organizational aesthetics. We build on three premises of leadership: First, we distinguish between leader and leadership (e.g. Crevani et. al., 2010, Koivunen and Wennes, 2011, Parry and Hansen, 2007, Salovaara, 2011). Leadership is here seen as a collective process and not only reducible to the leader (Ladkin, 2010). Second, we are leadership scholars who view leadership as socially constructed (e.g. Fairhurst and Grant, 2010, Grint, 2005). Third, we perceive leadership as an aesthetic, embodied phenomenon (e.g. Hansen et. al., 2007, Ladkin and Taylor, 2010, Ropo and Sauer, 2008). Embodiment of leadership does not refer here to an individual leader's body, but to a social, relational constructionism of leadership. In a book about the physicality of leadership (Ladkin and Taylor, 2014), the difference between physicality and embodiment is described as follows: physicality is what anyone from the outside can see, feel, touch and experience through their own bodies - we share a physical world. In contrast, 'embodiment' is the means by which invisible energies, dynamics and impulses come into physical form. These two aesthetic aspects of leadership are both different and interlinked, which makes them often difficult to distinguish and treat empirically. Although there is definitely a need to clarify theoretically the distinction between physical and embodied leadership, the purpose and limitation of this paper does not allow us to go deeper into this discussion here. We challenge other researchers in the field to undertake this interesting and important theoretical journey.

This paper is structured as follows: First, a review of research on virtual and digital work and leadership is presented, which seems to neglect the embodied aspects. This is followed by a literature review on aesthetics and embodied aspects of work and leadership that appear to neglect digitalization and virtual work. Thirdly, the methodological perspective and approach is presented. Empirical findings are presented together with the analysis. In closing, we draw some conclusions about what work life may learn from theatres regarding embodied leadership in a digital age.

### **Literature review on virtual and digital work and leadership**

Both work and leadership are increasingly drifting into virtual space. We live in a time where people, both in their work and privately, spend more and more time in front of a screen. Leadership is more and more often occurring without people touching, sensing, feeling and seeing each other face-to-face (Avolio et. al., 2013). Modern telecommunication and technology have created a new organizational reality with virtual work and virtual leadership being the rule rather than the exception, both within and across organizations and countries (e.g. Caulat, 2012, DasGupta, 2011, Zander et.al., 2012). The fast- developing and improving technology is a driving force, as well as environmental and productivity arguments. There is an attraction and fascination with technology and cyberspace that is striking, at the same time while the embodied and sensuous aspects of meeting face-to-face is overlooked in research about virtual or digital communication and leadership (De Paoli, Ropo and Sauer, 2014).

In our daily work life, we have meetings, communicating both face-to-face and virtually, but we are often usually elsewhere in our minds because we multitask, checking text messages, e-mails, social media, surfing on the web or simply working. Although there are some benefits of people multitasking at work, such as higher productivity and access to alternative information (Wasson, 2004, Kleinman, 2010), research reveals that people pay less attention

to the meeting agenda and increased levels of multitasking lead to a significant loss in accuracy and performance (Adler and Benbunan-Fich, 2012). The use of digital media at work is also shown to have many other negative effects on well-being and organizational behaviour, such as e-mail overload, stress and work-life imbalance (Derks and Bakker, 2013).

We will now turn to some of the most widespread understandings of virtual leadership. It appears that most definitions are about the technology and the digital tools mediating communication and relations in virtual space, rather than talking about the phenomenon of relations going on virtually. See a more in-depth review of literature on virtual and digital leadership (De Paoli, 2015). While technology defines the virtual work unit, geographical and organizational distance is also used to define virtual leadership (Zander, Mockaitis and Butler, 2012). Other researchers are studying the degree of virtuality. For instance, many teams are only partly virtual because they include members who only work remotely on a part-time basis. This condition occurs with telework (Andriessen and Vartiainen, 2006). In telework, employees work part-time in the office and part-time away from co-workers. Teleworkers may work at home, at telework centres or satellite offices, at customer work sites or in hotels and airports while traveling. Telework is a form of virtual work because employees are separated from one another and may meet in person only infrequently.

The majority of studies of virtual leadership are found within the research fields of information systems management, small groups and project management research. These fields treat virtual and distributed team leadership as a phenomenon in its own right (Kayworth and Leidner, 2002, Zigurs, 2003, Gurtner et al., 2007). They all report that leaders are experiencing new kinds of leadership challenges, but also that existing cooperation and leadership challenges increase when leading people virtually. Several interviews conducted with managers on different levels (De Paoli, Vaagaasar and Müller, 2013) have confirmed these general findings. While these studies address the challenges of virtual work due to the technology, the same technology is proposed as a way to achieve better relations and leadership, such as using communication media with greater information richness and more telepresence. Further, some argue that a technologically new kind of physical presence has to be established, namely a distant presence, or telepresence (Zigurs, 2002). Telepresence is often used in the context of virtual reality to mean the experience or sense of being present in a place different from one's physical location, i.e. the sense of 'being there'. Generally speaking, the more vivid and interactive a medium is, the greater the likelihood that team members will experience telepresence, according to Zigurs (2002). In recent years, an even broader range of more advanced internal electronic based communication tools and internet based software for virtual work have been offered. In general, most research on virtual teams and virtual leadership report that while traditional teams make their physical presence known in a variety of ways, like body language, voice, style of dress and so on, these informal cues are lost in virtual environments (e.g. Malhotra et. al., 2007, Zhang and Fjermestad, 2006). Beyond suggesting better use of technological advice to deal with the identified problems in virtual leadership, another proposed solution has been to reinstate the responsible, strong leader, following up relations and controlling actions and tasks (Wakefield et al. 2008, Pauleen 2004). There seems to be a firm belief that virtual leadership challenges can be fixed either by better communication technology or a strong leader following up members tightly.

While there has been an aesthetic and embodied turn in leadership research (Hansen, Ropo and Sauer, 2007, Ladkin, 2008, Ladkin and Taylor, 2015), the majority of virtual and digital leadership research is still addressing general leadership themes such as trust, communication, leadership styles, and process (e.g. Avolio et.al., 2014, DasGupta 2011, De Paoli, 2015, Kayworth and Leidner, 2002, Zigurs, 2002). Although some researchers highlight physical, personal contact and socializing to build trust in the formation of virtual teams (Creighton and Adams, 1998; Furst et.al., 2004), the embodied, aesthetic and sensuous

aspects of leading and working digitally are neglected. One exception is a book about how leadership in the virtual space may be improved by using the senses actively, such as attentive listening (Caulat, 2012) and an auto-ethnographic study of collaborating through Skype illustrating how physicality is not disappearing in a virtual work environment (De Paoli et.al., 2014). The importance of spaces, places and meaningful meetings is highlighted by several (e.g. De Paoli, 2015, Ropo et.al., 2015). The aesthetic consciousness of self and others intensifies in virtual communication, especially in relation to the senses of seeing and listening (De Paoli et. al., 2014). Perception of personal appearance and self is made possible on Skype in a way that you do not experience in face-to-face meetings, according to this study.

To sum up this literature review, the literature and research on virtual and digital work and leadership is neglecting embodied and aesthetic aspects. Therefore, we see the need for drawing more attention to these aspects in a digitalized work life, both in virtual space and during face-to-face meetings where digital distractions are prevalent. We will now turn to the literature addressing these aspects.

### **Literature review on aesthetic and embodied aspects of work and leadership**

The physical and embodied imprint of leadership is an emerging and growing field of leadership research, and many articles have been published about these themes (e.g. Küpers, 2011, Koivunen and Wennes, 2011, Ladkin, 2008, Ladkin & Taylor, 2010, Sinclair, 2005, Ropo et.al., 2002, Ropo et.al., 2013). Aesthetic, embodied leadership has been found to be important, especially in artistic work processes, such as theatres and orchestras (Biel-Missal, 2010, Koivunen, 2003, Koivunen and Wennes, 2010, Ropo et al., 2002, Ropo and Parviainen, 2001, Sauer, 2005). Ladkin and Taylor (2015) have also addressed the topic largely in an edited book about the physicality of leadership. Given the recent emphasis on the materiality of leadership (e.g. Special Issue of *Leadership* 2013) and the embodiment perspective on leadership getting stronger coverage in leadership research (e.g. Hansen et.al., 2007, Küpers, 2011, Ladkin, 2008, Ladkin & Taylor, 2010, Melina et.al., 2013, Ropo et.al., 2013; Sinclair, 2005), this field of research needs to take into account that technology and digitalization are infused in work and leadership.

Why is digitalization and technology neglected in research about the embodiment and physicality of leadership? Searching in the theoretical roots of the 'embodied leadership wave' may provide an explanation as to why technology is not at the core of attention. The embodied and physical perspectives fall into the larger field of research of organizational aesthetics that emerged in the mid-1980s, largely as a protest against the rational paradigm that dominated organization studies at that time (Koivunen and Wennes, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Researchers in this field, such as Strati (1999, 1992), Gagliardi (1990, 1996), Ramirez (1991, 1996), de Monthoux (2004) and Linstead and Höpfl (2000) emphasized the importance of aesthetic factors, such as emotions, intuition, symbols and sense perception, and argued that these factors have as significant a role in organizational behaviour as cognitive activities.

This first contributions in this research field laid the groundwork for establishing the body as a focus for leadership research. For instance, the work of Ropo and Parviainen (2001), which made a philosophical argument for bodily leadership knowledge, refers to a special type of tacit knowing that is acquired through experience and social interaction. Sinclair (2005) also

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<sup>1</sup> To see a thorough review of organizational aesthetics, see Taylor and Hansen (2005) and an analysis of aesthetics as a methodology, see Strati (2000:13–14) and Warren (2008).

argues for the importance of the bodies in leadership research through analysis of two real managers, showing how bodies and bodily performances count. This includes physical stature, features, stance, gestures and voice in leadership. Following up on this, the notion of aesthetic leadership was introduced (Hansen et.al., 2007). Ladkin and Taylor (2010) introduced embodiment to the established leadership field by arguing that it is through embodiment that the 'true self' in authentic leadership is perceived as authentic.

The study of embodied leadership is often inspired by the arts, whether this be orchestras, theatre or dance. Artists and artistic work offer good examples of how the senses and the body are central to both creative work and leadership. This perspective initially took its inspiration from classical music, where listening is an example of an aesthetic leadership process with social bodily presence (Ropo et.al., 2002, Koivunen, 2003). Koivunen and Wennes (2010) followed up on this with a more in-depth study in which leadership activities of symphony orchestra conductors were described through an aesthetic lens leading to three dimensions: relational listening, aesthetic judgment and kinaesthetic empathy. The term 'beautiful leadership' was launched by Ladkin (2008) in a study exploring the phenomenon through the analysis of orchestral leadership. Biehl-Missal (2010) used the field of theatre studies to enrich our understanding of leadership, because, as argued, the theatre may offer critical ideas about aesthetic interaction, leadership performance and leader-follower interaction. Through the theatre lens, leadership was shown to include critical interaction through increased aesthetic awareness from the viewpoint of followers (Biehl-Missal, 2010). Further, another study seeking inspiration from the theatre and Stanislavski's acting theory developed the notion of authentic leadership. It was shown that it is through embodiment of that 'true self' that leaders are perceived as authentic or not (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010). Through the dance metaphors of waltz and rave, Ropo and Sauer (2008) introduce aspects such as gaze, rhythm and space to develop an emerging aesthetic paradigm of leadership where corporeality is emphasized. Dance has been discovered to enrich leadership in different ways and is now part of the growing field of studies making contributions to leadership through art (Biehl-Missal and Springborg, 2016).

Summing up this field of research, these perspectives offer an alternative to the existing cognitively oriented leadership research, but have been more preoccupied with the senses, emotions and the body than exploring embodiment in digitalized and technological work life. The embodied and physical production processes in theatres may inform 'dis-embodied' leadership in digital time.

### **Methodological perspective**

The methodological strategy behind our study of embodied leadership in a virtual age to study a critical case (Patton 2002:236–237). Case studies in general can be understood as a strategy in which the study of concrete cases gives insight into the contexts in which they appear (Yin 1994). Critical cases are cases that have the potential of revealing context in a more accentuated way. In line with Patton's reasoning (2002), critical cases are not only isolated cases. Critical cases give insight into patterns of meaning that are relevant in a wider frame, but do not necessarily appear as prominent elsewhere. The insight into embodied leadership practices, by studying theatres, may in turn be used as a perspective to examine virtual leadership practices. This research strategy might help us detect tacit assumptions and blind spots in virtual leadership practices. As noted above, theatres represent a part of organizational life that has remained highly physical. In line with Flyvbjerg's argument for the scientific value of case studies (Flyvbjerg 2004), the physical aspect of leadership practices might be seen as a 'black swan' in virtual leadership practices. Flyvbjerg refers to the famous example of Popper: 'All swans are white'. Popper argued that just one observation of a black swan would falsify the proposition. Following Flyvbjerg, the falsification in turn can stimulate

further investigations and theory-building. Even though we live and work in an increasingly virtual context, virtuality is not all there is to it. Embodiment and physicality can be seen as a black swan that needs to be studied in order to develop a more complete theory of virtual leadership. Following this logic, the study of theatres might lead to knowledge that is relevant to a wide range of organizations. Not least will the study be relevant for knowledge work organizations with increasing use of virtual tools.

This research has an inductive and exploratory approach, as research connecting both embodiment and digitalization is very limited, both within leadership research and especially within the virtual leadership research field. By contextualizing the issue of physicality, we follow up on the quest for practical relevance in leadership research (Tushman et. al., 2007), but also argue for how leadership theory should be developed in line with the needs of the knowledge era (Uhl-Bien et.al., 2007). Empirically, we base the study on qualitative interviews. Having conducted several studies of the theatre world before (Røyseng 2007, Elstad and De Paoli, 2014, Kleppe and Røyseng 2016, Wennes, 2006), development of the empirical strategy and the guidelines for the interviews was able to be based on in-depth knowledge in this particular field. Our long research experience and insight into the theatre world may, on the other hand, also limit our inquiry and analysis with our own subjective taken-for-granted assumptions about theatre work and leadership. We have sought to avoid this through critical self-examination and a critical attitude to our assumptions and findings. The interviews focused on the leadership processes of theatre production. Interviews were conducted with a sample of eight leading theatre directors in Norway, both men and women of different ages. All the chosen directors are active and successful in their profession. In the next sections, we quote from the interviews. Due to ethical considerations, the informants are anonymized in the text. We analysed the material by reading the transcripts of the interviews several times to discover patterns or findings. We also grouped the different themes that emerged from the data material and looked for similarities and differences.

### **Creative work and leadership processes in theatres**

We start by describing the creative work and leadership processes in theatres, which is an answer to the first research question. Theatre as performative art has a long history and is infused with traditions that have roots in the oldest civilizations in the world. Theatre and theatre artists were in medieval times seen as craftsmen or merchants going from town to town, performing in the central square and collecting the money they needed. Theatre, like all the other art forms -- such as painting, sculpture, poetry and others -- gained autonomy in the society in the 18th century. The description and definition of the arts since then draws on the art and artists seeking unique expressions. Creative work is the essence and 'raison d'être' of the arts (Ropo et. al., 2016). Creative work and leadership in the theatre is characterized by high professional standards and competence as the art field entails skilled, well-educated artists who, typically, have extensive experience (Elstad and De Paoli, 2013). Theatre work is embedded in a long historical theatre tradition in the westernized world (Biehl-Missal, 2010), ingrained in professionalized cultures where creative work modes are transmitted from generation to generation and finally in a calling and devotion to theatre as art. Because theatre work involves a collective of interdependent people, its creative work processes and leadership are also highly relational. Theatre work and theatre leadership is not a formalized or written kind of professionalized knowledge, but rather transmitted from person to person, from generation to generation of theatre people. This forms the institutionalized organizational theatre culture with ingrained values, norms and cultures based on historic traditions and therefore difficult to change. Theatre culture varies according to the different theatre art forms and traditions that exist in the theatres themselves, such as the romantic text-based realistic theatre form prevalent in all the national theatres around the westernized world. Newer theatre traditions, such as the political theatre and avant-garde

theatres, have other organizational theatre forms and expressions (Elstad and De Paoli, 2014).

Our analysis and understanding of theatre work and leadership are generally based on the practices and organizational cultures of publically financed theatres that to a large extent are inspired by the romantic classical theatre form. However, the theatre instructors interviewed in this paper are also inspired by more avant-garde working approaches. A description of the creative theatre work follows below; it is of a performative art production unit leading to a performance consisting of the artistic personnel, such as director, actors, stage personnel, costume designer etc. We include it to summarize the description of creative work and leadership processes in theatres and because it will make it easier to see which other organizations can benefit from our findings. We have grouped the characteristics according to several organizational categories in the table below.

<b>Theatre Productions</b>	<b>Organizational characteristics</b>
Work	Complex, unique, creative, playful Interdependent High performance Tacit knowledge Embodied and aesthetic
People	Highly professionalized and specialized Strong, charismatic and unique personalities (are sought for) Pleasant aesthetically (voice, height etc.)
Process	People, bodies and emotions main resource Interdependent group Temporary project character Strong artistic guidance Leadership style varies Dependent on administrative and technical support
End result	Live performance by people on stage The première marking the transition

**Table 1 - Organizational characteristics of theatre productions**

Table 1 is developed based on the interviews and previous knowledge of the theatre. The table gives us a background to understand theatre productions better and to discover that they are both similar and different from regular work. The most apparent organizations to compare with theatres are highly professionalized environments producing unique live events, which can be consulting businesses, academics giving seminars, conferences or simply teaching, the event business creating internal organizational entertainment, kick-offs, presentations etc. Theatre works' reliance on props, costumes, sound and lighting, is quite similar to normal office workplace reliance on IT support, HRM systems or facilities management building support. This, in addition to theatre productions' temporal, highly creative and team-oriented character, make them also similar to general project and team performances. In other words, there are several other organisations that share traits with the theatre as places for creative work and leadership.

### **Theatres - the last frontier of digitalization?**

In this section, we will discuss why physical presence is so important in creative work and leadership processes and why digital and virtual communication is less prevalent here than elsewhere. This is intended to answer the second research question posed. Interestingly, when we explored the digital imprint in theatres, we got underneath the skin of theatre work.

This pushed the theatre directors to think and reflect on the nature of theatre work, but also to get to the very essence of how they are working. We were able to grasp how theatre people relate to each other through bodies, emotions, senses and just being fully human. Interestingly, the overall picture of the work and leadership of theatre performances is quite consistent regarding the importance of dedicated concentration, embodiment and focus of rehearsals. The theatre directors' attitudes and relation to digital media are quite consistent as well:

*'Usually I take comments directly after rehearsals. Everyone has to know each other well to communicate through mail so misunderstandings will not arise. It does not work to direct a play through Skype, as theatre is happening in the room. You work with people, shape situations in the room. I think about the digital life we live; if we are to concentrate, we cannot have all these things in our way.'* Informant 1

*'Digital communication is not used during the rehearsals; the absolute presence is essential. Theatre is an arena for human performance; you have to meet up physically and the theatre art unfolds through meetings and rehearsals.'* Informant 2

The theatre directors we interviewed all revealed similar attitudes regarding the digitalization of relations and communication. Digitalization in theatres is downplayed, although people use digital devices privately and in between the intense rehearsals. Interestingly, most of our questions about digitalization activated their consciousness and pride of theatre work being different than regular professional work conducted in modern organizations. Some reacted with surprise when asked about why they did not allow digital distractions. It was so obvious to them that they needed to be pushed to give an explanation. The explanations of why digital devices were not welcomed during intense creative work were oriented around theatres being relational, emotional and embodied. It was as if we had requested theatre directors to tell us what we wanted to hear. We were struck by the ability of the informants to articulate the relational and embodied aspects of their work.

*'I do not like to create through electronics; Skype works best when exchanging concrete information. I do not like to work through telephones either.'* Informant 3

Our inquiry revealed that theatre people love their smart phones and use them a lot, but only when they are not intensively working with a play. Many are devoted to social media and make pictures during rehearsals to post on their social media site. Sometimes the information department is involved and uses social media to draw attention to the coming play and to increase audience numbers. Especially social media posting directed to the young generations has proven to be successful.

The administration of theatres follows the general development of digitalized professional work and uses the necessary digital tools in both marketing, accounting, human resource management and other areas. Still, we find that the distancing of theatre rehearsal work from digitalization is interesting. First of all, it shows that artists are quite independent and autonomous in developing their own ways of doing things. They do not follow the mainstream pattern of knowledge based work with a prevalent use of digital devices in work meetings and the following widespread multitasking. On the contrary, theatre professionals let their smart phones and PC's be outside the stage during rehearsal work while they tend to rush to them during lunches and breaks. One theatre director said he needed to log off people in breaks, after intensive emotional and embodied work. Usually in offices it is the opposite (De Paoli

et.al., 2013), people use their digital devices and multitask during meetings, while they often log off during coffee breaks and lunches when they often prefer talking and relating to each other.

### **Theatres leading the way with embodied leadership in a digital age**

In this section, answering research question three, we discuss what we can learn from theatres regarding embodied and physical work and leadership processes in theatres relevant for other kinds of work and organizations. There were concerns in the 80ies and 90ies about the disappearance of theatre performative arts because of their relative high costs and because of competition from film, video, TV, internet and digitalized products. Today we can truly say that these predictions did not come true. Theatre art is still alive and active. Theatre audience development in many countries is stable and positive, as people still are attracted to see live performances with real people and bodies on the stage. Theatre performative arts are surviving despite competition from several media and entertainment offers. Real people and real bodies communicate something for which there is a need. It is therefore natural that theatre directors still maintain the embodied aspect when leading processes creating real live performances:

*'I think I perform and lead in a physically close way. One may discuss whether it is right, to sense and touch people. It is essential for me to see everybody face-to-face, to take the actors by the hand and get them to understand what I am saying. It is my acting background I draw upon when we discuss the play, the production, the performances. We always have a conversation in the middle. I am quite good at getting people to open themselves up, to create a warm dialogue. I am very fond of people and relate very intensively to people and may confront them directly and firmly, but they know I mean it in a good way.'* Informant 4

The core competence of making good theatre art lies in creating and leading processes to make interesting, touching, emotional performances. An extensive study of several theatre productions revealed that there is no best way to produce theatre (Sauer, 2005), and the best performances included emotionally engaging processes. Theatre performances with no emotions, both positive and negative, did not come out well. Even destructive emotional forces were found to be functional and important for theatre leadership (Sauer and Ropo, 2006). The emotional aspect can be seen to be connected to bodily expression, as the more emotions, the more bodily expression. When the theatre director is provoking, engaging and leading actors' emotions, we may call it an emotional approach to leadership (Sauer, 2005), then the performance will work and communicate with the audience. This makes sense considering that theatre is, amongst other things, the expression of bodies, speech, feelings and drama. In its ultimate sense, theatre is a physical manifestation of art, and the art does not exist without the physical existence of the body. Theatre performances are usually collective expressions of people and bodies. The quality of theatre performances is directly linked to how the bodily expressions are on the stage, the fluidity of bodies in process and the flow that is created. This is in opposition to, for instance, visual art that has a product as its end. The following quote explains how the creative nerve and spirit are manifested and speak through the bodies:

*'To me it is the physical aspect of theatre work I like, when people do it and understand when they do it. One may understand it with the head, but when people are deep in their work process with their head only, it is easy to feel completely lost. I try as director to fill up this feeling of being lost. Like training a muscle that gets big enough. I work hard to make them be in their*

*senses and feelings, to get them to know the situation so well that they just know how to do it. The physical becomes very important, that they just do it.'*  
Informant 1

All theatre directors interviewed talk about the importance of being in the body and working with the bodies on the stage. They underscored how achieving focus and concentration - by the emotional and the embodied being there - is important for the active engagement and living creativity in the artistic creation of a play. Directors need the actors and involved artists to be very much present in their mind, emotions and body in order to create a convincing performance that the audience will respond to.

The insight into theatre work and processes shows that embodiment is a central aspect of aesthetic leadership (Ropo et.al., 2016), but also a central aspect of leadership in artistic work processes, such as theatres and orchestras (Biehl-Missal, 2010; Koivunen, 2003; Koivunen and Wennes, 2010; Ropo et al., 2002; Ropo and Parviainen, 2001; Sauer, 2005). Both leading and following take place in and through the body. It starts with the physical presence. It would be rather difficult to act — or to do any other theatre work for that matter — without the body being present. Theatre work and its leadership is a lot about getting people to work well together, to get the flow and team spirit so the theatre performance on stage conveys engagement, embodied playing and emotional 'nerve', as the following quote from our interviews reveals:

*'In theatres it is very important to be in the situation, to be together, talk about a theme, get to the very deep of it and then jump to and from. I have a job to create holistic unity, but the actors are going to live each second on the stage so they spend each second to listen to what I say and to be there with the whole of them. We are part of a situation. If the actors are not on the stage, then they can sit down with their cellular phones, but that does not happen often.'* Informant 1

## Conclusions

We discovered through the interviews with theatre directors that the theatre may give the digitalized work environments both inspiration and some concrete insight into creative work and leadership processes. It is one of the few work environments where they keep digital devices out of their creative group process. This 'black swan' methodology made us explore the theatre setting in a lake swamped with 'digital' white swans. In today's work life, everybody is dependent on their digital work tools and do not manage to be without. We live in an 'optimistic technology bubble' where technology is the tool and answer to the essentials of all knowledge work and daily life in general. The leadership of creative group processes in theatre rehearsals is both embodied, focused and emotionally tense. To take research question three a bit further, we ask:

*What can we learn from theatres to be relevant for interdependent, high performance, professionalized work meetings?*

When creativity is sought for, leadership should demand focused attention and embodied, sensuous and emotional concentration on the part of all group participants. We have illustrated -- through previous research in the field of organizational aesthetics seeking knowledge from the arts and our empirical insight -- how theatres' leadership may offer an interesting context to leadership of creative group meetings. We do not claim that this is the only prerequisite for creativity, but that theatres with their long historical traditions in the westernized world have developed a way of working that resists digitalization of

communication and relations. Our description of creative work and leadership processes in theatres may be an inspiration and also a legitimization of keeping distractions to a minimum, either digital or others. However, we do not exclude the possibility that digital devices may be used for the purpose of creativity, either in the beginning of the group meeting or in organized sessions, when 1) details of insightful research would add value, 2) a relevant digital image or film would enhance discussion, 3) a catchy quote is required, 4) a leader in the field or an industry contact can be identified to help guide the making of informed decisions etc.

We have made a link between the aesthetic and embodied turn in leadership (e.g. Hansen, Ropo and Sauer, 2007, Ladkin, 2008, Ladkin and Taylor, 2015) with current research on virtual and digital work and leadership (e.g. Turkle, 2015, Wasson, 2004, Kleinman, 2010, Avolio et. al. 2014, DasGupta 2011, De Paoli, 2015, Kayworth and Leidner, 2002, Zigurs, 2002). The literature review on virtual and digital work and leadership revealed that research is more preoccupied with the positive and negative effects of digitalization of work and leadership in virtual space than how it transforms our way of working and leading generally. As noted in the beginning of the paper, we have sacrificed embodied and sensuous interactions for technology and digitalization, while current research about digital work and leadership does not pay embodiment and physicality much attention. The opposite seems to yield for the embodied leadership perspective where we find an absence of technology and digitalization.

A contribution of this paper is also about detecting gaps in research and inviting other researchers to continue this discussion and research journey. Some of the research questions we think will be interesting to explore further are:

How might the perspective of embodied, sensuous, aesthetic leadership enrich our understanding of digital and virtual work and leadership?

How does the material perspective of leadership benefit from including both embodied, sensuous and emotional relations with technology or digitalization?

How do our emotions and senses relate to technical devices and how do people also embody their PCs, I-pads, smart-phones and other technical devices at work?

There is more to explore in today's digitalized work life - both in the theatre world, creative work processes and leadership.

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### About the authors

**Donatella De Paoli** is Associate Professor at the department of organization and leadership at the Norwegian School of Business BI, Norway. With an everlasting passion for art, especially visual and theatre arts, and a Phd about team processes in projects, she started already in 1999 to infuse the business school with the arts. This has turned into arts management programs at different levels, a production management programs and also the use of arts-based methods in leadership programs. With an attraction to organizational architectural aesthetics, Donatella participated in the research project Leadership in places and spaces, with Professor Arja Ropo and others. The inquiry of how spatial practices shape organizational life has also led her to investigate material and bodily matters in digital and virtual spaces. This has turned into books, chapter in edited books and publications in journals about a varied range of themes; from leadership in open-plan offices, creative spaces, aesthetic leadership in the performative arts, film and film storytelling as arts-based method and so on. The research journey is still continuing.

**Sigrid Røyseng** is Professor of Arts Management at BI Norwegian Business School and Adjunct Professor of Cultural Policy and Cultural Analysis at the Norwegian Academy of Music. Currently Røyseng is Associate Dean for BI's bachelor program in Creative Industries Management. She is trained as a sociologist from the University of Oslo. She has her doctorate in Organization and Administration Theory at the University of Bergen. Røyseng has been a researcher at Telemark Research Institute (1999-2008) and Senior Advisor for research at Arts Council Norway (2008-2010). For three years (2014-2016) Røyseng was the Editor-in-Chief of the Nordic Journal of Cultural Policy. She is a member of the editorial boards of the International Journal of Cultural Policy and the Norwegian Journal of Sociology. She has published books and articles on the role of artists, cultural policy, cultural entrepreneurship, cultural leadership and freedom of speech in work life.

**Grete Wennes** was professor of leadership and knowledge work at NTNU, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway, with a special passion for the arts and leadership. Her academic career started with choir conduction of classical acapella music and then slowly turned into a life-long interest in leadership research and the arts. Her PhD was called "the Beauty and the Beast", referring to the great paradox in any art organization, between the lovely art on one side and the ugly economy on the other. She received her PhD in 2002 in arts management from Norwegian School of Economics. Grete's work is published widely in international journals, edited books and in books in her own name (some of them in Norwegian). Her research interests developed in several directions and among her favorites at the time are arts-based methods, embodied leadership, relational leadership, values and value based leadership. Wennes was widely used as speaker at different conferences and seminars and in leadership development programs. Grete has been practicing leadership in the arts by serving on several Boards of Directors in e.g. theatre, museum, performing art and jazz festival and in practicing choir conducting. She split her position at NTNU between being the Vice Dean for Executive Education at Faculty of Economics and Management and as research professor.