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WHEN THE SUIT DOESN'T FIT

Young leaders' work environment, well-being and identity work

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Abstract

Leaders who feel well are essential for an organisation and its employees, as this affects well-being and work engagement. Despite the importance, research on leaders' well-being is scarce, specifically regarding subgroups of leaders such as young leaders. The overall aim of this thesis was to investigate how young leaders experience their work environment, well-being and identity work process in the private sector in Sweden. Furthermore, to investigate if these experiences differ due to gender. Three studies were carried out using quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method designs to enhance knowledge in the field and to capture the complexity of being young in leader roles by applying a lifespan perspective. Results from Study I reveal that young leaders experience a poorer work environment compared to their older counterparts. Specifically, young leaders experience higher emotional demands, lower support from the organisation and find the leader role more challenging in terms of it being unclear and conflicting. Moreover, they rate their well-being as poorer with a higher degree of burnout and lower levels of vigour. These results indicate risks for young leaders' well-being and possibilities to thrive in this position. In Study II, the identity work process of young leaders was examined in three case organisations. In-depth interviews reveal how young leaders approach the leader role from a 'nonprototypical' position, that is, they deviate from the norm of the typical leader due to their youth and inexperience. Thus, young leaders face challenges in the acceptance-gaining process and try out different strategies on how to act and navigate the leader role. Study III investigates whether hardships for female leaders are established at an early age. On a general level, young female leaders experience a lack of resources with less influence and less organisational support, and rate their well-being as poorer in terms of vigour compared to other leaders. Advancing these results, cross-case comparisons between organisational settings with different gender compositions reveal that these challenges manifest differently due to context. Conclusively, a prerequisite to improve the situation for young female leaders is to increase the intersectional awareness to be able to adapt interventions for improvement. All in all, the increased knowledge from this thesis shows how age, and youth in particular, is an important contextual factor to consider in the advancement of our theoretic understanding of leader well-being and identity. Theoretically, findings contribute by advancing the lifespan model of leadership and can

be utilized in practice to help organisations safeguard the well-being of young leaders and provide them with a good start in working life.

Keywords

Lifespan perspective, young leaders, work environment, well-being, identity work, gender

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