

From Destructive Leadership to Good Leadership in Expert Organisations: Identifying the Determinants of Effective Leadership

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Abstract: Leadership culture in expert organisations strongly influences organisational well-being, employee retention and productivity. Destructive leadership, marked by authoritarian control, lack of transparency and neglect of employee welfare, erodes motivation and performance. Conversely, good leadership builds trust, fosters participation and supports professional growth. Drawing on eight semi-structured interviews with leaders in Finnish expert organisations of varying size, this study identifies the behavioural patterns that differentiate destructive from good leadership and proposes a development framework for practice. Reflexive thematic analysis was used; data saturation was achieved after the sixth interview and confirmed with two additional interviews. Results show that good leadership rests on: 1) values-based communication, 2) fairness and psychological safety, 3) shared decision-making, 4) strategic clarity and 5) systematic capability development. The study contributes to leadership theory by integrating destructive and constructive perspectives and advances the debate on sustainable work in knowledge-intensive contexts. Managerially, the findings point to organisation-wide interventions, rather than reliance on individual charisma, as the route to improved leadership quality and employee well-being.

Keywords: Expert Organisations, Leadership Development, Destructive Leadership, Good Leadership, Organisational Well-being, Employee engagement

1. Introduction

Work cultures are changing fast as demographic decline; technological acceleration and political volatility reshape labour markets. Expert organisations must therefore rethink leadership to keep employees healthy, motivated and productive. Theories of leadership are also increasingly influenced by calls for sustainability, social responsibility, and equity (Foss et al, 2022).

Using the empirical context of Finnish working life, the present paper focuses on destructive and good leadership styles, aiming to recognize and mitigate destructive leadership practices and identifying the key elements of effective leadership through empirical analysis. More specifically, the present study explores the dual nature of leadership (destructive and constructive) within expert organisations. The research questions this study seeks to respond to contribute to literature on leadership and sustainable work relates to the characteristics of good leadership in expert organisations: *What are the key components of good leadership and how does good leadership manifest itself in expert organisations?* and: *what are the effects of good leadership on expert organisations and their employees?* We combine a literature review with eight semi-structured interviews to derive actionable lessons for sustaining long, healthy expert careers.

2. Literature Review

We consider both good and poor (destructive) leadership in light of their definitions and impact. First, the former type is a determinant of sustainable work ability, which in turn is grounded in individuals' physical and mental health as well as their social capabilities. Additional resources that contribute to work ability include education, skills, values, attitudes, and motivation. When these elements are in balance with working conditions, a person's capacity to work remains high. Work ability serves as a key indicator for both career longevity and the likelihood of taking sick leave. As individuals age, their mental and physical resources naturally decline. Simultaneously, changes in workplace technologies and environments present new challenges. The quality of leadership within work communities also plays a significant role. Poor leadership has a direct negative effect on employees' work ability (Kunz and Millhof, 2023).

Leadership culture, an integral component of work environment and fluency, is currently undergoing significant transformation. Traditionally, leaders were viewed as heroic figures driving organisational success at any cost. Literature and public discourse have often praised these figures, yet there has been less attention paid to the adverse outcomes of such leadership cultures (Juuti 2018, pp. 13–14). Today, researchers increasingly aim to

disaggregate harmful elements of organisational leadership into more precisely defined phenomena (Page and Mgwenya, 2023).

Leadership itself emerges when individuals follow someone in pursuit of a shared goal. It is shaped by the relationships between leaders, followers, goals, and the situations in which action is taken. Leadership is a communal phenomenon that is built via shared focus, collaboration, and problem-solving, all aimed at achieving a common purpose. It is a process shaped by dialogue, where reality is interpreted and aligned to fit the situation. Groups within organisations need leaders to help them work efficiently toward their goals. Effective leadership requires knowledge, decision-making ability, passion, consistency, and a clear sense of direction. It is about earning trust and preparing the team for future challenges, not about superiority, but about responsibility for the organisation's vision. (Deshwal and Ashraf Ali 2020, p. 38; Juuti and Juuti 2021, pp. 20–21; Wolor et al, 2021, p. 106).

Destructive leadership, on the other hand, refers to a leadership culture where leaders prioritize their own goals over those of the organisation. A destructive leader actively harms the organisation through various means to advance personal interests. It is defined as wilful behaviour by someone in a leadership position that damages or intends to damage the organisation or its subordinates (Alexander et al, 2024, p. 1). Destructive leadership can manifest through individual or group behaviours, or as a process within leadership itself (Alexander et al, 2024; Klahn Acuña and Male 2022, p.2). Destructive leaders often have traits that increase and spread a toxic organisational culture. According to Boddy (2023, p. 599), these leaders typically lack empathy, act ruthlessly, and tend to lie. These traits and behaviours can be either intentional or unintentional. Some leaders knowingly adopt harmful behaviours to serve their own goals, while others may do so unconsciously, especially in cultures where destructive leadership has become normalized (Lipman-Blumen 2005, pp. 29–30). Destructive leadership impacts the organisation at some level. Its effects can be seen both on the individual level, such as reduced motivation and commitment, as well as on the organisational level, through decreased productivity, poor collaboration, and high employee turnover (Klahn Acuña and Male 2022; Wolor et al, 2022; Saleem et al, 2021).

Destructive leaders often possess personal traits that support the development of a toxic leadership culture. Charismatic leaders may present a favourable image to select individuals while behaving harshly toward subordinates. They are typically highly ambitious and driven to pursue their personal goals at any cost (Lipman-Blumen 2005; Page and Mgwenya, 2023). The main traits of destructive leaders include a strong desire for power, narcissism, and ideologies that are enhanced by hostility. Narcissism is characterized by arrogance, self-centeredness, envy, low self-esteem, and a need for entitlement. Many destructive leaders also have negative personal histories (Page and Mgwenya, 2023) and such leaders aggressively seek roles that elevate their importance within the organisation. They often justify their dominance by claiming to protect the organisation from external threats. In pursuit of their interests, they may use fear and intimidation which can lead employees to discuss work matters in secret. Destructive leaders may also slander or belittle both their subordinates and superiors (Wolor et al, 2022).

In expert organisations, in which tacit knowledge, strong professional identity and peer-regulated coordination are particularly visible, leadership must balance autonomy with direction (Henry, 2019). Yet few studies isolate leadership phenomena in such settings (Page & Mgwenya, 2023). Recent Finnish studies show that generational value gaps moderate perceptions of leadership fairness and autonomy (Wolor et al., 2021). Generation X leaders accustomed to command-and-control styles may inadvertently trigger disengagement among generation Y/Z experts, who equate good leadership with participatory problem solving and flexible work rhythms. Integrating generational theory thus refines our understanding of leadership effectiveness in knowledge-intensive settings.

3. Method

A qualitative methodological approach was chosen, since it is best suited for exploring experiential knowledge (Valli and Aaltola 2025, p. 39). The chosen interview format was a thematic interview, which assumes that the topics discussed reflect the participants' subjective perceptions and experiences related to the research topic. It is also assumed that participants have encountered relevant processes and phenomena. The key themes, such as structures and processes were identified related to the phenomenon through prior studies or literature (Puusa and Juuti 2020, p. 112). Thus, a semi-structured interview method via thematic interviews was applied. Finland was chosen as the empirical country context for the study, due to the prevalence of knowledge work and expert organisations in its society, and since the context is suitable for studying organisational leadership practices in general (e.g., Koveshnikov and Ehrnrooth, 2018). A semi-structured interview guide was developed by mapping prior leadership constructs onto the COM-B behavioural model (Michie et al., 2011). Questions

probed capabilities, opportunities and motivations behind both destructive and constructive practices. The questions were as follows:

1. Definition – *How do you define good leadership in an expert organisation?*
 - Probe: What concrete behaviours signal it to you?
2. Value/Impact – *Why is investing in leadership worthwhile?*
 - Probe: How does it affect day-to-day work or well-being?
3. Improvement – *What practical actions would raise the overall level of leadership in expert firms?*
 - Probe: What would you change first if you had a free hand?
4. Cornerstones – *Which elements are the cornerstones of good leadership?*
 - Probe: Rank the two most critical and explain why.
5. Negative experience – *Have you experienced poor leadership?*
 - Probe: How did it influence your motivation, performance or health?
6. Red lines – *Which leadership practices would you never use yourself?*
 - Probe: What makes them unacceptable?
7. Open floor – *Is there anything else about leadership you wish to add?*
 - Probe: Future trends or generational challenges?

(Each main question maps to COM-B: 1,4 → Capability; 2 → Motivation/Opportunity; 3,6 → Opportunity; 5 → Behaviour outcomes; 7 allows emergent themes.)

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews related to the study were conducted in April and May 2024, and the collected data was analysed during the summer of 2024. Eight individuals were selected for the study, each with different levels of experience in leading expert organisations or companies. Six of the interviewees were men and two women. They included CEOs, middle level managers overseeing expert staff, and leaders responsible for business operations and functions. Some also had experience in both leadership and leadership training (see table 1).

Table 1: Interviewee profiles.

Role	Sector	Gender	Years leading
CEO (2)	ICT; Engineering	2 Male	14; 12
Middle Manager	Consulting	2 Male 1 Female	13; 10; 9
Function	Public R&D	1 Male 1 Female	8; 11

The organisations they represented ranged in size from small companies with just a few employees to large corporations employing thousands. The range of experience that was consciously sought in the study enabled a multi-level examination of the focal topic of the study, i.e. leadership in expert organisations and how it is perceived from different positions. The organisations and interviewees were anonymized for the purposes of the study, as some participants requested anonymity to speak openly and candidly without fear of consequences for their careers or current roles. As a result, all interviewees are presented anonymously in the study to ensure fair and respectful treatment of all participants.

The interviews were conducted via remote meetings using MS Teams. The interviews were recorded with the platform's built-in tool, which also provided the first transcription of the video data. There were seven main questions, supported by follow-up and probing questions depending on the flow of each interview and the topics that emerged. Notes taken during the interviews were also used to ensure accuracy and alignment with what was said. The transcribed interviews formed the main empirical data for the study.

The data was categorized thematically using a three-level thematic framework. The themes were based on research questions and divided into two main categories: good leadership and poor leadership. These formed the top level of the framework. Each main theme was further divided into a second level of sub-themes, which refined the overarching categories. The third level consisted of follow-up and probing questions aimed at eliciting concrete and detailed interview responses that would result in rich data, thus allowing for the identification of the key elements of good leadership. Summary statements during the interviews were also applied by the interviewer to help structure and consolidate the themes. If interviewees provided additional comments in response to these statements, their input was categorized under the most appropriate theme.

Data saturation was reached when no new first-order codes emerged in interview 7; interview 8 confirmed stability (Saunders et al., 2018).

3.2 Organisation of Themes

The themes of good leadership support the development of leadership in expert organisations. Interviewees were asked to define good leadership based on their personal experiences, aiming to identify its key components and how it manifests within organisations. Because people perceive leadership differently, the theme was intentionally broad, helping to gather a wide range of elements that contribute to effective leadership.

One theme focused on the benefits and impacts of good leadership. While experiences varied, the significance of these outcomes helped clarify which leadership qualities led to specific positive effects in organisations. Another theme addressed improving leadership in general. This included both enhancing poor leadership and refining already good practices based on lived experiences. Both broad and specific observations were considered valuable in identifying areas for improvement. The fourth theme explored the core principles of good leadership. Interviewees identified the most important building blocks of effective leadership, helping to determine whether a shared understanding of good leadership practices could be formed. The themes on poor leadership focused on participants' experiences and their effects on organisations. Instead of asking for definitions, the study explored poor leadership through concrete observations and personal experiences. The aim was to understand whether interviewees had encountered poor leadership and how it had impacted their work or well-being. A subtheme examined leadership practices the interviewees would avoid entirely, i.e. what they considered unacceptable in leading people or organisations. This helped identify individual boundaries and values in leadership approaches. Follow-up and probing questions were used to explore the main themes and clarify specific points or summarize quotes.

Finally, the categorized interview data was compiled into a unified dataset, organised according to the thematic framework. This synthesis enabled the identification of patterns and recurring elements to support conclusions about the key building blocks of good leadership. The analysis acknowledged that while data within a theme might include multiple viewpoints, all relevant observations were represented. This approach aimed to highlight both commonalities and differences, recognizing that leadership is a wide and interpretative phenomenon that naturally results in different perspectives. (cf. Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2014, pp. 149–150)

The research findings were categorized according to the interview questions into two thematic frameworks: good leadership and poor leadership, with each individual interview forming its own part of the dataset. The data collected from the interviews was processed in such a way that, for each interviewee, the following were identified: a definition of good leadership, the benefits and effects of good leadership, ways to improve leadership, and the cornerstones of good leadership. In addition, the interviews addressed poor leadership through experiences, its effects, and excluded leadership practices. Credibility was reinforced through member checking and multi-author coding discussions, while an audit trail and reflexive journals secure dependability, confirmability and transferability.

4. Findings

The findings of the study are presented in a way that the data from each interviewee was combined according to the main themes. When combining the results, similarities were sought based on how they affect employees in expert organisations as well as, for example, the success of the organisation. To combine the results, key points were listed from each interviewee's data, considering the experiences and observations each interviewee had highlighted regarding the functioning of various expert organisations, their employees, and their leadership. An effort was also made to consider details related to different levels of leadership. These levels were influenced by matters related to the entire company's operational environment as well as matters related to individual employees. Similar items were grouped together to synthesize the results.

The findings reveal that effective leadership in expert organisations is multi-dimensional and closely tied to employee well-being, organisational clarity, and shared values. Good leadership was found to involve future-oriented thinking, organisational resilience, clear communication, strong interaction, and trust. It is characterized by fairness, a supportive work environment, and the ability to empower individuals through consistent and transparent decision-making. Leaders emphasized that when leadership promotes well-being, employees are more engaged, innovative, and productive. The benefits of good leadership include greater organisational success, smoother operations, and improved internal collaboration. Positive leadership practices

were also seen to reduce burnout and improve job satisfaction. Interviewees proposed improvements such as allocating more time for one-on-one leadership interactions, ensuring role clarity, and aligning leadership practices with the real needs of teams. They also stressed the need for leadership development to be intentional and consistent across all organisational levels. The structure of good leadership arising from the data is seen in figure 1.

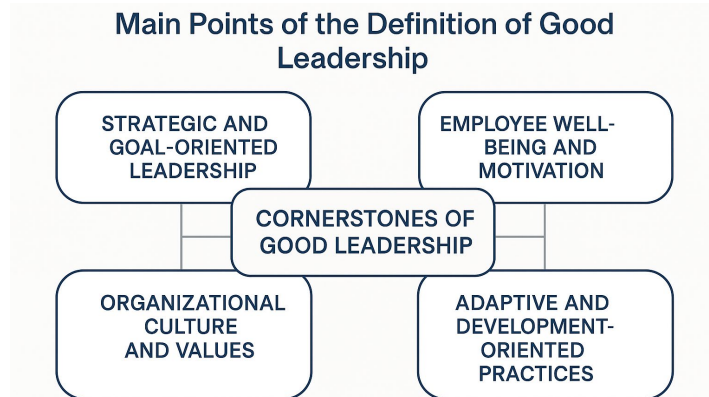


Figure 1: Key elements of good leadership.

The findings show that leadership, good leadership in particular, operates across multiple levels and dimensions. Leadership targets vary: some focus on managing business strategy, vision, and operations, while others focus on leading people, practices, and competencies. Leadership at different organisational levels fulfils distinct roles: top management concentrates on strategic goals, while lower levels lead via people and via daily operations. Effective leadership aligns decision-making with the point of impact, meaning actions are taken at the organisational level where they matter the most. An example of this are decisions concerning individual employees, best managed at the closest possible level to those affected. While leadership occurs across different layers, all levels should align with the same more general, overarching goals.

An important foundation of good leadership is high-quality communication. The findings suggest that Internal communication should be two-way, honest, and transparent. Every employee should have the right and responsibility to voice their views and development ideas without fear of compromising their position. Employees should also have access to private dialogue with their supervisors, including topics or issues that may be unrelated to work. Important in this is that leaders get to know their employees, more specifically their styles, personalities, and responses to situations, and to accordingly demonstrate openness themselves. By setting an example, leaders can maintain a culture where good practices are recognized and further developed (see figure 2).



Figure 2: The benefits and impact of good leadership.

The findings indicate that similar principles apply to decision-making: Employees should be involved in decisions that affect them and be provided with sufficient understanding of the background related to those decisions. Decisions should be made where their impact is felt, and the rationale must be transparent enough to revisit and assess the decision's quality or necessity for revision. Experts can make sound judgments and should be included in the process. Organisations should not adhere rigidly to past decisions and path-dependence but instead reassess their effects as contexts change over time. The result can be a culture in which the organisation voluntarily works toward its goals.

Leadership should also be inspiring and consciously designed to help employees realize their full potential. The role of a leader in this context is not to provide ready-made answers but instead to challenge individuals to find solutions that benefit both the organisation and their own professional growth. When leaders delegate responsibility effectively, they create space for themselves to lead more strategically. For this reason, also, leaders need to cultivate an environment where employees can focus on their core competencies. A leader must stay attuned to the organisation and be able to read signals that point toward success or improvement – and to course-correct if necessary.

The leader's task is to eliminate barriers to productive work and support employees by creating the best possible conditions for success. Leadership also requires giving employees room to work in their own ways. Experts are capable of self-direction, and when they are given the freedom to generate ideas and solve problems independently, it frees the leader to concentrate on strategic oversight. Together, leaders and employees should agree on goals and how to monitor progress. These goals must be clear and realistically achievable within regular working hours to ensure employee productivity, endurance, and well-being. In summary, all aspects of good leadership identified in the study relate to holistic well-being. Poor leadership experiences were clearly linked to decreased well-being and energy. A clear and encouraging environment is important, with equality a key leadership value. The main recommended actions for improving leadership practices in expert organisations, as drawn from the data, are seen in figure 3.

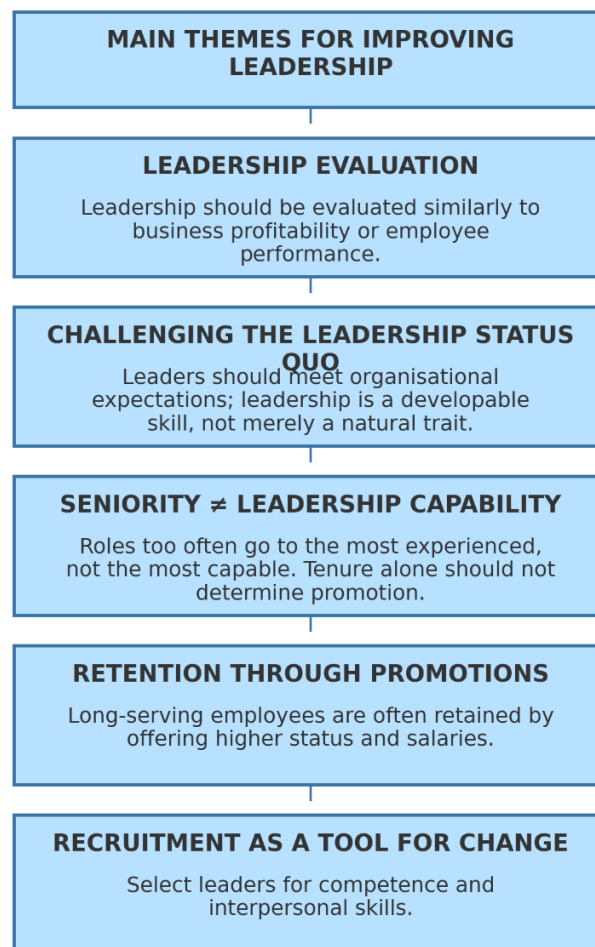


Figure 3: Recommendations for improving leadership practices in expert organisations.

Finally, the synthesis of good leadership in expert organisations, as identified from the empirical analysis, are:

- Empathy and humanity: Leaders should demonstrate empathy, respect and fairness toward all employees.
- Equality and fair treatment: Every individual deserves equal treatment regardless of background, gender or personal traits.
- Lead by example: Leaders should model behaviours that foster a respectful and inclusive culture.
- Moral backbone: Integrity and consistency in behaviour; no double standards or favouritism.
- Challenge hierarchical myths: Experience does not make anyone infallible; questioning a leader's view should be possible.
- Collective problem-solving: Organisations should encourage open discussion and mutual respect to find shared solutions.

5. Discussion

The findings relate closely to ongoing discussions on good leadership in organisations, which appears less a matter of personal charisma and more the systemic alignment of values, communication and decision rights. The prevalence of psychological safety in the findings echoes Edmondson (2019) but positions it as a prerequisite rather than an outcome. We consider that this finding may relate to the specific empirical setting of expert organisations in the present study. The findings revealed that destructive and constructive behaviours can coexist within the same leader, where day-to-day practices and organisational checks can “tip the balance”. The five-theme model illustrated in Figure 1 provides a behavioural blueprint that reflects polarised leadership debates in research.

More specifically, by framing leadership as a set of mutually reinforcing practices, it is possible to move the discussion beyond trait-based prescriptions and more towards organisational capability development discussions. In doing so, it becomes possible to construe good leadership practices through a dynamic capability (Teece et al., 1997) framework. These findings also align with recent calls for relational, context-sensitive leadership theory (Foss, Klein & Murtinu, 2022) and demonstrate their applicability in knowledge-intensive economies such as Finland. We next consider how they extend the extant literature, in considering the theoretical contribution of the findings in more detail.

6. Theoretical Contribution

The study contributes to leadership literature by integrating the concepts of destructive leadership and good leadership within expert organisations. In doing so, it provides a structured analysis of how harmful leadership behaviours (e.g., narcissism, manipulation, and disregard for employee well-being) manifest and impact both individuals and organisations. It thus contributes to the ongoing discussion in literature on the nature of good as opposed to poor leadership practices across organisational contexts (e.g., Alexander et al, 2024; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Acuña and Male, 2022), by categorizing destructive leadership as a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing both intentional and unintentional behaviours, and by demonstrating how these behaviours can become embedded in organisational culture. Importantly, the findings extend existing literature by linking destructive leadership directly with employee motivation, organisational performance, and cultural toxicity, thereby contributing to a more in-depth, holistic understanding of the dynamics and impact of poor leadership in knowledge-intensive organisational environments.

The developed framework identifying the key cornerstones of good leadership in expert organisations, drawn from analysis of qualitative interviews with leaders across different organisational levels, helps literature on the topic by proposing good leadership as a multi-dimensional construct, encompassing clarity, fairness, well-being, and equality. Unlike many previous models that offer prescriptive leadership styles, this approach emphasizes leadership as a dynamic, context-sensitive process grounded in lived experiences. The resulting guiding principles for leadership development processes, highlighting the notion that leadership is both a cultural and strategic resource for organisational sustainability and employee health.

7. Managerial and Policy Implications

The empirical data also emphasized the need for leadership training that should not be just for leaders, and that organisations should recognize harmful practices and for employees to engage constructively in leadership processes. Future research should aim to create frameworks integrating theory and practice for also improving

leadership and monitoring its development at the organisational level. As Finland faces discussions about shorter workweeks and increasing productivity, good leadership must be recognized as a key driver of organisational innovation and well-being. Another practical implication arising is that leaders should avoid inconsistent or reactive decision-making. Clear direction and fairness are essential and enhancing well-being requires more time spent on leadership, especially in one-on-one interactions. These must be meaningful, uninterrupted, and tailored to the needs of the employees. This is important for managers and leaders to consider, since the findings of this study indicated that many leaders found this aspect especially challenging.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This study had shed light on both destructive and good leadership in expert organisations, highlighting the need for broader research on their effects in the evolving work cultures in national contexts such as in Finland. We also acknowledge several limitations and arising future potential research avenues from the study. One limitation in the present study is that for the time, we did not have a chance for a longitudinal, panel-type data collection. Destructive leadership, though widely recognized in literature, still lacks long-term empirical studies, particularly on how organisational culture either encourages or prevents it (Alexander et al, 2024). The phenomenon is often linked to the individual traits of leaders, yet the role of structural or contextual factors remains underexplored. For instance, placing significant responsibility on a few individuals may inadvertently create conditions for toxic leadership.

Although the five behavioural themes offered here seem to apply across cases, several interviewees warned against over-generalising leadership “cornerstones”. Effectiveness ultimately hinges on each organisation’s culture, workforce composition and industry context. In the empirical context of our present study, media reports and interviewees included examples where international headquarters imposed aggressive management tactics in Finnish branches, which would suggest a further need for research the keep shedding light on how cultural differences can determine and shape leadership practices.

9. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the key factors of good leadership in expert organisations and in doing so illustrate how good leadership looks like in expert organisations. While the discussion in academia and in management in practice on what constitutes good leadership and how that can benefit different types of organisations remains ongoing, we see this study as an added contribution to that discussion pertaining to specifics and peculiarities of expert organisations in this research domain. By shedding light on the unique leadership needs and dynamics of expert organisations, this adds to the efforts aimed at explaining the nature and impact of leadership cultures that enhance both employee wellbeing and organisational performance.

Ethics Declaration

No ethical clearance was required for the research.

AI Declaration

AI tool (ChatGPT) was used to re-format the list of references to the correct conference format. Figures 1-4 were translated and re-drawn from the original Finnish data with the help of ChatGPT. Final proof-reading of the manuscript was conducted with Microsoft Office 360 with its Copilot functionality.

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