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Understanding Contemporary Leadership through the Participatory Conference Approach: Capturing Managers' Perceptions in Ecologically Relevant Settings

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Abstract:

Research Question: In this paper, we discuss and analyze the methodology of participatory conferences as a way to obtain highly relevant data for work and organizational psychology and management science in a context that offers greater ecological validity than typical research settings. **Motivation:** We analyze how the participatory conference approach can enable the collection of ecologically relevant insights into managers' perceptions of future leadership characteristics. **Idea:** Participatory conference approaches entail open discussions of professionally relevant topics and collaboratively address pressing issues within professional communities. By integrating different conference formats, a forum that embodies the scientist-practitioner approach could be created by offering a structure for exploring participants' understanding of some predefined topics while generating practical solutions relevant to professional practice. In this paper, we analyzed one specific segment of the SPARK 2024 leadership conference (i.e. "SPARK Lab"), which was held in Belgrade in 2024. The conference brought together about 200 leaders (70% of participants were employees in top management positions), who, particularly within the "SPARK Lab" segment, discussed the characteristics of future leaders. Our study draws on different conference materials to explore how participatory conferences foster environments conducive to both knowledge generation and practical problem-solving. Particular attention is given to the characteristics of future leaders as understood and enacted by managers in Serbia. **Tools:** We have employed a case study approach and qualitative content analysis relying on Gioia methodology. **Findings:** The results indicate that managers in Serbia perceive future leaders as empathic who regulate employees' emotions and promote organizational culture. Attitudes toward the future are marked by ambivalence toward new technologies, seen both as an imperative and a threat to collective relationships, while the role of future leaders in socially responsible management remains insufficiently defined. The results revealed the extent to which the conference fostered a relaxed atmosphere that encouraged honest responses, while simultaneously guiding participants toward embedding their responses in highly professional discourse which revealed certain limitations in relation to innovative approach. **Implications:** The participatory conference approach could be further analyzed and used as an ecologically reliable method for both process oriented scientific endeavours and pragmatic problem solving.

Keywords: participatory conference approach, contemporary leadership, case study, Serbia

JEL Classification: M12, M14, M10, O15, J24

1. Introduction

In modern work organizations operating under conditions of extremely rapid change and business transformation due to the introduction of AI technology, the question of leadership becomes one of the important topics. Apart from the question of what modern leadership should look like, there is also the question of its survival both as a concept and as a practice. While contemporary leadership approaches continue to incorporate established characteristics of transformational and transactional leadership into

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their practices (Bass & Avolio, 1993), there is also a growing emphasis on sustainable, ethical, mindful, and servant leadership types (Di Fabio & Peiro, 2018). Although leadership has been widely studied, much of the existing literature relies on survey-based approaches. Despite the fact that these studies are informative and valuable, the inclusion of hard-to-reach subjects and keeping them motivated to participate in such studies are very challenging. Moreover, it raises the question of the extent to which such research approaches could capture the ongoing mutual accommodation between an active human being and a changing environment, that is, how ecologically valid they are (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In particular, in high pace business environment, it seems that leadership research would benefit from clearer understanding how individuals collectively construct and negotiate their interpretation of leadership through palpable, first-hand data collection. Such a perspective relies on process-oriented approaches (Pettigrew, 1997) which emphasize that organizational phenomena develop through constant interactions, conflicts, and negotiations. In this sense, researching organizational phenomena requires a close connection between data and theory, a flexible and emergent research design, and the selection of cases according to their potential to contribute to the understanding and development of a concept (Eisenhardt, 1989). This approach requires research settings in which theoretical concepts and practical experience could intersect, allowing different topics to be explored as both a conceptual and a lived phenomenon.

In this paper, we propose and analyze the format of participatory conferences as a way of obtaining research data that are ecologically valid and tangible. This type of conference enables a topic to be discussed in a structured way, while maintaining the freedom provided by an interactive environment. Precisely in the form of iterative engagement, this context makes it possible to observe how an understanding of a topic and confrontation of ideas develop in front of the researchers' eyes. It also enables immediacy, rapid testing, and the adaptation of research hypotheses, which is often not possible in traditional research approaches.

The study of different conference formats and their outcomes is not new in the literature (e.g., Augustine et al., 2023; Carpenter, 2016; Degen & Kobler, 2026; Hale & Skallerup Bessette, 2016). However, the specific characteristics of conferences, their audiences, and the various approaches to analyzing conference-generated data continue to raise new questions that may deepen our understanding of such gatherings as potential forums for generating valuable scientific and practical insights.

Inspired by Eisenhardt's (1989) framework for theory building from empirical cases and process-oriented perspectives on team cognition (e.g. Grand et al., 2016), we adopt and propose an ecological, process-oriented and highly participatory approach to data gathering in the exploration of leadership. From this perspective, conceptualization of leadership is not treated as a fixed process, but as a continuously evolving socially constructed phenomenon.

Empirically, we examine the SPARK 2024 conference (i.e. the "SPARK lab" session) on future leadership held in Belgrade, Serbia - the conference that was organized in a dual format, comprising a structured conference component, and a unique, highly participatory component. The conference brought together 200 participants (almost 70% were employees in top management positions) from versatile contexts - business, human resources, and academia to discuss contemporary leadership. A particular focus was on identifying, discussing, and defining the characteristics of future leaders. Conference design enabled both structured, traditional conference format with rotating and iterative discussions, allowing participants to engage with opposing viewpoints and build on prior conversations. Using a case study approach and qualitative analysis following Gioia et al. (2013), we explore how leadership-related meanings are constructed, negotiated, and refined across interaction in this setting.

This study makes three contributions. First, it proposes participatory conferences as a promising context for studying organizationally relevant topics in real time, thus enriching traditional research designs. Second, it examines a processed based research perspective on how leadership understanding may come out from interaction, thus contributing to process-oriented approaches in HR management (e.g. Pettigrew, 1997). Third, it offers practical insight into how practitioners collectively understand and interpret contemporary leadership, highlighting the role of interaction in linking theoretical ideas with practical experience.

2. Theoretical Background

Highly specialized professional and academic conferences are expected to foster knowledge transfer, networking, and innovation; however, they are often embedded in traditional formats that constrain the freer exchange of ideas and participants' dedication (Degen & Kobler, 2026). Different participatory conference

formats nowadays emerge as an answer to shortcomings of such traditional approaches which should ensure participant activity, the flow of ideas, as well as knowledge creation (Degen & Kobler, 2026). Participatory conference formats often rely on unconference-based approaches that are primarily organized around interactions and self-organization, leading to knowledge co-creation. (Budd et al., 2015; Owen, 2008). These formats enable participants to be more autonomous, and motivated through engagement with content, process and social interaction (Carpenter, 2016). Empirical research on edcamps suggests that participants value the interactional and collaborative nature of these settings - particularly the way they learn and from whom they learn (Carpenter & Linton, 2016). The natural flow and exchange of ideas enabled by non-traditional conference formats could, to a large extent, resemble genuine participatory action research and focus group discussions, which are, in fact, common tools used by contemporary researchers.

The potential of participatory conferences as research settings could be understood through a number of theoretically grounded lenses, which are discussed in the following paragraphs. The first lens draws on theory building from the case analysis approach (Eisenhardt, 1989). This approach emphasizes the development of theory through immediate engagement with data, highlighting the importance of pattern identification. Rather than solely testing predefined hypotheses, theory emerges through an ongoing interplay between data and theoretical conceptualization. What specifically indicates the research potential that the participatory conference approach brings is an emergent research design that enables a transparent and credible data collection process. What is also particularly important in the context of Eisenhardt's (Eisenhardt, 1989) approach is that data are collected in the real-world context, "on the ground", and that data collection and data analysis largely overlap. It is also important to emphasize that data could be collected using multiple methods simultaneously. These characteristics particularly point to the "fruitfulness" of conferences for applying this approach. Furthermore, conferences allow the process of team knowledge emergence to unfold in front of a researcher's eyes. Different presentations, lectures, and conversations contribute to reinforcing an existing mental representation, or to the emergence of a new one. Knowledge is also shared and integrated, thereby giving rise to a collective representation of knowledge. Finally, this process results in a shared understanding of a particular topic (Grand et al., 2016; Pentland, 1999). It is precisely in this process that the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge could be best observed and followed (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In this process, existing experiences and unclear ideas are also reconsidered and shaped into concepts that are integrated and crystallized through the process itself. It is important to note that the iterative return to and collection of ideas with the aim of achieving group consensus among experts are familiar characteristics of the Delphi method (Hasson et al., 2000). However, what a "live", participatory conference enables, in contrast to the Delphi method, is precisely the confrontation of opinions and the process observation which provide some exceptional research insights.

Finally, it is important to emphasize why studying leadership in dynamic settings remains essential. Leadership is one of those topics in management that continues to attract sustained attention from both scholars and practitioners, often revolving around the same recurring question: whether leadership matters, and to what extent (Kelloway & Gilbert, 2017). Although virtually no working organization would explicitly deny the importance of leadership, both academics and professionals repeatedly return to questioning the foundations upon which this belief rests (Kelloway & Gilbert, 2017). Changes in the dynamics of work and the evolving characteristics of the workforce continuously call for a re-examination of established leadership concepts (e.g., Bass, 1999), particularly in relation to the alignment between individual values and organizational values. Leadership, therefore, remains a topic that necessarily needs to involve multiple stakeholders – leaders, followers, as well as the broader community. Paradoxically, leaders as respondents are often among the most difficult to access in empirical research, largely due to the demands and responsibilities of their roles, which leaves limited space in their work agendas. Apart from that, leaders (often senior managers) also constitute a particularly demanding conference audience. In our context in particular, they tend to expect conferences to provide insights into competitive international academic and professional trends, while simultaneously being highly motivated to engage in discussions. Moreover, they also tend to disengage quickly from content perceived insufficiently stimulating. In this sense, well-designed conference formats may serve as spaces where leaders continuously gather to gain relevant professional insights, while also functioning as platforms for meaningful dialogue, and research settings that could help us deepen our understanding of their perceptions of important management-related issues.

In the end, attempting to bring all the "lenses" together (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Grand et al., 2016; Pentland, 1999) into a single "optical system," and arguing for the possibility of using conferences as an ecologically relevant settings for collecting highly relevant data on management-related topics, we summarize the argument through the following propositions. First, conferences provide researchers with a rare access to a real, natural setting in which individuals gather to discuss relevant topics. In this context, researchers could also gain insight into the multilayered nature of a problem by themselves being part of that community.

Furthermore, this setting enables the observation of processes as they unfold – the exchange and discussion of ideas, and the reaching of shared understandings that are further translated into concrete decisions in practice. Finally, considering that the world of work is changing at an extraordinary pace following the introduction of AI technologies, which constantly calls for open discussions, this approach enables us to uncover issues that have not yet reached the desks of researchers and decision-makers. In this paper, we will analyze materials obtained through one such conference, attempting to arrive at unique insights both into the idea behind this approach and into the results we obtained.

3. Method

3.1 Materials and sample

In this paper, we analyze the SPARK 2024 Belgrade conference (one day conference on leadership development and contemporary leadership), held on October 9, 2024, in Belgrade, which focused on understanding leadership and developing contemporary leadership practices.

The event brought together 200 participants, including managers, HR managers, entrepreneurs, and SME owners, who discussed the key qualities and practices of future leaders in a participatory environment. About 70% of participants were employees in top management positions, SME owners, or professionals working in HR services. A smaller proportion (approximately 15%) comprised participants from finance, quality management, and procurement, as well as 15% of individuals from academia or creative professions (e.g., futurists and journalists). This conference integrates three formats – presenter and panel focused conference approach, together with participatory conference approach. The presenter and panel focused conference approach included highly skilled, specialized speakers (experts, professors) who discussed and presented the topic of leadership in different ways (“SPARK talks”). The participatory conference approach included two key activities (“SPARK vision” and “SPARK lab”). Spark vision is the activity that preceded the “SPARK lab” activity (which is the central part of the analysis in this article). This first activity (“SPARK vision”) was supposed to “open” the participatory part, “break the ice” and ignite the activity of collaborative generation of ideas (“SPARK lab”). It was designed as a participative quiz, the goal of which was to jointly reflect and define the desirable qualities of future leaders. The activity was attended by executive directors and human resources directors (fourteen of them) from large companies who were personally invited to participate in this activity – “to go on stage”. Through a structured “either-or” format of questions and public voting, participants discussed different qualities of a leader.

The central activity analyzed in this paper (Table 2), referred to as the “SPARK Lab,” involved all conference participants. This activity represented a hybrid approach that combined elements of the World Café method, such as participants’ rotation, collaborative dialogue, and the collective generation of ideas, with features of the Delphi method (Hasson et al., 2000; Linstone et al., 1975). What particularly resembled the Delphi method was the iterative refinement and alignment of expert perspectives across multiple rounds of discussion leading to the convergence of ideas.

This part of the conference brought to the table approximately 170 participants, while the discussions were moderated by CEOs, HR directors, and university professors. Participants were divided among twenty tables organized into four groups, with each table focusing on one of the predefined topics. The discussions were focused around five key topics making together a whole group of questions: 1) developing future leaders and ensuring leadership sustainability within organizations, 2) fostering a healthy organizational culture, 3) creating sustainable organizational strategies in a dynamic environment, 4) managing diversity and intergenerational collaboration, and 5) adapting leadership to a rapid technological change.

Each table was guided by two permanent mentors (from business and academia) who remained at the same table throughout the whole process. Their role was to facilitate the discussion, encourage active participation capture key insights, and ensure continuity of ideas flow during participant rotations. The process unfolded in three phases: an initial round of discussion at the assigned table, two rounds of participant rotations between tables with building upon previously shared materials, and a final phase dedicated to synthesizing and summarizing the key conclusions. During the rotations, participants built upon previously shared ideas while also introducing new ones. Meanwhile, mentors wrote down the central discussion points and directed the conversation further. In the final phase, groups consolidated their ideas and identified the main conclusions and recommendations, which were documented on hummers and presented to the audience as a collective outcome of the process.

For this paper we have analyzed the direct answers, hummers on which the answers were recorded, but also publicly available promotional conference material (posts on social media that preceded the conference, promotional material, press clipping), and internal material that was not in public circulation (instructions for moderators, invitations sent directly to mentors). The material that was analyzed was completely anonymous, it did not contain any personal or direct information about the participants involved in the discussion. Participation in this part of the conference was voluntary, and participants were not obliged to actively take part, or to speak if they did not wish to. Participants were informed that their answers provided during the participatory part of the conference would be analyzed and published in the Guide for the Development of Future Leadership (Teofilovic, Derkovic, & Atanasoski, 2025). The intention was for conference participants themselves to receive an overview of the conference's key conclusions that could support their future work. Thus, the present study represents a secondary analysis of existing data. Finally, it should be said that the authors of this work were the creator (Žaklina) and the participant/mentor (Milica) at the conference.

3.2 Data analysis approach

For data analysis, we used the Gioia's method (Gioia et al. 2012) in which qualitative content analysis is carried out within three levels of data coding. The first level implies that categories are derived and refined directly from the data, of which there could be up to 100 codes. At the next level, the categories are grouped into topics that include a deeper understanding and the first level of interpretation of the obtained data. At the last, third level, we reach the broadest dimensions that are obtained by grouping and deepening the topics of the second level. The review of the data structure, which is most often displayed graphically (or through a tabular view), is not the final stage of the analysis. In the end, it is important to breathe "life" into the "static" image, to animate it by building an "animated" model that explains the relationships between the displayed phenomena.

The analysis of our material began with a detailed joint reading of the entire material in two steps. The first step involved the analysis of the internal and external conference material (Table 1), that set the stage for discussion and the second step concerned the analysis of the material produced by the participants – ideas recorded on flipchart papers as part of the group discussions (Table 2). The first step in both analyses led to the formation of first-order codes. Each subsequent step leading to the generation of dimensions involved discussion among the researchers and the juxtaposition of the meanings obtained with existing theoretical concepts. Accordingly, the codebook was further developed and discussed through several iterations. Table 1 presents all the codes that the researchers arrived at through the analysis of the data and finally agreed upon, whereas in Table 2, due to space constraints, only illustrative codes are presented in the first column, together with quotations that best describe the meanings on the basis of which the second-order themes were formed. Given that the authors of this paper were also participants in the conference, trustworthiness was ensured through discussion in several rounds, the juxtaposition and discussion of different opinions, which led to the material being further refined in an iterative process in which also all the "abandoned" solutions and meanings were retained.

4. Results and discussion

Before analyzing the content of the managers' answers, with the aim to identify the key characteristics of future leaders, we have analyzed the context (Table 1) in which these answers were generated. The context was analyzed in order to better understand the participants' expectations, as well as the overall atmosphere of the conference, which might have significantly shaped the answers and directed the discussion. Conferences do not represent a conventional research setting, and general strategies used for conference promotion, together with direct instructions for conducting discussions, could make certain topics more salient while overshadowing or excluding others. For the analysis of the immediate context, we have chosen the materials used to promote the conference online, as well as the instructions provided to the facilitators, given that they altogether indirectly and directly shaped both the expectations and the course of the discussions analyzed within Table 2.

Table 1: Presentation of the content analysis of materials reflecting the characteristics of the context

Materials	First order concepts	Second order themes	Aggregate dimensions
Conference promotion on the Internet (Topic “framing”, materials available to participants)	Co-creation New platform Authentic Bold Creation of visionary profiles Exchange of ideas Leadership incubator Leaders of Serbian business in one place Networking Rich experience Young leaders Transformation Future Long-term Non-standard conference Action Unique speakers Gathering of all stakeholders Experts Unusual biographies Implementation of solutions Legacy for the future Key actors	Space for idea generation Space for learning and leadership skill development Generation of ideas that challenge existing norms A strategically important event that creates a legacy	Conference as an interactive, specialized environment for idea development Conference as a learning platform with legacy potential
Instructions for facilitators / materials not available to participants	Open dialogue, moderated discussion, structured listening, and equal participant involvement Convergence of ideas: translating raw ideas into deeper insights Summarizing previous inputs Rotation of perspectives Building on ideas across groups Developing ideas to produce meaningful and substantial outcomes Facilitators shape the rhythm of the process, guide the flow of discussion, balance participation, unblock potential stagnations, and ensure continuity of flow Mapping of key ideas Clustering of ideas Visual representation of ideas Recording of ideas Thinking is not only verbal, it is visible, drawn, and developed in space, forming the basis for recommendations	Collective co-construction and synthesis Knowledge emerges through movement The facilitator as a conductor, maintaining the flow of ideas through space and time Visual mapping of ideas, making ideas palpable	Process facilitation of collective, participatory work Materialization of thinking through visual practices

As can be seen from Table 1, the conference is positioned through different messages as both a classic, expert conference, and a participatory, dynamic and innovative forum. The promotion of the conference included a high emphasis on novelty in format, as well as the need for the generation of ideas that should leave a legacy for the professional community. The choice of words was to a large extent aimed at directing the participants towards being free to generate new ideas on the spot.

The instructions for the facilitators included instructions similar to those that would be given to focus group moderators, but also to facilitators within the Delphi method. The focus was on enabling and sustaining the process rather than directing one. This part can largely be seen as a good basis for collecting data on the phenomenon of leadership. However, it should be noted that the facilitators (“mentors”) were highly positioned CEOs and university professors, which may have created, at least among some participants, the expectation that the discussions were intended not only for the free exchange of ideas, but also for the sharing of highly professional and specialized insights and seeking advice. The very fact that the table moderators were labelled as “mentors” could have greatly influenced the process itself. In addition, the instruction for materializing palpable, visually convincing ideas could have been interpreted as a call for

making them particularly professionally and theoretically grounded. This, in turn, may have imposed certain constraints on both the form and the content of the participants' responses. Reconstructing the process through which the dialogue unfolded at the tables where the central "SPARK Lab" activity took place, we could say that it predominantly proceeded through a two-way exchange along the "mentor"–participants" line and, somewhat less frequently, through exchanges in which participants discussed issues among themselves. Within this predominantly two-way exchange, it was expected that the language of the discussion had to be made professionally relevant and polished instead of more open, and "closer" to lived experience. On the other hand, looking at this from the perspective of ecological validity, this kind of setting is to the greatest extent reminiscent of meetings in which the discussion takes place in the context of hierarchical difference among participants. Thus, the ability to observe such an exchange "in situ" could also have very similar drawbacks.

Table 2: Presentation of the content analysis of responses on the characteristics of future leaders

First-order concepts	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
"Managing fear of change" "Allowing mistakes / no mistakes, only lessons" "Constructive feedback" "Breakfast with the CEO (talents, new employees, value ambassadors)" "Understanding the needs of generations (through assessment)"	An actor in shaping interpersonal relationships and emotional experiences (leader as regulator)	The leader as an humble actor in shaping and supporting the interpretative frameworks of employees in relation to work
Employee involvement in decision-making Reverse mentoring Autonomy and empowerment "Bringing out the best in people" Quick bite learning & communication "Tip of the day" "Providing all generations with opportunities to exchange experiences and managing competencies" Empathy	Gradual and controlled delegation of power to employees (participation is managed by a leader)	
"Sharing good experiences" "Clear roles with clear connections" "Filter for engagement / employees with the same or similar values (value-based selection)" Community building (sharing experiences, connecting through deeper meaning, social responsibility, creativity) "Growth mindset" "Brand ambassadors" "Workshops for value formation"	Leader as a narrative-shaping actor	The leader as a stabilizer of continuous organizational uncertainty
"To make it a job for someone to follow innovations" "Innovation hub" "Constant monitoring of trends and benefits" "Celebration of change" "A leader who promotes change"	Normalizing of constant change	
"Employees must be familiar with the new trends (in order to avoid that attitude I'm not sure whether we have that in the company)" "Technological exclusivity (elimination of outdated application processes, etc.)" "Introduction of new technologies through informal gatherings and gamification" "Address the fear of employees that new technologies do not affect job security"	Tense relationship with technological change	
"Zero tolerance for cultural disrespect" "Vertical Mentoring" "Talent mapping - mentoring and reverse mentoring" "Creating a culture that supports the development of young leaders" "Leaders present in all elements of change"	Leader as an agent of organizational culture	
"Caring for all stakeholders" "Care for the environment/social responsibility"	Present but non-operationalized awareness of corporate social responsibility	
"With a clear vision and mission" "Decisions from integrity" "Walk the talk" "I am the plan" "Live - do's & don'ts" "Self-development for innovation"	Leader grounded in personal moral principles that are perceived as positive	A leader focused on personal development and career advancement
"Constant change and self-improvement" "Continuing education" "Reverse mentorship"	Leader as a lifelong learner	

In this regard, only a brief review of the responses from Table 2 might give the impression that descriptions of the modern leader largely resemble key terms that could be found in professional literature on leadership, in terms of both their content and quality. Thus, many “textbook concepts” such as psychological safety, reverse mentorship, and empowerment appeared in the description of the modern leader, alongside some leadership characteristics that are well established in the literature depicting classical forms of transformational and transactional leadership. In line with that, a review of the matrix reveals elements similar to the well-known Leadership Grid® (Blake & McCanse, 1991), particularly the “team management” style, characterized by a strong orientation toward both people and results, as well as the “middle-of-the-road management” style, which reflects a balance between concern for people and task accomplishment.

Leaders are thus, on the one hand, described as emotion regulators and empathists who ground and permeate their relationships with employees, relying on their own positive moral principles and openness to continuous change and learning. On the other hand, they are also, like employees, part of the same collective, and it appears that they are likewise “pressured” by the demands imposed on them by the employer, or by the market itself. “Leaders” are also those who steer the narrative, represent organizational culture, normalize constant change as the gold standard, and carefully and wisely manage employees. This part also nicely illustrates the position of Serbian managers who work in large foreign companies or “cumbersome” systems in which they suffer from lack of autonomy (Teofilovic et al., 2020). It is precisely this lack of autonomy in relation to power centres that makes a specific “seesaw” – making it significantly difficult for managers to “jump” into the position of leader, and very easy to slip back to a manager position on daily bases. On the other hand, the prevailing impression is that the attitude towards the future is interwoven with a tense attitude towards new technologies that are positioned as imperative, but at the same time a threat to the relationships in the collective. Discussions often brought up the topic that new technologies are gadgets that are considered a market advantage (“a must-have”), but which essentially bring numerous problems to companies – the threatening workload of employees and the question of their redundancy. Also, the future in terms of corporate social responsibility remains unclear compared to other topics. Within this topic, the answers were the least informative, and there was a lot of repetition and “empty wording”.

These two topics really emerge as very important, and the closest to what is likely to be a topic that will come to the table of future leaders. The changes introduced by AI in business are an inexhaustible hot topic in scientific and professional circles. At the same time, with the unstable social, economic and political situation all over the world, the issue of positioning companies in relation to the community in which they exist is a topic that will surely shape many important decisions of future leaders. It is precisely in this tension between textbook ideals (e.g., “team management style”), and the underlying reality of “middle management,” which now also requires the inclusion of community and technology orientations, that the novelty of these findings lays. Judging by the answers, these topics (community and technology) are the least elaborated, prepared, tangible for leaders and certainly represent a discovery that needs to be worked on further. They are the sources of future strategies, but also the insecurities and anxiety of those who lead people, which should be an important topic in further research and conferences. An important part of the adaptive response to these future challenges is certainly this identified and acknowledged need leaders’ have in order to constantly improve and work on themselves, to stay in the flow.

It is precisely here that the extent to which the conference provided a relaxed environment for giving honest answers, but at the same time influenced them to move in a highly professional discourse, could be well spotted. In Figure 1, we have summarized some advantages and disadvantages of using the participatory conference approach as an ecologically relevant setting for capturing managers’ perceptions on research-relevant topics. Also, within Figure 1, we have summarized them with the main results of the study. Figure 1 suggests that the conference did not fully achieve an unrestricted flow of ideas, which would need to be further developed through the fostering of continuity of such conference formats. It seems that ensuring collective, participatory work and insisting on interaction in the search for solutions facilitates the generation of a greater number of ideas, as well as seemingly more honest responses. On the other hand, the need to materialize ideas, time constraints within discussions, and avoidable structuring of the natural flow of exchange may also produce unintended repercussions. Imposing a rigid, time-bound structure could lead time-constrained participants to refrain from speaking up on more complex topics, such as new technologies and corporate social responsibility, or to rely on familiar concepts and technical terminology that provide “quick fix”. Ensuring a productive flow of discussion in time-limited, highly demanding hybrid conferences therefore represents a significant challenge for organizers as well. This is particularly relevant in contexts where high expectations surrounding conferences could easily result in feelings of oversaturation, boredom, and disappointed expectations among a highly demanding audience (Degen & Kobler, 2026).

Future research could use a somewhat broader approach in which such conferences could be preceded by questionnaire studies, while the conference itself could be the basis for additional testing of the obtained

results. It is also possible, with the permission of the participants, to introduce some form of observation that could give us an insight into the interactions of the conference participants and its related outcomes. Finally, the conference itself could provide a natural space for applying multiple case analyses approach (Stake, 2006), especially conferences that combine “participatory” and “traditional” approaches through different sessions.

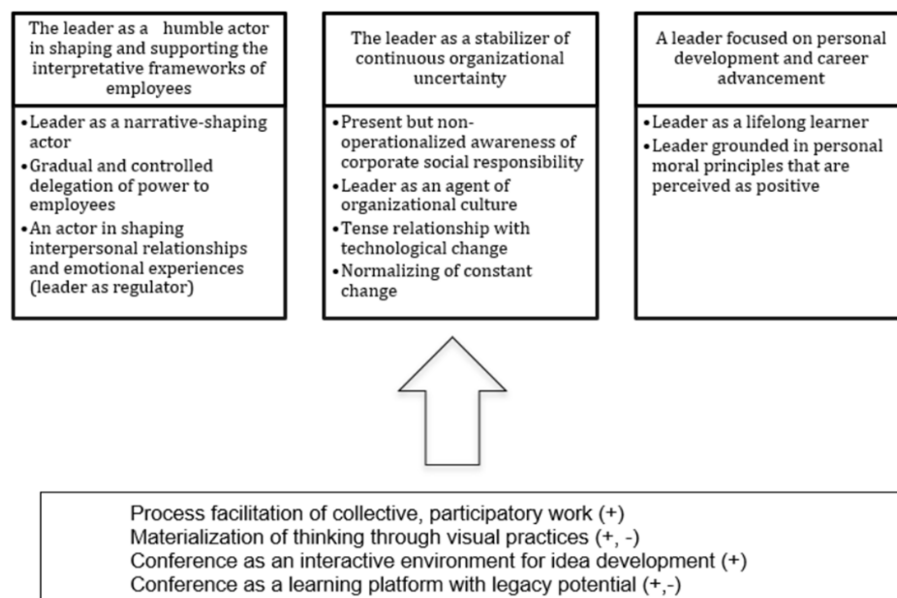


Figure 1: Main findings that integrates insights on conference setup with research results

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to show the way in which the participatory conference approach could be considered as an ecologically valid research platform. This is especially so when considering the importance of the topic and the delicacy and difficulty of reaching a very specific sample of respondents (e.g., high-ranking managers). By including and respecting the participatory, processual, flexible and emergent research approach characteristics, it was shown that it is possible to get honest answers with some novelty potential. On the other hand, the particular setting of this study did affect the scope of novelty that the data brought with it. Ensuring ecological validity, an undisturbed procedural and participatory approach in respondents' participation, on the one hand, but also ensuring that such a milieu of data collection is not disturbed for direct research purposes, is a very important task for future research. Direct monitoring, recording the dynamics of teamwork in this situation would provide very useful deeper insights, but would certainly raise further methodological and ethical questions. Certainly, the participatory conference approach could be further analyzed and used as an ecologically reliable method for both process oriented scientific endeavours and pragmatic problem solving. Finally, this research also brought practical insights into very sensitive topics that need to be explored further. These include the introduction of AI technologies that often obscure the real needs of employees, as well as the “unpacking” of social responsibility in a more socially engaged way.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

The authors used ChatGPT, based on GPT-5.6 (OpenAI), solely for language editing and stylistic polishing of the manuscript text. No AI system was used to generate the study's content, analysis, findings, interpretations, or conclusions, all of which reflect the authors' own work. The authors reviewed all AI-assisted text and takes full responsibility for the accuracy of the final manuscript.

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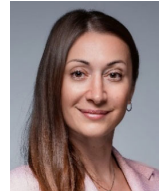
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