

The Contingency of Leadership – A Case Study of Municipal Trajectory Management

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Abstract

The paper elaborates on the contingency of leadership, referring to specific circumstances that require deliberate interventions, while challenging efforts to implement concerted action. This applies particularly when issues are at stake. The paper suggests that the notion of trajectory, which lies at the heart of the pragmatist Anselm Strauss' interactionist theory of action, merits further consideration. Empirically, the paper draws on experiences from a case study of an innovative project consisting of the building of premises for a library and a concert hall, called 'Stormen', in Bodø municipality, located in Northern Norway. Several controversial issues bore on the process. Although the municipal leadership managed to bring the project to a successful conclusion, trajectory management was rather demanding. The paper should consequently serve the analytical purpose well of discussing how and why contingencies, anticipated as well as unanticipated, challenge the performance of leadership.

Introduction

The aim of the paper is to explore how performing leadership is particularly important in handling contingencies, referring to doubtful situations in which different views and interpretations arise as to how to settle issues. Yukl's definition of leadership as "influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it" (2013: 23), addresses the dynamic, processual features of leadership. Irrespective of the extent to which leaders may strive to manage the course of events, the performance of leadership risks being challenged and even failing in the worst cases. This particularly applies to democratic political institutions in the sense that embedded patterns of cleavages imply that those in position cannot rely on concerted action when issues are at stake. Even the facilitative kind of leadership referring to the cooperative and consensus-building features of the council-manager system of local governance (Bjørnå and Mikalsen 2015; see also Sørensen and Torfing, 2011; and Røiseland and Vabo 2016 on governance networks) is confronted by contingencies that may jeopardize efforts to manage the course of events.

The paper argues in favour of the analytical benefits of applying the pragmatically inspired sociologist Strauss' interactionist theory of action. The concept of *trajectory*, which he considers to be central to his writings (1993: 48, 53; see also chapter 2 in Strauss et al. 1985/97), deserves further and renewed attention by focusing on substantial problems evolving over time, and "the actions and interactions contributing to its evolution" (1993: 53, 54). It thus constitutes a flexible analytical umbrella by inviting the researcher to study problem-solving activities in different kinds of institutional contexts involving multiple sets of actors. The notion especially brings to the fore how such processes easily turn into a 'cumulative mess' (ibid. 53) due to divergent assessments of what should be done. Although acknowledging the importance of

structural and contextual mechanisms regulating the course of events (see Strauss 1978: 238, 239, 1993: 60-65), contingencies, anticipated as well as unanticipated, may occur, jeopardizing initiatives to manage the trajectory. In studying trajectory management efforts in a local, democratic context, the paper focuses on the effects of anticipated as well as unanticipated contingencies.

As to the positioning of the paper in the field of leadership research, it has to be said that leadership per se is not at the core of Strauss' varied contributions in the field of sociology, including medical sociology, organizational sociology, etc. But as I have argued elsewhere (Andersen 2018),¹ Strauss' focus on how negotiations bear on or ensure any particular social order in the sense of "getting things accomplished" (Strauss 1978), highlights the dynamics of social organization. It is also worth noting that he is fully aware of the significance of *trajectory management*, and thus takes into account the way actors try to carry out plans "consciously designed to shape interaction as desired" (Strauss 1993: 55). Though hardly referred to in research and literature on leadership, his way of approaching the maintenance and transformation of a social order prepares the theoretical ground for pragmatic, critical researchers in the field such as Alvesson and Spicer (2012) and Tengblad (2012). The impact is apparent not only in their emphasis on practice-based theories, but even more importantly by asking "when, how strong, and what leadership intervention became crucial" (Alvesson and Spicer 2012:381), thus observing how managerial work involves a great deal of uncertainty and numerous unforeseen events (Tengblad 2012: 341; see also Karp 2013; Alvesson and Jonsson 2016).

The processual approach applied in the paper favours a single case study design. The selection of a successful and innovative project, the building of a premises for a library and a concert hall in the Norwegian municipality of Bodø, should serve as a critical case (see Eckstein; 1975; Yin, 2009: 38-39, 48). Although a clear majority was mobilized in the municipal council, there is more to say about the process than merely reporting on its happy ending. Contrary to what might be expected, the trajectory exhibits strong elements of uncertainty and tensions, thus demonstrating how the political-administrative leadership was forced to address anticipated as well as unanticipated contingencies in order to accomplish the project.

The paper raises the following research questions, which also underlie the framing of the text:

- In which ways does the concept of trajectory account for the contingencies of leadership, and how does the 'Stormen' case serve the purpose of revealing the contingencies of trajectory management?
- What are the issues at stake in the 'Stormen' trajectory, and how did strategic moves by important stakeholders inform the problem-solving process?
- How and why did anticipated and unanticipated contingencies, threaten the performance of leadership in different ways?
- Lastly, what theoretical added value does the paper provide?

The Analytical Framing: Leadership by Handling Contingent Trajectories

It needs to be said that Strauss was reluctant to formulate explicitly the interactionist theory of action that underlies his impressive and broad repertoire of empirical studies. By arguing principally in favour of grounding theories empirically, he insisted on a continual coupling between theoretical reasoning and the collection and processing of data. When European colleagues eagerly encouraged him to spell it out, he initiated this project (see Strauss 1993: 1,2). It became clear to him that the notion of trajectory did permeate his effort to unravel the courses of events and practices pertaining to getting things accomplished in different contexts (1993: 52, 53). Furthermore, indebted as he was to the American pragmatic tradition and its rejection of any kind of dualism, Strauss, takes a critical stance toward the inclination to dichotomize the seamless web of social life, resulting in a decoupling of knowledge and practice, environment and actor, macro and micro, ends and means and so on (Strauss 1993: 45; see also Putnam 2019). Unfortunately, leadership research and literature abound in theoretical distinctions, ascribing contrasting features to what is conceptualized as the essence of performing leadership (Collinson 2014: 38-41). Although ideal types may serve specific analytical purposes, they easily run the risk of becoming ontological divisions, and hence, as another pragmatist, Selznick, remarks, they “create walls of separation, where the phenomena themselves are interactive and interdependent” (1992: 21). But in what ways does the concept of trajectory elaborate the contingencies of getting things accomplished?

Approaching contingencies by the concept of trajectory

According to Strauss, the concept of trajectory is applied in two different ways. In what appears to be a simplistic application, it refers only to the evolution of an experienced problem; be they a social revolution, the course of an illness or the accomplishment of a project such as is addressed in this paper. To fully exploit its analytical potential, Strauss goes further by elaborating on the actions and interactions bearing on the courses of events. Firstly, by insisting on the dynamics of getting things accomplished, he emphasizes the transience of any trajectory, although acknowledging the varied pattern of stability and instability in terms of how courses of events evolve in different settings. However, Strauss far from claims that “certain things are always negotiable, that the sky is the limit” (1978: 259). On the contrary, by observing the structural and contextual framing of the negotiations, he considers how limits bear on the negotiations taking place and thereby regulate the trajectories unfolding (1978:235-239). A path dependency prevails by defining the complexity of the issues at stake, as well as regulating which actors have a say when and the resources available to shape the courses of events, but not in the sense of determining the outcome of the trajectory (see Strauss 1978: 238, 239, 1993: 60-65).

Secondly, and contrary to criticism targeting his perspective, he does not claim that co-operation always prevails when actors try to get things accomplished (1978: 250). As the pioneer pragmatist Dewey mentions, situations sometimes appear rather transparent despite their complexity, and little or no doubt is involved about the way to apprehend and handle such situations

(1910: 102). Getting things accomplished, to apply Strauss' formulations, is "straightforwardly rational" (1993:53). What Dewey denotes as "wholly doubtful" matters signifies the opposite point of the continuum, leaving actors entirely in the dark in terms of apprehending or deciding what to do. However, between these extremities, a certain amount of doubt suggests, more or less vaguely, "different meanings, rival possible interpretations" and "there is some *point at issue, some matter at stake*' (ibid. 102). Provided that "no hard and fast rules" (ibid. 104) help to get things accomplished, actors must resort to situated judgments (see also Vickers 1965) to proceed. Or, to stay on Strauss' track, negotiating strategies including persuasion, appeal to authority, manipulation and even coercion gain importance to settle what to do. Especially under tension-provoking circumstances involving much uncertainty, processes easily get stranded, sometimes temporarily, requiring revision to keep on track again (Strauss 1993: 55, 56). In the worst cases, however, problems are so unanticipated and difficult to handle that they lead toward an impending deadlock (Strauss 1993: 53).

Thirdly, Strauss makes allowances for the way actors try in different ways to shape courses of events. He introduces a lot of subconcepts referring to the significance of visions and schemes, the arc of actions that actors apply to perform trajectory management. Not least, when it comes to accomplishing a building project, one might presume that there are well-developed instructions as to *what to do when*. When carried out, they successively limit the options available. Regardless of how much actors invest in directing the trajectory in a methodical and systematic way, however, elements of 'muddling through', to use Lindblom's classic concept (Lindblom, 1965), are involved, a phenomenon that Styhre demonstrates as well in his study of the work of construction site managers (Styhre 2012). Although some actors mobilize authority in their capacity as formal leaders, or else make use of other relevant resources to steer the trajectory, there is "no *deus ex machina*" that is able "to manage the total course" (Strauss 1993: 57). When multiple actors are involved, grey areas may occur as to who have a say when, and in addition different assessments of what should be done prevail, and thus a co-ordination problem easily occurs. Even worse, some actors seize the opportunity to apply symbols like democratic deficit. The act of symbolizing, according to Strauss, appears intrinsic to interaction as such (Strauss 1993: 152), and symbols are especially contested in democratic politics. To those in charge of a trajectory, the accusation of a democratic deficit looms large, though not tantamount to bringing the process to nothing.

To sum up so far: The notion of trajectory, as applied by Strauss, provides an analytical flexibility in the sense of an invitation to reflect on getting things accomplished in a broad repertoire of settings, varying in relation to the number of actors involved, the complexity of issues dealt with, the balance of power, the strategies applied and so on. It accounts for the interactional dynamics as well as the effects of structural and contextual conditions regulating the courses of events. Most importantly here, it targets the inclination to either celebrate leaders as agents intervening deliberately and effectively to determine the courses of events or to reject leadership, portraying leaders as rather insignificant figures (see also Alvesson and Spicer 2012: 368). Such simplified images serve at best

to symbolize extreme points on a continuum. It is far better to ask which contingencies leave room for performing leadership and to what extent those in position are able to manage the courses of events, thus accomplishing what they have planned to do.

Some Methodological Considerations: The Analytical Potential of the ‘Stormen’ Case

In relating the ‘Stormen’ case and describing the course of events, the paper draws on a chapter in a previously published book addressing leadership by practicing judgments (Andersen 2017). This paper brings the theoretical argumentation a far step further by digging deeper into how anticipated and unanticipated contingencies informed the course of events, thus emphasizing the analytical potential of Strauss’ interactionist theory of action. However, some further methodological comments are needed to account for the analytical potential of selecting the case, and especially to introduce the issues at stake in successfully completing the project.

In the capacity of targeting community development, the selected case should exhibit important features of consensus-building, em-powering or co-creating associated with the facilitative kind of leadership (Bjørnå and Mikalsen 2015: 956-957). Indeed, Bodø municipality during the past decade appears to have gained a reputation for excelling in innovative projects. In addition to ‘Stormen’, resulting in the renovation of a central part of the city as well, the municipality’s application to become European Capital of Culture in 2024 was crowned with success (see High North News, 24 September 2019). However, the comprehensive ‘New City and New Airport’ project in the wake of the national decision to shut down the fighter plane base and relocate it to Ørland is the most striking project and has even attracted international attention (see High North News, 24 March 2017).

Considering that ‘Stormen’ project was brought to a successful close, accomplished on schedule and in accordance with an approved budget, it apparently is ‘a most likely case’ in the sense of confirming the effectiveness of a facilitative leadership or a network-based governance. Nevertheless, there were a number of stumbling blocks that jeopardized trajectory management efforts. Indeed, the course of events threatened to become a ‘cumulative mess’. In this respect, it might also serve as ‘a least likely case’, calling into question the prospects of a facilitative kind of leadership.² Thus, the principle of continuity gains importance by conceiving of trajectories as fluid and varying depending on whether co-mangement and consensus-building or turbulence and tensions prevail. To repeat, more controversial issues rendered the course of events turbulent even with the backing of a majority in the municipal council and the support of other important local actors.

Firstly, ‘the ‘Stormen’ case reveals how development projects run the risk of provoking a traditional cleavage in local politics between parties skeptical to diverting resources from high-priority and statutory duties like primary education and caring for elderly people, and those who claim that a municipality has to leave space for projects rendering the municipality a more pleasant place

to live. It is interesting to observe that the emerging cleavage did not coincide entirely with the division between parties in position and opposition.

Furthermore, an innovative project like ‘Stormen’ launching out on a new course, easily brings to the fore a so-called grey-area. Two issues turned out to involve uncertainty in defining a proper way of knowing and acting. The first one revolved around whether ‘Stormen’ could claim compensation for value added tax (VAT), which also concerned Norway’s relationship to EU, regulated among other things by the non-discriminatory provision of The European Economic Area Treatment. Doubt prevailed even in the Ministry of Finance, and five years passed before the Ministry of Finance in 2013 was ready to respond to a request originating in a similar project in Stavanger municipality. The reply of the ministry hardly settled the issue in an unambiguous way, leaving space for interpretations and negotiations.

Whereas this issue actualized how the macro-institution of government may impinge upon local politics, the second one originated in a growing concern locally as to how to govern an in-house semi-autonomous agency like ‘Stormen’, due to limited experience in steering at an arms length’s distance (see Andersen and Torsteinsen 2017). It is worth noting that even after celebrating the completion of the premises with pomp and ceremony on November 15th, 2014, the turbulence and drama did not end there. A year later, the local council adopted with a majority to implement a Public inquiry to investigate the process. The supervisory committee concluded by criticizing the former municipal leadership for its handling of the process. Since then, the management of ‘Stormen’ has been disputed on several additional occasions, causing replacements of the CEO and several chairmen. Indeed, ‘Stormen’ is symbolically living up to its name.

A note on the empirical material

Empirically, the study capitalizes on more sources: The previously mentioned public inquiry in the Municipal Control Committee published as an audio file on the municipality’s home page provides important information as to how core actors assessed the process a posteriori (see Bodø kommune, Kontrollutvalget 2015 a and b). Those summoned by the committee included the former mayor and the chief executive, the chair, co-chair and the manager of ‘Stormen’ KF, the co-chair of the steering group and the municipal auditor. I have transcribed the questioning taking place during the hearing.

Given the mandate of the Control Committee, the hearing involved what constituted a proper way of a steering at arm’s length distance, and especially whether a democratic deficit permeated the ‘Stormen trajectory’. As elaborated later in the paper, a rather confusing distinction between what was portrayed as a ‘compensation’ and ‘renting out’ model occupied the agenda.

The actors summoned to witness for the committee, by having been directly involved in the process, were expected to be able to provide first-hand insight. However, one cannot exclude strategic elements in the core actors’ presentation, namely, an unwillingness to reveal knowledge that might provoke criticism in the public space. In that respect, the local newspaper’s coverage of the course of events provides a corrective, thus providing a supplementary source. It has continued this process, year after year, not mincing matters, resulting in a lot of

critical news stories about the management of Stormen (see for instance Gulliksen 2016). By letting the chief executive reading and commenting on a previous draft (the chapter in the anthology), I have received a feedback on the text from at least one person directly involved in the process.

The ‘Stormen’ Trajectory: Issues at Stake

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the ‘Stormen’ case suggests how demanding it can be to steer trajectories involving a multiple set of actors, who happened to have divergent opinions on several issues, hence rendering the trajectory turbulent. The issues which gave rise to contested judgments occupied the agenda during the entire process; however they were the objects of varying attention as the process evolved.

The political prioritization issue and discourse

As a public project initiated by the municipal leadership, it received a widespread attention. To those in charge, the idea of ‘Stormen’ conveyed a symbolic meaning, signifying a forward-looking, progressive policy, and hence demonstrating an ability to translate visions into practice. However, it must be emphasized too, in accordance with a pragmatic way of thinking (see Visalberghi 1953), that the idea originated out of an experience with something already available, i.e., a needed improvement in the form of a library and venue for cultural events. ‘Stormen’ as an end or a vision maintained a continuity to the present situation in the sense that the initiators expected the project would be an enrichment combining a library and a concert hall.

Nevertheless, and not surprisingly, an increasing number of people questioned whether the promised enrichment could justify an investment amounting to 1.181 billion Norwegian kr. (€112.8 million €), in addition to 20–25 million Norwegian kr. (2 – 2.5 million €) in yearly operational expenses. The continuity to the present situation applied as well to those opposing the project, but conversely, by prioritizing care for elderly people and provision of other municipal welfare services. The period preceding the start of the building process in 2011 was marked by increasing opposition at the grass roots level, and the local population was divided down the middle regarding whether the project should be prioritized at all. However, the local council did not give in, and in 2010, a majority in the local council rejected a proposal to hold a referendum on this matter.

It is interesting to observe that opposition to the project was most clearly demonstrated by the two wing-parties the left-wing Red Party (‘Rødt’) and the right-wing Progress Party (‘Fremskrittspartiet’). After the local election in 2011, The Progress Party joined a majority coalition together with the Conservatives (‘Høyre’), the Liberals (‘Venstre’), The Centre Party (‘Senterpartiet’), and ‘The Cristian Democratic Party’ (‘Kristelig Folkeparti’), and even filled the position of vice mayor; a development that ensured that there would be no unanimous stance even among the political leadership. Instances of discord crept into the leadership coalition on several occasions, as for instance when a member of The Progress Party in the steering group supervising the

project withdrew in 2012, and the vice mayor expressed understanding for his decision to resign.

The professional, legal issue and discourse

Whereas the above issue was played out in the public arena, leaving the trajectory open to unforeseen bottom-up initiatives, others took place in more formalized settings regulating which actors had access to the process, and what kind of arguments were deemed to have merit. This applied not least to the legal discourse concerning how to interpret rules important for financing the building as well as the operational expenses of 'Stormen'. Still, closing in the process in this way could not prevent contingencies from occurring, and thereby made managerial control of the course of the events challenging. Indeed, the rather complicated issue of whether the project could claim compensation for value added tax (VAT) on expenses regarding the building and running of 'Stormen', permeated the whole trajectory.³

Considering that the project was thus forced into legally ambiguous terrain, the municipal leadership found it urgent to seek legal advice. A legal consultant known to be an expert in this matter recommended a reorganization of 'Stormen', originally planned as a limited company, into an inter-municipal Company (IKS) regulated by a separate law. According to the consultant, by changing the organizational design, 'Stormen' would have a legitimate claim to exemption from value added tax. His recommendation did not settle the issue, however; on the contrary, it triggered a chain of events. Feeling uncomfortable with this solution, the management of one of the tenants, North-Norwegian Opera and Symphony Orchestra ('NOSO'), objected to the proposal. As a matter of fact, the co-owner of 'NOSO' in addition to Bodø municipality – the municipality of Tromsø – mobilized and perceived the proposed design as incurring increased financial risks to the owners.⁴ The divergence came to bear when an alternative consultant was engaged, who contested the previously proposed solution. His assessment suggested that exceptions regulated by the Law could apply to an 'IKS' as well, provided that its activities were perceived as an enterprise competing with commercial actors.

However, the original legal adviser of 'Stormen' reasserted his assessment, insisting that most of the activities would satisfy the law's requirement for claiming compensation for value added tax. He recommended preparing a review including criteria as to which of the working expenses were entitled to compensation and which could not claim compensation. Simultaneously, advising local government to consult the Regional Taxation Authorities ('Skatt-Nord') to gain acceptance for the municipality's view on this matter, meaning 100% compensation for value added tax levied on the expenses of building the library, and in addition a reduction of 7.5% of the expenses for the concert hall.

The regional Taxation Authority's (Skatt Nord) reluctance to accept the proposed solution came as a surprise to the chief executive. The authority interpreted the provisions relating to exceptions as 'Skatt Vest' had done previously, namely rather strictly, by insisting that it does not take much for an entity to be considered an undertaking in the sense of EEA law, and hence would contravene the prohibitions against a public subsidy policy (see letter from 'Skatt Nord' 4 February 2015). Thereby, the Authority brought to bear 'The European

Economic Area Agreement' ('EEA'), which obliges Norway to abstain from a discriminatory practice as to economic activities. According to their assessment of the exception provisions, it suffices that 'the activity *can* compete with enterprises to which the exemption from value added tax does not apply' (see letter from 'Skatt Nord' to Ernst & Young, 4 February 2015:2).

If Skatt Nord's conclusion were correct, the reduction in what 'Stormen' could claim as compensation would amount to 60 million NOK (e.g., roughly 6 million €). However, the Chief Executive felt safe that 'Stormen' had a solid case, not least relying on an assessment made by the Ministry in 2013 responding to a request related to a similar project in Stavanger. Then, the Ministry stated that the exception provisions did not include activities exploiting a local niche, an assessment that was assumed to favor the assumption underlying Bodø municipality's view. By bringing the issue to the national political agenda, Bodø municipality as well as other municipalities were able to appeal to central authorities. The mayor met with the Minister of Cultural Affairs on several occasions to gain acceptance for the local solution.

The governance issue and discourse

The issues mentioned so far referred to rather well-known cleavages, be they diverging assessments concerning prioritization of public resources or definitions of what constitutes proper interpretation and practice of rules. The trajectory of 'Stormen' also entailed a preponderant issue that caused much confusion concerning how to organize and run 'Stormen'.

Originally, the local council on several occasions in 2013, decided to base the operation of 'Stormen' on as the so-called 'renting out' model. This model made sense when considering that 'Stormen Management Ltd.', established the same year, was meant to rent out one of the premises to the library or Bodø municipality, and the other, the concert hall, to 'Bodø Cultural House KF', 'NOSO', 'Nordland Musical Festival' and 'North Norwegian Jazz Center'. However, the course of events wound up changing the operating conditions, and when the item appeared on the agenda again in 2014, only the library, 'Bodø Cultural House KF' and 'NOSO' remained as tenants. It was conceived as a more cost-efficient and less bureaucratic solution to transfer responsibility for the running of the premises to 'Stormen KF'. Paradoxically, the local council maintained 'renting out' model. As the former municipal auditor expressed in the 2015 public inquiry relating to the transfer of operational responsibility to 'Stormen KF', being part of the municipality as a legal person, it is hardly logical to adhere to the 'renting out' model.⁵

Discussions and negotiations took place during the autumn of 2014 to address the issue of value added tax and the operation of 'Stormen'. In retrospect, two meetings proved to be especially important: the one including the legal adviser, the municipal auditor, the chief executive and the management of 'Stormen', and the other one under the direction of the steering group. According to the minutes, the participants unanimously shared the view that 'a compensation model' was preferable, and the steering group even settled on this model. However, the vice chairman, representing the Centre Party (Senterpartiet), who chaired the meeting in the absence of the mayor, expressed

concern as to whether this choice complied with the previous resolution in the local council. She claimed in the public inquiry that she presumed the matter was put on the agenda of the local council. Immediately afterwards, in an interview with the local newspaper, she leveled criticism with a claim that local government suffered from a democratic deficit. The ‘Stormen’ affair loomed large on the horizon as she elaborated her frustration.

Inced by some journalists and other critics, she added fuel to the ongoing debate, claiming that a local elite network prevailed. According to critics, these people, as the ‘Stormen’ affair demonstrated, had no scruples about cutting corners to have their way. She also made it known that her frustration concerning the municipal leadership was in no small measure due to the Centre Party’s decision to cast their vote for a red-green coalition in the negotiations taking place after the local election in autumn 2015. Paradoxically, the popular mayor and the Conservative Party, which was a winner in the local election,⁶ failed in the negotiations to remain in power.

In the public inquiry, the chief executive insisted that ‘Stormen KF’ ‘owned the matter’, thus emphasizing the discretion of an in-house firm. Nevertheless, he maintained that the running of ‘Stormen KF’ complied with what the local council had decided, although he admitted that he should have placed the matter on the local council’s agenda in the wake of the changing contingencies. The chair of the in-house firm’s board also reported that he had been told that ‘Stormen KF’ should be treated like an Ltd’. Obviously, the issue relating to how to run an in-house firm like ‘Stormen KF’ caused much confusion and prepared the ground for putting the local democratic process in question. The supervisory committee concluded in its report that the adjustment of the original model was due to new contingencies, while at the same time criticized the municipal leadership and the vice chair presiding over the previously mentioned meeting for not letting the local council have a say in the process.

Discussion: Leadership by Handling Contingent Trajectories

Recurrent aspects of the ‘Stormen’ trajectory include the efforts of those in charge to find a way out of the issues at stake. Obviously, a project like ‘Stormen’ entails rational elements in terms of plans, including the physical design of the building, schemes for working out or coordinating the actors involved and, it must be recalled, a steering group mandated to supervise the process. Nevertheless, it hardly came as a surprise that specific problems arose as the course of events evolved. Indeed, some were anticipated, due not only to experience accumulated during the implementation of corresponding projects. But institutionalized patterns of local politics render some conflicts most likely to occur. The political, administrative leadership was hardly taken by surprise when they experienced that ‘Stormen’ became part of a prioritization discourse, in addition to noticing the rather widespread resistance towards the project prevailing at the grass roots level.

It is beyond doubt that the political, administrative leadership on this occasion intervened deliberately and effectively. Considering the increasing resistance among the local citizens to the project, it was not unlikely that the process might have failed before start-up provided if the proposal to organize a

local referendum had been approved. However, the political, administrative leadership managed to eliminate this option by enlisting a clear council majority against the referendum proposal. Hence, a rather broad coalition was mobilized in support of the project; an achievement that suggests the importance of facilitative kind of leadership.

The opposition within the governing coalition was presumably a harder nut to crack, not least when the executive committee voted at the end of 2011 in favour of a temporary break in the process for the purpose of scrutinizing the project's budget. Some politicians interpreted this as a strategic move on the part of the Progress party in their attempt to put a spoke in the wheel. By accepting the withdrawal of the PP-member from the steering group, a negotiated order was reestablished, bringing the process back on track.

Regardless of how much the actors in charge rely on trajectory management, unanticipated contingencies may arise, and these threaten to hamper the smooth running of a process. On some occasions, such as in the VAT issue, the municipal leadership had to rely on decisions made higher up in the hierarchical system of governance. Matters of legal regulation belong to the jurisdiction of national authorities, meaning that 'the Stormen' trajectory was embedded in what Strauss refers to as 'a conditional matrix' (1993:60, 61), demonstrating the bearing of decisions on the macro-level. Although the mayor and the chief executive focused much attention on the VAT issue by consulting legal experts to assure that 'Stormen' could comply with the compensation requirements, they had to acknowledge that the regional Taxation authority took a differing and more restrictive view when interpreting the rules. Although surprising, it was hardly an entirely unlikely option.

The political, administrative leadership did not give in by exploiting the opportunity to influence and appeal to the Ministry of Finance. The chief executive who has previously been the leader of the regional tier of the taxation authority in Northern Norway, considered the 'Stormen' case to be strong due to the solid preparations done locally. Considering that the issue was settled in favor of the municipality suggests that even unanticipated contingencies can be successfully handled.

Unanticipated contingencies occur not least because those in charge locally are unable to manipulate important institutional parameters, such as in the VAT issue; at best they can rely on and appeal to principals authorized to resolve the matter. But unanticipated problems may also occur as unintended consequences from designing a model of governance that appears to be rather complex. In the 'Stormen' case, this included, in addition to the ordinary bodies of local government, a special steering group as well as the in-house municipal firm accountable for the daily operation of 'Stormen'. On several occasions, doubt seemed to prevail in terms of *who was accountable for what*, probably also due to lacking routines for transferring information between actors occupying leading positions. The confusion relating to which model applied to the running of 'Stormen' ('renting out' versus 'compensation'), and who owned the issue illustrates the saying 'too many cooks spoil the broth'. At least the turbulence permeating the final phase of the process casts doubt about the effectiveness of trajectory management. Indeed, the case proved to have far-reaching

implications when some critics interpreted the trajectory as a symbolic representation of a prevailing democratic deficit in local politics. Not surprisingly, the chief executive admitted in the public inquiry that he should have placed the matter before the local council and should have explained more thoroughly the adjustments made in the original operational model.

A Final Remark on the Contingency of Leadership

The paper has ambitions beyond describing the trajectory resulting in a successful accomplishment of a project. However, 'the Stormen' case does not serve the purpose of inferring criteria prescribing how to practice effective leadership. It must be repeated that an analytical purpose motivated the selection by offering an opportunity to dig deeper into and reflect on the contingency of leadership.

By viewing leadership as contingent, one must be cautious about abstracting theories and inferring guidelines prescribing how to perform effectively. In principle, one easily runs the risk of putting a too heavy stock in the potential of research-based or scientific knowledge when it comes to improving any social practice, not least leadership performance. Proponents of the pragmatic approach, neither a-theoretical nor reluctant to improve practice, insist on grounding theories empirically (see Strauss 1993: 2, 8, 9, 10), acknowledging additionally that the conditions vary for achieving what was originally intended. Admitting the limitation on what leadership studies may yield is not tantamount to leaving the field to heroic anecdotes or to so-called successful recipes. However, the question remains: what added analytical value does the 'Stormen' case study provide, regarding our knowledge about leadership and improvement of our capacity to handle anticipated and unanticipated contingencies?

The interactional analytic scheme inspired by Strauss' concept of trajectory firstly captures well the intricacies of performing even a facilitative kind of leadership. Undoubtedly, governance networks as demonstrated in the 'Stormen' case, prove to be effective in getting development projects accomplished. One must be careful, however, not to exaggerate the coherence and stability of such networks. It is interesting to observe that Røiseland and Vabo, who argue for co-management as a necessary and valuable supplement to the traditional politically hierarchical kind of government, are aware of the fragility of such an arrangement when circumstances contrary to what the partners originally expected do not match the prospect of achieving a mutual gain, and even asymmetrical relations emerge (Røiseland and Vabo 2016: 36, 96). The messy world of organizations, mentioned by Denis et al. originates not least in the tensions within leadership constellations (2010:82,83). As this relates to the 'Stormen' trajectory, the prioritization issue caused turbulence even within the municipal coalition of government, threatening to bring the process to a deadlock. The agents trying to gain control of an indeterminate situation, as well as the researchers reflecting on the underlying mechanisms, are both involved in processes of exploration, or 'muddling through', to apply Lindblom's classic concept (Lindblom, 1965; see also Styhre 2012).

Secondly, building consensus locally hardly suffices in the attempt to get things accomplished when this involves matters in which national authorities

have a say, such as the VAT issue demonstrates. Not surprisingly, most mayors and chief executives queried in a Norwegian survey hold that national authorities have increased their ability to influence local government (Aarsæther, Willumsen and Buck 2015: 233). On the other hand, even when a formal hierarchy prevails, leeway remains for making one's voice heard by networking and informal negotiations; something which the municipal leadership did manage to exploit with success.

Thirdly, conceptualizing the management of projects as trajectories invites one to reflect on the preponderance of a cumulative logic in the sense of a chain of reactions by which each step contributes to a reinforcement of the course of events. The actors' ability to reverse the dynamic of such trajectories turns out to be limited. As already mentioned, the interactional dynamic in the 'Stormen' case suggests a cumulative mess or a co-ordination deficit by giving rise to confusion and differing interpretations as to which of the operating management models was laid down by the multiple stakeholders involved. The most blameworthy on the part of those in charge of the implementation of the project was the accusation of an emergent democratic deficit, thus causing tensions about whether the implementation of the project truly complied with the preferences of the municipal council. This issue loomed large as the project proceeded towards completion, and even intensified afterwards by the resolution of the Municipal Control Committee, though by a narrow majority, to conduct a public inquiry.

Although this was a gain of primarily symbolic importance, it was nevertheless significant by creating the perception of a comprehensive democratic deficit pervading local politics, which meant that the popularity of the mayor and the Conservative Party's success in the local election could not prevent a change in the municipal leadership. As such, it bears witness to the preponderance of symbolizing in the study of interactional dynamics to which Strauss attaches a great importance (1993: 149-169). However important the symbolic aspect might be in the 'Stormen' trajectory, a kind of cumulative logic also helped to bring the project to a successful close. In at least what concerns a building project, when material structures gradually take shape, the process reaches a point of no return irrespective of the controversies between important stakeholders.

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Notes

¹ In an earlier publication (2018), I have elaborated on his conception of the 'negotiated social order', arguing for its analytical relevance when it comes to studying the contingencies of getting things accomplished. My empirical focus is on management at an arm's length distance, which refers to delegation of tasks and responsibilities within the political/hierarchical system of government as well as organizing publicly owned units as separate legal persons. Also, in the latter case, it was often unanticipated contingencies or those that were less likely to occur, that revealed the tensions pertaining to steering at an arm's length distance.

² As to the application of crucial cases, it is worth mentioning Eckstein's point of view. He argues just for the analytical gains of utilizing crucial cases both for the purpose of confirming a most likely theoretical assumption to occur, as well as demonstrating its

‘antithesis’ (1975: 119). However, this paper does not aim at theory testing in the strict sense, which underlies Eckstein’s elaboration of crucial cases.

³ I have left out some legal intricacies pertaining to the interpretation of the Law of Compensation for Value Added Tax to simplify the text referring to this discourse.

⁴ According to the Law of inter-municipal companies, the shareholders are unlimitedly accountable for ‘a percentage or a fraction of the company’s obligations’ (see § 3).

⁵ ‘Stormen KF’ is a legal construction, an in-house municipal firm, which is not subjected to the Chief executive’s authority to instruct subordinated municipal entities. However, he/she can request the board of the firm to postpone the implementation of a resolution until the local council has discussed the matter. The local council acts then in capacity as a General assembly in a Ltd.

⁶ The Conservatives (‘Høyre’) experienced a 10 % increase in voter support in the local election. With voter support of 33%, it became the largest party. However, one of the coalition partners, The Progress Party (‘Fremskrittspartiet’) suffered a decrease in voter support of 10%.