



Travelling Leadership Ideas as a Business Virus

Abstract Virtually identical management ideas seem to crop up simultaneously in similar organizations globally, in what ways can this phenomenon be understood? Leaders in organizations may play a more active role than those often depicted in the management fashion theory. The encounter between thought and practice may be lasting; beliefs may affect training and practice. The ideas may represent a trade-off between business strategy, leadership, and employees. We keep acceptable and adequate ideas while we drop unacceptable and inadequate plans. The ideas work like a sensitizing concept of directions along which to look for temporary order and stability, as well as potential change. Adopting a business idea is like a virus spreading worldwide, leaving an enormous impact through global corporations and societies. In this chapter, we study management ideas in a selection of top Scandinavian corporations to generate and discuss 8 relevant hypotheses. The same ideas might reach public institutions like universities and hospitals. In public institutions, they might present as a form of New Public Management or merely a way of managing, e.g. universities or hospitals through a magic business virus, creating what looks like similar strategies found in private businesses.

Keywords Travelling ideas · Fashion theory · Virus theory · Digitalization · Sustainability · Flexible workplaces · Project management agility · Trust-based leadership · Value-based leadership · Business spirituality · Business modernity · Mysticism

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The first sentence of Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* is: "*Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way*" (1877, p. 1). Here Tolstoy means that for a family to be happy, several vital aspects must be given (such as good health of all family members, acceptable financial security, and mutual affection and values). The happy corporations are all alike sharing key travelling ideas giving good health (i.e., modernity), financial security, and mutual virus processes, including local virus variants. In other words: happy corporations share a standard set of ideas and attributes which lead to happiness, while any of a variety of ideas and attributes can cause an unhappy corporate family. The concept might be transferred to public institutions and different societal frameworks.

How then can we understand this spread of ideas among some organizations? "Travelling ideas" denotes that virtually identical management ideas crop up globally in similar or dissimilar organizations. In studies of this phenomenon, the dominant theoretical perspective is "management fashion theory" (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). Proponents of this research tradition associate the spread of ideas with organized clothing fashions' global diffusion (Gill & Whittle, 1993). Fashion creators are the leading global consulting companies. The fashion might be ideas of the lean, core business, outsourcing, agility, or new public management dressing up organizations in the same way. The fashion theory looks upon fashions as a natural and positive part of leadership and management, creating competitive advantages for those utilizing the fashion trends in change and innovation management.

Røvik (2011), who launched his alternative "virus-inspired theory" approach in organization studies, believes that the metaphor of virus propagation can serve to fill several of the gaps that fashion theory has left us. He stresses how fashion theory seems to presuppose the fleeting nature of ideas: that they come and go without exerting much impact on business practice. Using the virus metaphor, Røvik (2008, 2011) seeks to pinpoint the possibility that the encounter between idea and exercise may be *lasting*. Beliefs may affect practice, and leaders in organizations may play a more active role than those often depicted in the fashion theory. We will use the virus theory describing the receivers as active users using the virus to transform and change their organizations.

We found this perspective relevant and triggering because we identified the similar ideas for example at some key telecommunication competitors Telia (Sweden) and Telenor (Norway), two essential telecommunication enterprises in Scandinavia that also work and compete internationally. Their ideas include: Globalization, digitalization, sustainability, trust-based leadership, value-based leadership, virtual teams, project management agility, transparency, and flexible workplaces. Furthermore, we also found that most of the 60 largest corporations at the Scandinavian stock market practice the same ideas. We have thus concluded that strategic and leadership concepts work as travelling ideas. These buzz words go to almost any private business forming the way of thinking and working as a travelling virus. In the following, we argue that this chapter's empirical probing test supports a belief that a virus-inspired theory gives a more vibrant picture than the fashion theory.

2.2 THE VIRUS-INSPIRED THEORY

Several management authors have noted that in the past few decades, we have seen a rise in the creation, dissemination, and commercialization of management ideas (see e.g., Sturdy, 2004). Ideas emerging in one part of the world are packaged with descriptions and examples and then disseminated worldwide through the business press, consultants, and conferences. This distinctly global phenomenon characterizes modern businesses (Engwall & Kipping, 2004). The phenomenon has also boosted researchers' interest in how and why management ideas spread and what happens when they interface with organizations (Abrahamson, 1996; Davenport & Prusak, 2000; Sturdy, 2004).

Comparing management ideas to fashion by observing their popularity trends, rising, and falling, has shown how management ideas resemble other styles. One of the proponents of this perspective is Eric Abrahamson (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996; Abrahamson & Rosenkopf, 1993; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). Abrahamson's main idea is to model a *bandwagon* and how many jump on it and show how much innovation they gain by jumping on the wagon. Jumping on the bandwagon is a way to get positive and negative innovations into the organization (Abrahamson & Rosenkopf, 1993). The bandwagon model is, however, not empirically tested and remains an anticipation. Recently, however, management fashion theory has been increasingly questioned, notably because it offers little explanation of what happens to an idea once it

is adopted by an organization (Clark & Greatbatch, 2004; David & Strang, 2006; Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Scarbrough & Swan, 2001). Neither the adoption itself nor the further process is well explored, due to lack of empirical evidence. To offer a more differentiated and nuanced understanding of what happens after a management idea penetrates an organization, Røvik has presented a theory comparing instead management ideas to viruses (Røvik, 2011).

In an open organization context, Røvik (2011) argues that a *virus metaphor* might be fruitful for understanding and describing organizations' handling of management ideas. Using the virus as a metaphor for idea-handling processes, Røvik combines knowledge from biology and virology with organizational research and management ideas. Metaphors have been used in organizational theory for many years. They take a concept from one domain and transpose it to another and use the metaphor as a "surprise machine" (Gouldner, 1970). New insights have come, and we have expanded our knowledge in organization theory. Using metaphors in theory development is a challenge in balancing between sharing sufficient similarities between the two domains and keeping a high potential for novel insights. We feel that the virus-inspired theory presented by Røvik (2011) intuitively shares many similarities with idea handling processes (i.e., diffusion, adoption, contagion, and the complexity of the diffusion process).

Nevertheless, the similarities are not trivial. Røvik (2011) applies Ortony's (1979) theory of "salience imbalance" when describing the virus-inspired approach. Røvik (2011, p. 634) describes the procedure of salience imbalance as follows:

By mirroring the target domain in light of prominent source domain features, one can reinforce features of the target that we consider previously non-salient or even borrow notable elements from the source. Attribute them to the mark and thus reveal qualities of the goal formerly unperceived.

A salience imbalance might be a reason to be ready for a virus and adopt it.

Thus, we have fragments of a fashion theory, a bandwagon theory, and a virus theory. The theories neither explain nor explore well what happens to travelling ideas in organizations. We will use the theories for developing hypotheses and use qualitative empirical material to describe and

analyse the adoption of viruses in organizations. The research is reflection and model (i.e., theoretical) based. Combining a theoretical and empirical approach may contribute to a more affluent foundation for understanding travelling ideas.

2.2.1 *Summing Up the Fragments of a Proposed General Virus Theory*

Below we present a table that illustrates similarities between viruses and management ideas. We then “mirror” the virus metaphor with our cases—Telia and Telenor—to generate our hypotheses. The six characteristics from Røvik (2011), we have adapted into a table suggesting their viral features and transformational processes (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Summary of viral features and corresponding idea-handling processes

<i>Viral feature</i>	<i>Idea-handling process</i>
1. Adoption	The formal decision in an organization to adopt an idea
2. Non-adoption	The deliberate organizational decision not to utilize an idea
3. Isolation	A formally adopted but not implemented virus residing in units often at an organizations’ top-level, (e.g., in some actors’ memories, in documents, and decoupled from organizational practices)
4. Expiry	The gradual evaporation of a formally adopted idea, often without any formal decision to quit
5. Rejection	The decision to stop using an assumed idea regarding experiential learning (e.g., unsatisfactory results) and incompatibility, i.e., has proven not to fit in with institutional norms, logic, and sophisticated practices)
6. Entrenchment	The transformation of a virus into practice (i.e., it anchors in organizational structures, routines, and daily activities) so that specific intended effects reproduce the virus in different parts of the organization
7. Maturation	An idea lingers in an organization, often for a long time, before materializing, leading to a gradual, slow-phased transformation of the concept into practice
8. Translation	The deliberate change of methods and approaches occurs when they transfer viruses and implement viruses
9. Inactivation	Organizational activities related to an adopted virus either decrease or are discontinued
10. Reactivation	An adopted but dormant idea is “turned on” again, and organizational activities connected to the idea increase

There are six characteristics possessed by viruses presented by Røvik (2011): (a) infectiousness, (b) immunity, (c) replication, (d) incubation, (e) mutation, and (f) dormancy (for elaboration, see Sect. 2.3 below).

Summing further up, we might relate four phases to the travelling and practical adoption of an idea:

1. Replication
2. Incubation
3. Mutation
4. Dormancy

The passive recipient image of the fashion metaphor can be reframed using the virus metaphor. A typical property of viruses is that they spread contagiously through direct contact between the infected and those free from infection. A virus does not spread by itself; instead, it spreads by infected hosts. Once infected, the virus will spread through the host. The new ideas become adopted possibly throughout the whole organization. In our view, this description tallies what often happens when new ideas are introduced in organizations. The leadership and the consultants use whatever is needed to transform the organization from A to B. The transformation might be done by a 3, 5, or 7 steps model securing the integration. Business schools might be hired to offer extensive virus-based executive training programs.

2.3 TESTING THE VIRUS THROUGH EIGHT HYPOTHESES

This chapter thus assumes the view that the virus theory can be fruitful as a metaphoric understanding for the endemic spread of management ideas. We have used the theoretical fundament to develop eight hypotheses for testing the travelling virus idea empirically. To our knowledge, our approach represents the first empirical test of the virus theory on leadership and organizational processes. Using the cases of two telecommunication companies (Telia and Telenor), the test will be undertaken by exploring eight hypotheses (*H1-H8*):

- H1: It is probable that Telia and Telenor initially is an active part, which also involves local involvement and “local wizard actors”,*

i.e., actors who actively translate and transform the travelling idea.

A virus will trigger a defence mechanism or an immune reaction when trying to infect a new host. When it comes to ideas, this kind of defence mechanism could lead to non-adoption or, at a later stage, rejection of the concept in its most severe form. Nevertheless, other idea-handling types of processes, such as isolation or expiry, are also possible later. Loneliness could be described as the idea of only being present in documents at the leadership level and lacking significance for organizational practice. Expiry is another way to disarm a travelling idea, such as when employees in the organization simply stop caring, the idea may gradually evaporate.

H2: When the virus ideas meet Telia and Telenor, it will trigger several defence mechanisms.

In virology, a virus contains a genetic code that dictates how it will reproduce in host cells. The virus controls the host cell's metabolism and uses it to multiply rapidly, which is called replication. Replication is a part of concerning management ideas. Entrenchment is the term used to describe how a concept or a design transforms into practice, like routines or other organizational structures. Specific intended effects in line with how the ideas integrate within the host could, for example, involve that a public organization adopts the concept of new public management by appointing "process owners". Contrary to the fashion theory, this indicates that travelling ideas can be implemented and sometimes have a long-lasting and considerable impact. The ideas thus behave more or less as a permanent virus for many years and not fast like a temporary fashion.

H3: The idea will materialize into changes within Telia and Telenor. These changes will be following how the concept describes in theory.

Viruses require a period of incubation. There is a varying duration for different viruses from when the host is exposed until symptoms appear. We claim that management ideas follow the same route and often linger in latency states before they materialize. This maturation phase seems to vary depending on the intensity, i.e., the strength and the duration of attempts to materialize a management idea into an organization. Power,

in this case, refers to how massively the ideas are promoted (Foucault, 2002 [1969]).

H4: An intensive initial campaign within Telia and Telenor will quickly result before changes in line with the travelling ideas are noticed.

When it comes to viruses, errors sometimes occur in the replication process: the virus mutates, i.e., miscopies itself. An organization may also become infected by several different viruses at the same time. Some variations are successful and do not harm the virus. Mutations may also often make the mutant virus become invisible to the immune system. Here, we draw the parallel with the renaming of management ideas, when the linguistic label is changed, and a local name perhaps attached to a general, globally spread thought. But in other cases, a mutation can be compared with the translation of management ideas, i.e., generic ideas that in a specific organization more or less deliberately transform into something different (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Hallström, 2006).

H5: The travelling idea will in local versions at Telia and Telenor in some or several aspects differ from how the concept describes in theory.

To conclude the review of the virus metaphor, we have to understand the idea of dormancy. One feature of certain viruses is that they may be challenging to eliminate once they have entered the body. They may then, for example, alternate between active and inactive states. The introduction of a new idea often initiates great enthusiasm, grand plans, and a generally high activity level. The views get over in the “bend over here it comes again” phase where the employees do not identify the purposes as urgent or proper, or adequate. Inactive management ideas reactivate when actors other than those who worked on them initially, present new plans for their introduction and use. Reactivated (“infected”) management ideas may often be reshaped (mutate) so that e.g., leaner becomes smarter, online homework becomes flexible, globally becomes glocal (both global and local considerations), and greener becomes sustainable.

H6: In the longitudinal story describing process management within Telia and Telenor, there will be an alternation between active and inactive states.

Using virus as a metaphor we relate to the idea-handling processes in varieties of sometimes complex ways. Their relations can be of three general types: succession, tangling, or competition, according to Røvik (2011, p. 645). We might ask ourselves how *H1* and *H2* are related if we look at the eight hypotheses presented in this chapter. They are both in the early phase of the idea handling process, and the interpretive flexibility (Bijker, 1995) in Telia and Telenor is probably still high.

H7: The virus buzz words tend to give meaning for the leaders, managers, and employees as a spiritual star or soul for the corporation.

There is a strong need for a mission star or meanings to believe in while working in today's corporations. The virus buzz words might work as a spiritual belief for hope and order and togetherness. The managers often behave like prophets for the virus ideas and present them as the gospel of modernity.

H8: There is a need for somebody saying that some ideas are just bullshit.

We do not find this in the theoretical foundation. However, it is clear that many of the travelling guru and consultant ideas in today's businesses are hardly relevant, and we would like to test if there is a need for a bullshit manager in organizations.

Nevertheless, are the spread of management ideas in succession, intertwined, or conflict? What is the relationship between *H5* (mutation) and *H3* (replication)? They compete since *H3* is more or less a replication (i.e., copy) following the original idea. At the same time, *H5* transforms the unique design into another shape. However, *H3* and *H5* are also similar since both are active phases where things happen. Another thought might be that *H5* can have a relation to *H2* (immunity), in which the protection (i.e., resistance) is regarded as a fundamental reason for the occurrence of the mutation (*H5*). Finally, it might be tricky to separate and classify *H6* (dormancy) and *H4* (incubation), which is probably best seen as complementary hypotheses.

2.4 EMPIRICAL METHODOLOGY

To explore our hypotheses in a corporate setting, we will use insights from two Nordic telecoms. The Telia and Telenor study is a case study with interviews and central documents as primary data sources. Throughout, Telia and Telenor showed interest in our research, and we were thus guaranteed good access also over time. The scope for comparing two periods, the early phase pre-COVID-19 and a more current phase during COVID-19, is a crucial component of our study, given that the time aspect is crucial for understanding the adoption of management ideas.

The same researcher (Olaisen) conducted ten interviews in April 2019 (5 in Telia and 5 in Telenor) with various “process owners”, managers, and work developers. Each meeting did focus on the respondent’s views and experience of travelling ideas, and interviews lasted 1–1 1/2 h and were made by phone. He repeated the ten interviews in April 2020. Many questions focused on the changes in the organization during the years, in light of the historical situation and how the respondent perceived and interpreted the changes made along the journey to the present case. What did they see as critical incidents in why things turned out to be the way they are? We found their general strategic overview of what has happened to be an advantage (Fesser & Willard, 1990). A potential disadvantage of choosing organizational leaders as the prime source might be that they can be seen as biased and not likely to criticize strategic decisions partly being their work responsibility. However, we feel that most of the respondents were very open and reflecting during the interviews.

Our approach regarding Telia and Telenor from without and within—also means that we devote relatively little space to the internal organization. It is considerably more interesting to study the transformational processes, i.e., travelling ideas as workflows. Further research will have to look closer at the internal processes.

We decided to examine also the annual reports of 2020 for the 20 largest corporations at each of the stock markets in Oslo, Stockholm, and Copenhagen to investigate if we could find a description of similar travelling ideas as followed in Telia and Telenor. The annual reports were readily available and offer today an overview of all essential processes in the organizations. The bias is, of course, that the annual reports only give an overview of the positive processes while omitting the unsuccessful or damaging processes.

Of course, a cultural bias of the whole study is that we base it on Scandinavian corporations and Scandinavian leadership and management. The largest Scandinavian corporations are, however, global both in strategy and business practice. In the latest IMD report on global competitiveness, Sweden is ranked 2nd, Denmark 3rd, and Norway 6th (IMD, 2021). Scandinavian leadership and management should therefore be of interest to all businesses.

2.5 ANALYSES OF SCANDINAVIAN TRAVELLING VIRUSES

Accordingly, we investigated the 20 largest companies in each of the stock markets in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark ($N = 60$). We found that 41 companies (69%) subscribed to the nine same virus ideas as Telia and Telenor:

- Globalization
- Digitalization
- Sustainability
- Virtual teams
- Trust-based leadership
- Value-based leadership
- Project management agility
- Flexible workplaces
- Transparency.

Globalization means that the market and the production of services are global. Digitalization means that all facilities plan to work digitally. Sustainable means to work for greener societal solutions (see Chapter 1). Virtual teams say that all organizations should operate across geography and time. Trust-based leadership means that the leaders and managers trust the employees to find the best solutions. Value-based leadership means no tolerance towards discrimination or violence towards gender, race, sex, age, or mobbing cases. Project management agility means that we perform as agile projects. Project management or temporary project teams are usual organizational forms among Scandinavian corporations. Flexible workplaces suggest that the employees might define if up to 20% might work at distance or from own home. Transparency includes information openness (e.g., publishing financial reports), organizational

transparency (e.g., openness regarding ownership and joint ventures), and openness for example on the corporation's impact on the environment. Openness to scrutiny may concern in principle all relevant processes and stakeholder relations (e.g. anti-corruption measures). The interpretation can be fully transparent or to a high degree, including incentive systems. A form of Scandinavian equality. Its meanings and presumptions are however not to be taken for granted, as we need to reflect on.

Scandinavia is a small part of the world (22 million inhabitants) where social welfare, free education, and a good infrastructure are available for all inhabitants. Equality and mutual respect are vital for understanding Scandinavian management. The cooperation between the corporations, the trade unions, and society is a cornerstone for Scandinavia. Also, a relatively high taxation system. Still, Scandinavia prospers on most measurements, e.g. on both welfare and productivity. The Scandinavian culture is still a bias of this study, but other parts of the world might nevertheless reflect on and learn from Scandinavian management experiences. However, the study is an explorative study with no ambition of delivering a general virus theory.

If we exclude trust-based leadership and transparency, about 80% subscribe to the other ideas. We conclude that at least 70% of Scandinavia's leading corporations subscribe to the same virus-infected purposes as Telia and Telenor.

We have used the frameworks from the theoretical foundation upon the evidence from the annual reports (see Table 2.2).

Summing further up, we might relate four phases to the travelling and adoption of an idea like a virus:

1. Replication. The annual reports are telling about a robust replication process through all the corporations.
2. Incubation. The top management group decides on the incubation period by maturity and risk.
3. Mutation. The mutation in different local viruses is vital to secure the suitable local variant of the virus to the correct local place. Values and transparency offer differ between different places.
4. Dormancy. The annual reports do not report any dormancy except a few cases where the corporations report that they have always been solid upon sustainability, transparency, value-based leadership, and globalization. Dormancy is only related to positive opinions about corporations.

Table 2.2 Summary of idea-handling processes from Scandinavian annual reports

<i>Viral feature</i>	<i>Idea-handling process</i>
1. Adoption	The formal decision in an organization to adopt an idea. The annual reports report the adoption of the virus as a decision by the top management group
2. Non-adoption	The deliberate organizational decision not to utilize an idea. The reasons for not adopting an idea are based either on that, e.g., trust-based, value-based, or transparency-based leadership do not fit with a global strategy or a global practice. The other reason mentioned, is that the corporations are not ready for digitalization, transparency, or value-based leadership
3. Isolation	A formally adopted but not implemented virus residing in units often at an organization's top-level (e.g., in some actors' memories, in documents, or decoupled from organizational practices). The annual reports mention that the corporations evaluate several changes and trends, but a top-level decision is yet not taken
4. Expiry	The gradual evaporation of a formally adopted idea, often without any formal decision to quit. No annual reports mentioned expired ideas at all
5. Rejection	The decision to stop using an assumed unfavourable idea due to experiential learning (e.g., unsatisfactory results) or incompatibility, i.e., that it has proven not to fit in with institutional norms, logic, or sophisticated practices. The reason for rejection is that the ideas do not correspond with the overall strategy or do not fit with global practice
6. Entrenchment	The transformation of a virus into practice (i.e., it anchors in organizational structures, routines, and daily activities) so that specifically intended effects reproduce the virus in different parts of the organization. The annual reports stress the importance of spreading the ideas to the whole organization through all channels and means. The reports stress a strong belief in the total entrenchment. Total enrolment is essential for value creation
7. Maturation	An idea lingers in an organization, often for a long time, before materializing, leading to a gradual, slow-phased transformation of the concept into practice. The reports refer to a long time for maturation and fear for failure met through consequence reports and views from hired consultants

(continued)

Table 2.2 (continued)

<i>Viral feature</i>	<i>Idea-handling process</i>
8. Translation	The deliberate change of methods and approaches occurs when they transfer viruses and implement viruses. The annual reports underline the importance both of a good story and a well-documented process. The translations should be both central and local in their form, and the importance of process owners at all levels is described as a key for success
9. Inactivation	Organizational activities related to an adopted virus either decrease or are discontinued. The reports do not mention discontinued ideas and avoid any kind of criticism about the corporation. The communication departments must have all got the message that everything in the report about the past, present, and future should be positive
10. Reactivation	An adopted but dormant idea is “turned on” again, and organizational activities connected to the idea increase. Sustainability-based leadership, value-based leadership, and trust-based leadership are mentioned as reactivated mature processes

The annual reports from 30 of the largest corporations studied (among a total of 60 selected) from the Scandinavian countries confirm the idea handling processes derived from the theoretical discussion of the foundation of the chapter. The ideas come to the top management group from internal and external sources. The external sources might be personal knowledge or collective knowledge. Sustainability and digitalization are described as a must. At the same time, trust, transparency, and values depend upon practice, risk, and strengths and weaknesses. The annual reports about ideas hitting 41 of 60 corporations at the same time form their way to better value creation and modernity. There were not reported any disagreements on the ideas or their implementation. We conclude that ideas are hitting organizations simultaneously, and that the ideas transform businesses or the ideas of businesses. The businesses are different, but their ideas are very similar. We do not know how important the ideas are for value creation in practice or if they are only paintings of a wished modernity.

For example, in two of the companies where interviews were conducted, the virus ideas worked like mission statements giving meaning and belief to work as a spiritual business soul of belonging to modernity

and the future. The virus ideas seemed to work like directions along which to look for meaning, belonging, and modernity. By the virus perspective adopted, we seek to explain the spread, we do not propose any illnesses per se.

2.5.1 *Reflection*

The first sentence of Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* is: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (1877, p. 1). Here Tolstoy means that for a family to be happy, several vital aspects must be given (such as good health of all family members, acceptable financial security, and mutual affection and values). The happy corporations are all alike sharing key travelling ideas giving good health (i.e., modernity), financial security, and mutual virus processes, including local virus variants. In other words: happy corporations share a standard set of ideas and attributes which lead to happiness, while any of a variety of ideas and attributes can cause an unhappy corporate family. The concept might be transferred to public institutions and different societal frameworks.

The world of ideas has many authors from the field of Philosophy, and we might add that Aristotle states the same principle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Ross 2009, p. 103):

Again. It is possible to fail in many ways, while to succeed is only possible in one way (for which reason also one is easy and the other difficult – to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult); for these reasons also, then, excess and defect are characteristic of vice, and the mean of virtue; For men are good in but one way, but bad in many.

It seems the corporate annual reports are good in but one way, and the corporations choose to report the same travelling ideas since it is possible to fail in many ways. We may speculate: To succeed is only possible in choosing the same ideas and spreading the ideas as variants of the same virus. That said, the image of modernity through global buzzwords might also be a self-betrayal. Most businesses would probably benefit more from critical reflections and learning from their own culture and history including how ideas actually spread.

2.6 DISCUSSION OF HYPOTHESES

In this chapter, we set out to challenge what is labelled fashion theory of the ways management ideas spread in some large corporations by instead drawing on a virus-theory informed perspective. We based the eight hypotheses previously presented on the virus theoretical foundation, and we will now discuss and reflect on the hypotheses compared with our qualitative empirical data from the Telenor and Telia case.

H1: It is probable that Telia and Telenor initially is an active part, which also involves local “actorhood” i.e., leadership actors who actively translate and transform the travelling idea.

The extended leadership groups in Telia and Telenor actively supported the ideas of globalization, digitalization, sustainability, virtual teams, and value-based leadership as parts of the corporation’s strategy. In contrast, trust-based leadership, transparency, and online workplace and working from home are actively supported by the trade unions and the employees. There were top-down support and bottom-up support of travelling ideas and dynamic top-down and bottom-up support. The travelling ideas translated and transformed into the context and culture of Telia and Telenor. The dynamic Scandinavian model incorporated the trade union’s view of utilizing the travelling ideas and combined the ideas with the top management selection of ideas. In the winter and spring of 2021, during Covid-19, both corporations and the trade unions strengthened the demand for flexible work at home or in-house at the corporations. In Scandinavia, Telenor and Telia have performed excellently with nearly 100% digital work from home, and in the future, the corporations are opening up for 60% work from home and 40% at work (in corporate offices, etc.). Telenor and Telia have translated the Covid-19 situation into a win-win situation translating the ideas into a new Scandinavian practice waiting for a translation into global practice.

H2: When the travelling idea meets Telia and Telenor, it will trigger one or several forms of defence mechanisms.

There were defence mechanisms both in the extended leadership group and among the employees. The employees did not support digitalization, virtual teams, and globalization, and the leadership group did not

support trust-based leadership and value-based leadership. The practice of work during COVID-19 increased the support for handling work both from the workplace and from any distance. The defence mechanism met with the Scandinavian trust of not reducing the number of employees or imposing early retirements.

H3: The idea will materialize into changes within Telia and Telenor. These changes will be following how the concept describes in practice and theory.

As once said, to know an organization, we have to change the organization. A theoretical description of the ideas had no meaning neither for the employees nor for the leadership group. The COVID-19 changed the way Telia and Telenor worked without any script or theory behind the changes. The hypothesis is not supported since it is not the way the concept was described that direct action. The changes in Telia and Telenor did not follow any theory but were practically based.

H4: An intensive initial campaign within Telia and Telenor will quickly result before changes in line with the travelling ideas are noticed.

The leadership group might launch several ideas either as strategic choices or as workout plans. However, the employees might look upon the ideas as travelling consulting ideas without content (“bend over here, the consulting ideas come again”). The initial campaign in Telenor and Telia was well-planned cooperation between the leadership group and the trade unions agreeing on an initial campaign. The cooperation model made Telia and Telenor change fast, and any ideas were easily reflected and accepted as the number of employees and the salary rate were not threatened.

H5: The travelling idea will in local versions at Telia and Telenor in some or several aspects differ from how the concept describes in theory.

The local version will not be a theory or concept but an acceptance that digitalization, sustainability, and globalization did not threaten jobs, but

created new opportunities. Value-based leadership and trust-based leadership guarantee a just and acceptable working situation. The COVID-19 proved the success of working from home, and both Telia and Telenor adopted a model with up to 100% home or distance work, which were changed to a plan for the possibility of 60/40 home/at work “after Covid-19”. The trade-off between the need for profitability and employee involvement and engagement builds into trust-based leadership.

H6: In the longitudinal story describing process management within Telia and Telenor, there will be an alternation between active and inactive states.

One-third of the employees was regarded as very actively involved in the ideas and in practicing them. One-third was active in practicing them, and one third was neither active nor involved in the theory of the concept nor the practice of travelling ideas. There were thus active participants and not active participants. The intensity of the virus and the numbers affected will depend upon the participation rate.

H7: The virus buzz words tend to give meaning for the leaders, managers, and employees as a spiritual star or soul for the corporation.

In Telia and Telenor, the virus worked like mission statements giving meaning and beliefs to work as a spiritual business soul of belonging to modernity and the future. The virus worked like directions along which to look for meaning and belonging. The ideas can be regarded as strange, working towards an idealized modernity or belonging to the future. The employees believed in or accepted the ideas of digitalization and globalization. Telia and Telenor are selling telecommunication offerings, and they practice the road they are selling. The Norwegian author Knausgård (2020, p. 197) writes in his latest novel:

Mysticism in the working life has come to stay. Mysticism contributes in an age where everything is explained, given, numbered, measured and counted. Mysticism gives spiritual meaning and might be the star and inner soul we always have been looking for.

The hypothesis *H7* can never be proven and will have to be rejected. Anyhow, we might have come to a time where the mysticism of the travelling ideas is the soul of modernity, we as leaders and employees want to belong to a form of community. We need a dream and hope. The travelling ideas coming to us like a virus, including local variants, might be the dream and the hope. They might also be the same old shit. Bend over, here it comes again. Still, according to Telia and Telenor, their experience of ideas or mysticism in their company organizing gave hope and a dream not only for a corporate world but for a better world.

H8: There is a need for somebody saying that this is only bullshit giving no meaning.

The interviewed agreed that it is too easy to develop bullshit, especially when ideas come from external sources, and too many are expecting that all new ideas should be accepted. There are too many ideas about directions along which to look. A bullshit manager might be needed to do what all think. Bend over—here all the bullshit comes again. There is an agreement that there are too many ideas to be evaluated and a need for stability in ideas.

In other words, a bullshit manager is warranted. There are too many travelling ideas, and somebody must take the role like the little boy in H.C. Andersen's story (1837) to say: "The emperor has no clothes". When a leader surrounds himself only with *yes*-men, it often leads to absurd and embarrassing results. It is far better to surround oneself with critical people who are not afraid of raising questions or point out deficiencies as they see them and as they occur.

2.7 CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we aimed to shed light on how ideas spread in organizations by use of an alternative theory than the dominant fashion theory. Specifically, we address travelling ideas within leadership and explore empirically if ideas behave like a virus in organizations. We have done this in an essay form, reflecting on the ways the metaphor of virus proliferation fills several gaps that fashion theory did not explain.

- One clear example is the weak demonstration within the fashion theory of what happens within an organization after an idea has “travelled in” (David & Strang, 2006; Scarbrough & Swan, 2001).
- Another example is the simplified adoption–rejection dichotomy. The virus-inspired theory identifies more possible processes in the idea-handling process, leading to various outputs.

Our study’s significant contribution is that the theorizing has been exploratively tested against real-life data. The findings support that the virus metaphor can help us identify and understand idea-handling processes in greater details with much more sophistication than the fashion theory. The description entails which ideas are the travelling ones, and insights on how ideas are implemented, accepted, rejected, or reactivated. Even if the richness might be more extensive, we have analysed concrete ideas and reflected on the rise, fall, and decline of management ideas from the virus perspective. This is not only anticipations but a theoretical discussion. We have identified similar ideas as recurrent organized patterns, here supported by research evidence from two large corporations. By that, we have given a theoretical and practical contribution to using the virus theory as an alternative to the fashion and bandwagon theory.

We also looked into the most significant 20 corporations in each of the Scandinavian countries. The findings demonstrated how nearly all large corporations are influenced by the same travelling ideas, however, by different local virus variants, and how these viruses and virus variants are spread through the corporations. We found that most Scandinavian corporations had worked with the following ideas (in 2020):

Globalization, Digitalization, Sustainability, Virtual teams, Trust-based leadership, Value-based leadership, Project management agility, Flexible workplaces, Transparency

Trust-based leadership, value-based leadership, and transparency were the most challenging ideas to adopt and spread. We do not know if the corporations have adopted and implemented these ideas, but they mention them as a guiding star for their businesses.

The case interviews demonstrated the influence and development of travelling ideas in single corporations. Telia and Telenor worked with the same ideas as all the corporations in Scandinavia. The corporations did follow our proposed cycles for adopting a virus and for spreading the

variants of the virus. Telia and Telenor's dynamic cooperation between the leadership and trade unions made it possibly simpler to work with transparency, trust-based leadership, value-based leadership, and transparency. The whole organization's dynamic cooperation opened up for working with and including travelling business ideas like a virus through the whole organization. The most exciting hypothesis regarding ideas as a part of mysticism gave Telia and Telenor a meaningful soul of modernity and meaningfulness was accepted.

Eventually, we would like to clarify that by using the virus as a metaphor for idea-handling processes, we propose by no means that management ideas are excessively pathologic. Indeed, numerous studies of the biosphere suggest that micro-organisms "rule in the world" through dynamic processes with varieties of impact. Furthermore, any correspondence between viral features and idea-handling is constructed and not just found (see Chapter 3). In conclusion, we will stress that the organizations we have had the privilege to study are well-functioning in several respects. We see the viral features as a metaphor for a complicated process and not as a normative statement of any kind.

2.7.1 *Limitations and Further Research*

We may see this as a sign that the area we study, i.e., travelling ideas and their influence on organizations, is perhaps not as significant as we may tend to believe. The truth may be that organizations contain so much accumulated wisdom and knowledge inherited from past generations to make everything else a superficial veneer.

Alternatively, it may take longer time to spread essential management ideas from the abstract into more concrete activities in and between the established corporations, for example, incorporating deep ecological conceptions into the organized value-creation. In fact, concerning the process of working with travelling ideas, we know very little about how the ideas are integrated at different layers in an organization, including in what ways corporate practices transform the ideas into daily routines and work processes.

Furthermore, the concept of sustainability, transparency, trust-based leadership, and value-based leadership are examples of how corporations support the idea but might do something completely different in practice. The mutation process may help explain how an organization can assert that it is working by following a specific idea but doing something that

appears different. The corporations tend to tell another story than they are practicing. Ideas may also become dormant or fail to connect, their time has not yet “come”. Ideas often need to be reactivated (Jevnaker, 1993), pointing to both time and processual aspects for spreading ideas (see Chapter 6). On this background, we suggest the relation between entrenchment and translation in idea-handling processes as one particular area towards which future research should be directed.

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