

Development as a Positive Leader in the Context of Thematic Supervision: Leaders' Experiences of D-Groups

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Abstract

Supervision is defined as the process of examining and evaluating oneself, one's own work in a group or individually with a trained supervisor. Its' objective is to facilitate the growth and learning of the participants. The focal point of this study is a particular form of thematic supervision grounded in the theoretical framework of positive leadership and organizational development, known as D-Groups.

The objective of this study was to describe how leaders who have participated in the D-Groups perceive the significance of the groups for their own leadership development. The research was conducted as a qualitative study. The data were collected through focus group interviews and subsequently analyzed using a qualitative content analysis. A total of ten participants were interviewed.

The primary findings indicate that the D-Groups serve as a valuable source of support, fostering a sense of pause, presence, and reflection. Additionally, the D-Groups were found to advance value-based leadership and support positive leadership in practice. Peer support and a sense of community emerged as key elements in the perceived significance of the D-Groups.

The results highlight the D-Groups as a learning environment: a safe space for reflection, a conduit for novel ideas and perspectives, and a catalyst for expansive thinking. The study proposes D-Groups as a means of facilitating positive leadership development among leaders.

Keywords: supervision, positive leadership, leadership development, reflection

1. Introduction

Supervision can be defined as the process of examining and evaluating oneself, one's own work, thinking and actions in a group or individually with a trained supervisor (Cavallaro et al 2019). Supervision is a reflective process that facilitates professional growth and learning of the individual being supervised (Forsten-Astikainen, 2023). In leadership supervision a key objective is to assist leaders in developing their leadership identity and articulating their own perception of leadership (Roth, 2017; Sahraei et al., 2021).

The role of supervision in fostering well-being at the workplace is similarly significant. Leaders frequently encounter significant emotional challenges and conflicts in the workplace. Addressing these issues through supervision can help prevent exhaustion and stress (Keski-Luopa, 2015, 38; Ollila, 2008). It is noteworthy that studies have consistently demonstrated a decline in the well-being and job satisfaction of leaders (Casserley & Critchley, 2010). The well-being of leaders is of consequence for their capacity to manage the well-being of others and to implement quality human resource management (Harms et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2016).

While supervision has been employed extensively to support management, there is a paucity of research on the subject of supervision in general, its effectiveness, and its relevance (Cavallaro et al 2019; Ollila, 2008; Roth, 2017). Concurrently, research on positive leadership has called for practices and development methods that would support leaders' personal and professional growth and leadership identity (Baron & Parent, 2016; Brewer & Devnew, 2022; Ström et al., 2024). It is evident that this issue cannot be resolved by training courses that solely concentrate on "surface" skills and managerial content (Brewer & Devnew, 2022; Hannah et al., 2014). Consequently, research has underscored the importance of reflexive practices, such as coaching or supervision, as integral components of leadership development programs (Baron & Parent, 2015; Brewer & Devnew, 2022; Fusco, 2020). Contrastingly, there is a dearth of research exploring the use of supervision as a catalyst for leadership development, particularly in the context of goal-oriented professional growth and leadership development.

Authenticity is considered a core component of positive leadership theories (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), with a significant impact on leaders' well-being and sustainable careers (Brewer & Devnew, 2022; Corriveau, 2020; Metin et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2014). A large body of research has stated that the development of authentic leadership requires the strengthening of self-knowledge and self-awareness by means through self-reflection (Baron & Parent, 2017; Castelli, 2016; Raffo, 2014; Strand, 2011). The practice of self-reflection, however, is contingent upon the presence of specific social conditions characterized by a state of trust and psychological safety (Baron & Parent, 2015; Brewer & Devnew, 2022; Mälkki, 2011). In accordance with this line of research, it can be posited that leadership supervision has the potential to serve as a safe space for reflection (Keski-Luopa, 2015) and a learning environment fostering professional growth and development (Alila, 2014).

However, there is a paucity of research on thematic supervision; supervision as a support to leadership; or supervision in the context of positive leadership. To address these research

gaps, this study examines a specific form of thematic supervision, the D-Group, which was developed on the basis of positive leadership theory to support positive leadership development. Consequently, the present study assumes that D-groups may support the development of an authentic leadership identity in the direction of positive leadership and provide a novel framework for supervision. The purpose of the research is to describe how leaders who have participated in D-Groups perceive the significance of the groups for their own leadership development.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Positive Leadership

There is no single definition of positive leadership, but it is regarded as an umbrella concept for forms of people-centered and humane leadership, such as ethical, spiritual, servant, authentic and transformational leadership (Blanch et al., 2016; Dinh et al., 2014). Alternatively, positive leadership has been conceptualized as the implementation of positive psychology principles within the domains of management and human resource development (Cameron, 2013; Youssef & Luthans, 2012). Irrespective of the specific definition, the fundamental components of positive leadership are widely recognized to encompass interactivity, moral and ethical perspective and the authenticity of leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021).

Wenström et al. (2018) posit that positive leadership can be conceptualized through the lens of the PRIDE theory of positive organization (Cheung, 2014). According to this theory, the components of positive leadership encompass positive practices (P), relationship enhancement (R), individual attributes (I), dynamic leadership (D), and emotional well-being (E) (Cheung, 2014; Wenström, 2020). Empirical evidence has demonstrated that PRIDE theory identifies the organizational factors that contribute to employee well-being and work engagement (Cheung, 2014; Haapakoski et al., 2023; Wenström et al., 2018; Wenström, 2020), which in turn affects the quality and performance of the organization (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010).

The PRIDE theory has been developed and applied in leadership training as part of the Positive Leadership Development programs as a part of RDI-projects in a higher education institute (Haapakoski et al., 2023, Wenström et al., 2018). These projects have developed and implemented leadership development programs, leadership training, and thematic supervision groups, known as D-Groups, which have been structured around the PRIDE theory (Wenström, 2020, see also Ström et al., 2024). Thematic supervision groups have been named after PRIDE theory's sub-area D, which refers to dynamic leadership and leadership development. Henceforth, we will use the term D-Groups. The objective of these groups is to assist leaders in reflecting on their own thought processes and actions in the context of the theory of positive leadership, facilitating learning in this area, and thereby promoting the development of positive leadership.

2.2 Positive Leadership Development

Research of positive leadership development is limited (MacKie, 2017; Ström et al., 2024). A majority of this research represents authentic (Baron & Parent, 2015; Brewer & Devnew, 2022) or transformational (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007) leadership development. Authenticity, a common core of positive leadership theories, can serve as a crucial dimension of development (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2021). Using definitions from Kernis (2003) and Kernis and Goldman (2006), Ilies and colleagues (2005) have delineated a developmental process for leader authenticity comprising four distinct yet interconnected components: self-awareness, unbiased processing; authentic behavior or acting and authentic relational orientation.

According to Ilies et al. (2005), the concept of self-awareness encompasses the identification of one's own strengths, values, feelings, beliefs and patterns of thinking. The term 'unbiased processing' refers to the reflective process of becoming aware of the impact of one's own strengths and actions on others. Authentic behavior is defined as the congruence between thinking, acting, and interacting, and the capacity to behave authentically in diverse roles and situations. An authentic relational orientation in leadership is characterized by trust and reliability in social relationships. When a leader is authentic and human, they are perceived as more trustworthy and are more likely to receive social support (Ilies et al., 2005).

Baron and Parent (2015) subsequently identified a number of factors that contribute to the development of authentic leadership. The first of these is recognizing ways to action, which involves becoming aware of one's own actions. This can be achieved by exploring how others perceive one's actions and how one reacts in different situations, as well as how one's own past experiences and emotional identity influence one's feelings, thinking and actions. Another factor is emotional awareness, which involves recognizing, accepting, and attending to one's own emotions, including self-compassion. Awareness of one's needs and values entails encompasses examining one's own motivations for action and the manner in which one's values can be implemented in action (see also Auvinen, 2023). Research has demonstrated that support for leadership fosters authentic action and the experience of coherence in different roles and increases courage to act in accordance with one's values (Baron & Parent, 2015).

In light of these approaches, it can be argued that authenticity as part of positive leadership development necessitates reflection (Raffo, 2014). Reflection is the process of understanding and reappraising one's own and other individuals' cognitive processes and actions, thereby facilitating change (Forsten-Astikainen, 2023; Keski-Luopa, 2015, 116; Wenström, 2020). Reflection allows leaders to reflect on their own theory-in-use and leadership schemas (implicit theory), expectations and leadership in practice (Keski-Luopa, 2015; Kragt & Day, 2020). Successful reflection with others is contingent upon the establishment of a secure and trusting environment that enables the expression of challenging emotions and thoughts. When optimal, shared reflection fosters feelings of empowerment and a sense of autonomy (Akhigbe & Monday, 2022; Forsten-Astikainen, 2023).

The present study posits that supervision can serve as a reflective practice in the development

of positive leadership.

2.3 Leadership Supervision as a Support for Reflection in the Context of Positive Leadership Development

The objective of supervision is to facilitate the growth and learning of the participants (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Roth, 2017). In English literature, related terms for supervision include counselling, work-counselling, mentoring or professional support, and the development of professional expertise (such as mentor, facilitator, or clinical supervisor) (Cavallaro et al. 2019; Weaver et al. 2024). The content of supervision generally originate from the participants' own work and are discussed from the perspective of experiences, feelings, and expectations (Roth 2017).

Supervision has been demonstrated to play a pivotal role in the well-being and empowerment of leaders (Ollila, 2008). This is a crucial finding because the leader's own well-being is a necessary condition for the well-being of the people they lead (Harms et al., 2017). Leadership supervision provides a confidential forum for the resolution of various types of situations and for the enhancement of competencies (Ollila, 2008). Furthermore, leadership supervision in groups offers a chance for peer support at work, reflection on one's own leadership style and, as a result, leadership development (Roth, 2017). Thematic, case-based and process-based supervision are the three main forms of supervision. Thematic supervision, characterized by its adherence to a predetermined theme, finds particular application in brief supervisory processes, though research in this area remains limited (Alila, 2014).

Themes in positive leadership supervision draw upon the theoretical framework of positive leadership and organization, regarded as a component of the developmental path toward positive leadership (Wenström, 2020). From the perspective of supervision, theory functions as a reflective instrument, enabling leaders to examine their own thinking and actions, conceptualize their own experiences, and make them understandable (Archer, 2007). Consequently, it is essential for leaders to have a model or framework in place to define and identify their own leadership principles.

Typically, leadership supervision is to be provided to groups of leaders or leaders from the same organization. The present study employed Positive Leadership Thematic Supervision with open groups of leaders from diverse organizations and sectors. Consequently, thematic supervision introduces a cross-sectoral element of peer support to the supervisory process. As evidenced by prior research on authentic leadership training, a community of leaders from diverse backgrounds fosters a constructive environment for reflection and leadership development (Baron & Parent, 2015; Brewer & Devnew, 2022). By creating a psychologically safe atmosphere and trust within a group, the different experiences and perspectives of others allow the group to overcome the limitations of their own thinking and challenge their own beliefs (Baron & Parent, 2015; Brewer & Dewnev, 2022).

The research question of this study is to ascertain how leaders who have participated in D-Groups perceive the significance of the groups for their own leadership development.

3. Method

The present study was conducted as a qualitative study, particularly beneficial approach when studying a phenomenon about which relatively little is yet known (Keller et al., 2016). Qualitative research is designed to enhance our understanding of the subject under study and to describe it in people's own words (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). In this way, qualitative research can expand and enrich our knowledge, and can inspire new theory (Gergen et al., 2015).

3.1 Program under study: The D-Group - Positive Leadership Thematic Supervision

The D-Groups were introduced as part of the Positive Leadership projects between 2020 and 2023. The announcement of the opportunity to participate in the D-groups was posted on the Positive Leadership Network Facebook group, which has an active membership of nearly 5,000 individuals representing a diverse range of professions and organizations. Participation in the groups was free of charge.

The D-Groups were conducted remotely and convened 10 times throughout the year. Each meeting lasted two hours. The size of the D-groups varied between seven and 15 individuals, with an average of 10 persons per group.

The D-Groups were attended by leaders and leaders from a variety of organizations and sectors, whose participation was driven by a personal commitment to leadership development. In accordance with the principles of supervision, the participants committed to maintaining confidentiality on all matters discussed in the group. The D-Groups were led by experienced supervisors who had completed the Finnish Association of Supervisors' (STORY) approved supervisor training and also had expertise in positive leadership. A total of four different supervisors were involved in the project.

In the first D-Group session, the PRIDE theory of positive organization was briefly discussed. The overarching theme of each D-Group session was one of the PRIDE theory components, namely positive practices (P), relationship enhancement (R), individual strengths (I), positive leadership (D), and positive emotions and atmosphere (E). The content of the supervision was developed through a dialogue between the theory and practical examples drawn from the experiences of the group members, with a focus on addressing their specific needs.

At the first session, participants were also instructed to write a reflection diary, though this was not mandatory. In the following sessions, the content of the discussion was defined by the participants, with the role of the supervisor being to articulate and conceptualize this content using positive leadership theory. In essence, the groups engaged in a discussion about the participants' personal experiences, reflections, and feelings concerning their own leadership and management practices. Thematic areas encompassed the manner of addressing challenging matters with personnel, the experience of irritation or frustration as a leader, the identification and utilization of the strengths of personnel, the fostering of their professional growth, the management of one's own actions, emotions and professionalism, and the development of positive practices such as meetings and discussions.

3.2 Participants and Data

The population of this study included all members of the 75 D-Groups, that were conducted between October 9, 2020 and November 29, 2023 with a total population of approximately 750 individuals. Due to the unavailability of contact information for all participants, a targeted invitation to participate in an interview was sent via email to 86 individuals. Furthermore, the invitation to participate in the interview was published on the Facebook group of the Positive Leadership Network, which was expected to reach the participants of the D-Groups. The invitation to interview provided details of the study and instructions on how to participate, as well as the terms and conditions for the privacy of the study.

Ten individuals consented to participating in the interviews as a result of the call for participation. The interviews were conducted in two groups as focus group interviews via Teams Meeting. In focus group interviews, the subjects are selected on the basis that they share some common background or experience (Belzile & Oberg, 2012; Liamputtong, 2010). The interviewees had participated in different D-Groups. The average management experience of the interviewees was 10.4 years.

The interview was conducted as a thematic interview (Mishra & Ajoy, 2022). Two group interviews were conducted, each lasting one hour. The first group included four participants, while the second group included six. Each interview incorporated multiple themes as part of a broader study. The research question was addressed by posing the following question: "What has been the significance of participating in the D-Group for you as a leader?"

In the focus group interview, participants discussed the given topics under the guidance of Authors 1 and 2, who acted as interviewers. Other researchers do not know the identity of the respondents.

The interviews were designed to be as open, informal and interactive as possible, in order to elicit the experiences and ideas of the research participants as authentically as possible. The interview proceeded with the interview themes acting as the framework for the discussion. The researchers asked questions related to the themes, to which the interviewees responded based on their own experiences and thoughts.

The verbatim transcription of the interviews was conducted using the Teams software and was anonymized. The total length of the transcribed text was 70 pages, and the language of the interviews was Finnish. The data extracts have been translated into English for the article. The interviews were stored in a password-protected cloud service. The research process was conducted in accordance with the guidelines established by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK).

3.3 Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in accordance with the qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2015). To commence the analysis, the researchers searched the interview data for meaning units that corresponded to the research task, which were recorded as reduced expressions in a separate table. Following the reduction step, the data were grouped by

identifying similarities among the reduced expressions. The similar reduced expressions formed subcategories, which were named according to their content. The classification was then continued by combining the subcategories into main categories. The following example in Table 1. illustrates the reduction and classification of the original expression.

Table 1. An Example of Analysis

Original expression		
"It was really important for me to be heard and seen. I think that was very well done, even though we were remote. There was a sense of presence all the time."		
Reduced expression	Subcategory	Main category
The place to be heard and seen and to be present.	Place to pause and be present	Support for pausing and presence

4. Results

The study addresses the question of the significance of the D-Groups for leadership development as perceived by the leaders who participated in the groups. As a result of analysis, five main categories and 10 sub-categories were formed, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Result Categories

Main category	Subcategories
Support for pausing and presence	A place to pause and to be present A safe and confidential atmosphere
Support for reflection	Finding new perspectives Processing change
Support for value-based leadership	The courage to lead according to your values Support for your values and strengths
Peer support and sense of community	Sharing experiences, learning and peer support Building community and empowerment
Support for positive leadership in practice	Positive leadership as a mindset: structuring your own work Positive leadership in action: putting it into practice

Subsequently, an examination of the results will be conducted according to the main categories.

4.1 Support for Pausing and Presence

The findings indicated that the leaders who participated in the D-Groups perceived the group as a venue for pausing and being present in their leadership. The groups were perceived as accessible and provided an opportunity to decelerate and accomplish tasks. D-Group offered the possibility of disengaging from the frenetic pace of daily life, facilitating a period of respite.

The results demonstrated that the leaders who participated in D-Groups perceived the atmosphere within these groups to be safe from the outset. They felt a sense of belonging within the group and exhibited courage in discussing issues, which fostered the emergence of new perspectives. Leaders reported that trust between group members was established rapidly, despite the remote nature of the D-Groups.

It was really important to me to be heard and seen. I think we managed to do that, even though the group was remote. There was a constant sense of presence.

Even though the participants were geographically distant, there was a sense of community

4.2 Support for Reflection

The findings indicated that participation in D-Groups and the sharing of experiences led to a heightened awareness and the generation of novel approaches for navigating diverse circumstances and individuals. The D-Groups provided the interviewees with new ideas and a renewed sense of motivation, and the content and experiences shared by leaders in diverse fields facilitated the emergence of novel perspectives. The D-Groups facilitated the processing of change situations among leaders by creating a supportive and non-judgmental environment.

A notable proportion of the participants employed a reflection diary during the D-Groups, perceiving it as a valuable instrument for introspection and personal growth.

Reflection can be very scary sometimes, if you have been firmly on one side or another and then at some point you realize that you should practice self-reflection a little bit. I think it is a really important leadership tool by example

4.3 Support for Value-Based Leadership

The findings indicated that the D-Groups facilitated the convergence of leaders with aligned values, thereby reinforcing their personal values and enhancing their capacity to articulate and lead in accordance with their intrinsic values. The groups cultivated the ability to express their unique leadership styles and developed the fortitude to defend their espoused values of positive leadership within the organizational context. Engagement in the group provided leaders with the confidence to bring their individual perspectives to the work community. The leaders perceived that the experience gained from the group enhanced their ability to perceive and interact with their subordinates more effectively.

The theme of positive leadership brought together people with similar values. It's a great way to connect with others, it's easy to get involved, and it supports your own values and your own value-based leadership.

In the D-Groups, I was able to build my confidence and speak up when I saw people acting in ways that didn't align with the principles of positive leadership. I felt confident enough to say that "this is what we do."

Furthermore, leaders reported an enhanced recognition of their own strengths and the courage to utilize them as a result of their participation in D-Groups. Leaders also indicated that their sense of meaning was heightened as a consequence of their involvement in the groups. The findings demonstrated that, within the D-Groups, participants were able to shift their perspective from positive leadership to their own strengths and self-awareness.

It makes the job easier to know your own strengths... It's not working if you are all over the place and aren't aware of what you're doing and who you are.

4.4 Peer Support and Sense of Community

The findings indicated that the D-Groups were characterized by a sense of empowerment and a sense of community. The peer group provided a secure and confidential space for discussion. Leaders perceived that, even when working with different organizations, they were addressing similar challenges in their leadership roles. The D-Groups offered both supervisory and peer support. They felt that they had received support from other participants and that they had supported others.

The most salient aspect of peer support was the manner in which leaders perceived an opportunity to learn from and obtain ideas for their own work from others. Furthermore, participants reported feelings of both strengthening and being supported by the experiences shared by others. Additionally, they perceived that the experiences shared by leaders from a various sectors provided valuable insights for leaders in other sectors. They indicated that they could draw upon the challenging experiences of others to inform their own leadership practices. The findings demonstrated that by listening to others' perspectives, leaders also learned from themselves, which in turn reassured and reinforced their own ideas.

Peer support from the other participants... Even if you didn't have a problem case to deal with, you got validation and support from the challenges of others.

4.5 Support for Positive Leadership in Practice

The findings indicated that the PRIDE theory of positive organization, when employed as a framework for the D-Groups, provided leaders with a positive leadership framework that facilitated the structuring of their own leadership in practice. The groups also strengthened their understanding and knowledge of how to prioritize issues and tasks in their own work. According to the results, the understanding of positive leadership gained from the D-Groups contributed to their own development as positive leaders. Leaders felt that being seen and heard in the D-Groups helped them to feel more present as leaders to their subordinates. Adopting positive leadership principles and integrating them into their professional practices

was also identified as a means of enhancing their work environment. The results of the study demonstrated that leaders gained an understanding of the significance of fostering a positive atmosphere and recognizing their strengths.

They also felt that it was easier to carry out day-to-day management work after participating in the group. The support of the group was relevant in situations where leaders encountered challenges in incorporating a positive leadership perspective into environments where it was not yet recognized.

I feel that the group gave me an understanding of positive leadership and helped me to prioritize my own work.

Without my own experience of being heard and seen, I might not have been able to be so present as a leader to my subordinates.

It is challenging to bring the positive leadership perspective alone into an environment where it is not yet recognized.

5. Discussion

The contemporary workplace is characterized by accelerated paces and mounting demands, which are reflected in the work of leaders in the form of rushed schedules, stress, and work pressure (Elomaa et al., 2023). This research indicates that D-Groups provide an invaluable opportunity for leaders to engage in reflective practice (Branson, 2007; Hackman & Johnson, 2009). Remarkably, despite the geographical distance between members, D-Groups have been shown to establish trust and a sense of community. This finding is particularly noteworthy given that remote groups facilitate participation, require less time from the leader, and allow for interaction from different locations, thereby enabling individuals from diverse geographical areas to engage with one another.

The study highlighted the pivotal role of reflection as a conduit for novel ideas and perspectives, as well as a catalyst for expansive thinking. The D-Group fosters a secure learning environment conducive to such reflection (Alila, 2014; Bernard & Luke, 2015). Reflection alone entails the implementation of one's own internal patterns and adopted ways of thinking. In contrast, reflection in a collective setting offers a multitude of ideas that may challenge existing beliefs and prompt further reflection and questioning (Keski-Luopa, 2015, p. 117). The present study corroborates this finding, demonstrating that the reflective approach adopted through supervision can facilitate self-reflection as part of one's own work, for example through a reflection diary (Harry-Nana & Bosch, 2020; Keski-Luopa, 2015, 117; Schedlitzki et al., 2015). According to the results, the reflection diary supported the supervision process and maintained reflection between the D-Group sessions. As previous research indicates, reflective diaries can support the development of reflective skills and understanding of one's own leadership (Harry-Nana & Bosch, 2020).

This study lends support to the findings of previous research, which indicates that reflection is an effective strategy for tolerating uncertainty and navigating change (De Dea Roglio &

Light, 2009). In an era of constant change and pressure, this is particularly important for the well-being of leaders and their ability to act in a socially and ethically sustainable way (Kiersch & Gullekson, 2021). Furthermore, reflection helps to clarify one's strengths, values, emotions, identity, motives, and goals, which in turn facilitates better decision-making and goal setting (McDaniel & DiBella-McCarthy, 2012).

Concurrent research underscores the significance of recognizing, acknowledging, and reflecting on one's personal strengths and values as a foundational element for fostering positive leadership development (Ström et al., 2024; Wenström, 2020). The present study's findings further emphasize the support for one's inherent values and strengths as a pivotal benefit of D-Group. Leaders in the study articulated that D-Group offered them a reinforcement mechanism to act in alignment with their personal values. In this manner, D-Groups can facilitate the handling and examination of daily challenges and situations from a values-based perspective, thereby fostering authenticity (Branson, 2007).

Reflection in supervision has been demonstrated to facilitate heightened self-awareness regarding personal blind spots, vulnerabilities, and biases in thinking (Ralph, 2005; Showry & Manasa, 2014). Mirroring one's own thoughts and experiences with those of others helps to explain and evaluate one's own experiences, choices and possibilities, and to give them a theoretical outline (Baron & Parent, 2015)

The present study demonstrated the significance of the varied backgrounds of the leaders participating in the group as an enriching factor in their own thinking. Similar results have been found in studies of positive leadership training, where peer learning has also been found to deepen reflection (Baron & Parent, 2015). Concurrently, the present study highlights that a group in which participants share a similar understanding of human nature and values can have an encouraging and empowering effect. This is particularly significant in cases where an individual leader lacks support from their organization to adopt a humanistic leadership style and values. In such cases, the formation of a peer group, such as a D-Group, emerges as a pivotal factor in promoting well-being. The significance of peer support, empathy, and encouragement has been repeatedly highlighted in prior research on leadership development (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007).

Additionally, studies have identified that the competence of the supervisor and the trusting relationship with the supervisee play a significant role in strengthening the self-efficacy of the supervisee (Morrison & Lents, 2018), and this was also found in this study. The D-Group supervisor must be able to create an atmosphere of trust remotely in a group where people do not know each other and, on the other hand, have expertise in the theoretical content of positive leadership in order to help participants reflect on their thoughts and actions in relation to the positive leadership framework (Wainwright, 2010).

This study contributes to the extant literature on supervision by leveraging the theoretical framework of positive leadership as a thematic framework for supervision. The findings indicate that the knowledge and theoretical component of D-Groups provides substantial support for leadership. Positive leadership theory has been demonstrated to facilitate the framing and structuring of one's own work and basic tasks, as well as to promote

comprehension of the factors that contribute to staff well-being and the creation of a positive atmosphere. (Roth, 2017; Ström et al., 2024; Wenström, 2020)

This study highlights the benefits of theory-based, thematic supervision for leadership development. The findings indicate that supervision supports general well-being and serves as a goal-oriented model for positive leadership development. Moreover, it demonstrates that, with the support of a shared, value-based framework and an experienced supervisor, trust, presence and a sense of community can be fostered among leaders from different organizations, even online. The findings further underscore that, in addition to fostering a sense of identity, the D-Group can have a practical impact on leaders' daily work and practices, thereby impacting the work community. It is also noteworthy that the D-Group functions as a support structure for leaders in challenging organizational environments, which could otherwise cause ethical stress or feelings of isolation.

The study also contributes to existing theoretical frameworks. Firstly, previous studies on supervision have emphasized the importance of a theoretical framework (Keski-Luopa, 2015). Our study was the first to apply the PRIDE theory of positive organizations as a thematic framework for supervision, opening up new areas of application for both the PRIDE theory and the structuring of thematic supervision. Furthermore, the study provides new insights into the theory of authenticity development (Ilies et al., 2005). The results demonstrate that participants gained benefits from D-Groups that support self-awareness, unbiased processing, authentic behavior and authentic relational orientation.

6. Conclusion

The research question was as follows: How do leaders who have participated in D-Groups perceive the significance of the groups for their own leadership development? Analysis of the two focus group interviews yielded five mutually reinforcing outcomes. First, the D-Groups created an assigned time and space for reflection within a psychologically safe environment. This facilitated deeper reflection, broadening perspectives and aiding in processing change. Additionally, D-Groups strengthened value-based leadership and awareness of personal strengths, increasing courage to act in accordance with one's values. Furthermore, D-Groups fostered peer support and a sense of community across sectors, reducing feelings of isolation and enabling reciprocal learning. Finally, the D-Groups promoted positive leadership by translating the PRIDE framework into everyday routines and clearer prioritization. Despite the remote setting, participants consistently reported feeling "heard and seen." They also described concrete, value-consistent changes in their leadership. Taken together, this evidence suggests that D-Groups function as a theory-guided supervision model that fosters positive leadership development by integrating identity work with a peer community and, consequently, with the practice of daily management.

As previous research has demonstrated the efficacy of integrating supervision and instructional approaches in leadership training (Brewer & Devnew, 2022; Ström et al., 2024), it is imperative to refine and adapt supervision practices to align with the demands of contemporary working life and the needs of leaders. Identity development through reflection

should be a continuous endeavor for individuals in leadership roles. The findings of this study demonstrate that D- Groups can facilitate leaders' identity work and the development of positive leadership. Consequently, D-Groups should be regarded as a method of supporting leadership. This study provides empirical evidence that the theory-based, thematic structure of supervision has the capacity to offer a sense of purpose and systematicity in leadership development. This is noteworthy, as the thematic structure of supervision has been rare until now. In addition to addressing daily issues, participants are guided towards thinking and acting in accordance with a positive leadership framework.

In today's dynamic and demanding professional environment, characterized by constant changes and the increasing trend of remote and distributed work, it is crucial to identify and implement effective tools for leadership development that are tailored to the needs of leaders and can be integrated into their demanding daily routines. The D-Groups in this study were conducted entirely remotely, which not only facilitated ease of participation and saved time but also provided an opportunity for collegial support and networking among leaders from different backgrounds. The results of the study suggest that participation in D-groups may reduce the ethical stress and loneliness experienced by leaders; however, this finding requires further research.

7. Limitations

It should be noted that this study is not without limitations. As is characteristic of a qualitative study, the study population was relatively small ($n = 10$) and was selected on a voluntary basis from all the participants in the D-groups. It is possible that they differ in some ways from those who did not take part in the research interviews. For instance, they may have had a particular interest in the topic or found the D-groups particularly useful (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Waterfield, 2018). Nonetheless, the findings of this study can serve as a starting point for further research into this new thematic form of supervision.

In qualitative research, the researcher is considered a research instrument, and their assumptions influence the manner in which questions are posed and the interpretation of the results (Graneheim et al., 2017). In this study, researchers 1 and 2, who conducted the interviews and were responsible for the initial analysis, had no prior involvement with positive leadership projects or D-Groups. Similarly, researchers 3 and 5 had no contact with D-Groups. During the analysis phase, researcher triangulation was employed to ensure rigor and reliability. Additionally, researchers engaged in ongoing discussions regarding the formation of outcome categories and interpretation of results as the analysis progressed (Flick, 2018).

8. Implications for Practice

As educational institutions offer leadership development programs and training for managers and executives, the opportunities offered by supervision are highly recommended. A

theory-based and thematic approach in supervision is recommended to facilitate the implementation of a positive leadership framework. The utilization of online supervision is recommended, as it facilitates greater accessibility for leaders.

It is further recommended that supervision be conducted in groups of leaders from diverse organizations, as this facilitates peer-to-peer learning. Finally, it is recommended that leaders be granted access to supervision both for their own professional growth and learning and for the purpose of facilitating ethical decision-making.

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Authors contributions

Hökkä and Sallinen were responsible for collecting and analyzing the data. Dr. Kiviniemi was responsible for study design and participated in analyzing the data. Veivo participated in analyzing the data and drawing and conclusions. Dr. Wenström was responsible for theory and discussion, and drafted and finalized the manuscript, and Veivo and Kiviniemi revised it.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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