

**Learning Entrepreneurial Leadership among Nascent  
Food Entrepreneurs in Denmark and New Zealand**

Michael Breum Ramsgaard,  
VIA University College, Faculty of Health, Aarhus, Denmark

Email: [mibj@via.dk](mailto:mibj@via.dk)

Professor Lorraine Warren,  
School of Management, Massey University, New Zealand

Email: [L.Warren@massey.ac.nz](mailto:L.Warren@massey.ac.nz)

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper examines the process of learning entrepreneurial leadership in small food businesses in the early stages. It draws on the growing body of research around entrepreneurial leadership that deals with leadership in ventures but overlooks the importance of entrepreneurial leadership in the nascent phases. We analyse the factors constituting the processes of learning entrepreneurial leadership among nascent food entrepreneurs. The primary source of data derives from four in-depth interviews in each country with founders of SME food businesses with no more than 5 years of company history. Further we discuss whether regional differences in the conception of entrepreneurial leadership can be identified through comparison between qualitative data from Denmark and New Zealand.*

**Keywords:** entrepreneurship; entrepreneurial leadership; entrepreneurial learning; SME; food;

### This paper is a Work in Progress

Thus far, there is little in the literature about the learning processes of becoming a leader among nascent entrepreneurs. This paper investigates the social actions and practices associated with developing entrepreneurial leadership capacities in the nascent phases of building new food businesses. Through a comprehensive literature review that focusses on the extraction of influential factors towards creating entrepreneurial leadership in the nascent phases, we develop a framework for an empirical analysis of eight qualitative case studies, four in Denmark and four in New Zealand. The conceptual framework and case analyses provide insight into learning processes of becoming a leader in an entrepreneurial context. The empirical study thus far consists of data from Denmark, where four food entrepreneurs have already been interviewed using semi-structured interviews. On completion, the conference presentation and paper for journal submission will include data from New Zealand in order to validate and compare whether there are regional differences or similarities in the conception of the constituting elements when learning entrepreneurial leadership in nascent food ventures.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### **Entrepreneurial leadership**

Most organizations value leadership as a crucial factor for growth and innovation (Baum & Bird, 2010; Mitchell, 2005). In new entrepreneurial businesses there is a growing awareness that the concept of entrepreneurial leadership is becoming an increasingly important factor for creating long lasting sustainable businesses (Bagheri & Pihie, 2011; Jones & Crompton, 2009; Leitch, McMullan, & Harrison, 2013). One question that needs to be asked, however, is how entrepreneurs learn their practice of leading, which has not yet been specifically addressed in the literature around entrepreneurial leadership (Kempster & Cope, 2010; Vecchio, 2003). Within this key question it should be questioned whether entrepreneurial leadership is different from leadership in general, and also whether the leadership field can benefit from a conjunction with entrepreneurship (Kempster & Cope, 2010). Therefore a closer examination of the entrepreneurship and leadership fields seems important in order to develop new insight on the factors supporting this development and contribution to both academic fields (Cogliser & Brigham, 2004; Kempster & Cope, 2010). Entrepreneurial leadership in the current parts of the literature is understood as a social process (Kempster & Cope, 2010; Korsgaard & Anderson, 2011; Perren & Grant, 2000) and no longer considered to be within the past trait theories of leadership (Gupta, MacMillan, & Surie, 2004). Cope and Kempster suggests a focus on the concept of 'leadership preparedness' and Cope has in earlier papers explored the concept of 'entrepreneurial preparedness' (Cope, 2003; L. Wang, Rafiq, Li, & Zheng, 2014) which implies a connection between entrepreneurship and leadership also in the nascent phases with an implicit learning element. A key interest in this perspective is to focus on how the entrepreneurial leadership is actually narrated by the entrepreneur; thus here we take a closer look at entrepreneurial learning in an action-oriented perspective.

### **Leadership and entrepreneurship**

An exploration of the points of intersection between leadership and entrepreneurship is needed in order to highlight where leadership theory concur with entrepreneurship theory. Cogliser & Brigham (2004) identified in a review several areas where these two fields naturally converge. Their four identified constructs are 1) vision, 2) influence, 3) leading in the context of innovation/creativity, and 4) planning, beside the questions: What is a leader/entrepreneur? What does the leader/entrepreneur do? And in what context do they operate? (Cogliser & Brigham, 2004, p. 775). The conceptual overlap

between leadership and entrepreneurship within these four constructs can be used to identify whether the academic application of one area can be linked to the application of the other. Specifically it makes sense to analyse these constructs in the provided cases in the present project.

When examining how entrepreneurs relate to the phenomenon of leadership and subsequently in what relation they actively identify themselves as leaders, Cope and Kempster (2011) found the processes to be much more informal in the entrepreneurial context, something which other results also resemble (Perren & Grant, 2000).

### **Entrepreneurial action-oriented leadership**

Schumpeter stated that in order to become an entrepreneur you need to act as an entrepreneur (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006) highlighting that entrepreneurial actions significantly constitutes who you are as an entrepreneur (Clarke, Thorpe, Anderson, & Gold, 2006; Watson, 2009a).

Additionally it could be debated if you need to act as a leader in order to become a leader and correspondingly what are then the actions needed? The nascent entrepreneur does not necessarily have enough learning experience to draw upon to the extent of learning to become a leader nor does he/she has educational knowledge or background hereto. This is particularly so for early stage firms which have unproven or immature business models, combined with inexperienced founders and incomplete management teams (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Ardichvili et al, 2003; Ferguson and Olofsson, 2004; Patton and Higgs, 2013). While some entrepreneurial founders are able to rise to the leadership challenge of creating a strategic vision, integrating that vision into a company culture and managing the planning operations of the business, many lack the skills to successfully take on the challenge

The growing body of entrepreneurship research about entrepreneurial learning (Cope & Watts, 2000; Cope, 2003; Deakins & Freel, 1998; Pittaway & Thorpe, 2012; Wang & Chugh, 2014; Warren, 2004b) has also moved towards the common understanding that learning in the nascent phases of venture creation is action-oriented and occurs through doing and reflection (Rae & Carswell, 2000; Rae, 2000). Patton and Higgs (2013) note that leadership is often shared across the founder team in the early stages to bridge the learning gaps, particular where the founder is a scientist without commercial experience. Significantly, social action is crucial for advancing the business and entrepreneurial leadership development (Gibb, 2009; Spedale & Watson, 2013; Thorpe, Cope, Ram, & Pedler, 2009).

Pittaway and Cope (2007) further argues for a distinctive form of entrepreneurial learning which implies specific key learning processes having an experiential element (Pittaway, 2004). Within

an educational setting they argue for the importance of emotional exposure, situated learning, action-orientation and discontinuity.

### **Qualitative approaches to leadership, learning and identity**

The subtlety associated with entrepreneurial phenomena has led in recent years to the use of interpretive and social constructionist methodologies, in contrast to a large body of positivistic or descriptive work. For example, the narrative perspective toward learning has long had a school within the body of entrepreneurship literature (Anderson & Warren, 2011; Down & Warren, 2008; Hytti, 2005). Here learning is seen as a social construction of narratives and corresponding methodological approaches have been widely used (Cope, 2003; Warren, 2004b). In this relation, Watson brings together three concepts, namely narrative, identity work and the social construction of reality (Watson, 2009) and accounts for the influence and emphasis of a narrative understanding of identity construction. Watson's main point is that we as humans have to engage in identity work in order to make and use narratives about ourselves (Watson, 2008; Watson, 2009). Looking at a particular part of the identity could be the 'entrepreneurial identity' (Down & Reveley, 2004; Harmeling, 2011; Warren, 2004a) where scholars agree on including both the perspective of self-identity and also social-identity. When linked to entrepreneurial leadership the shifts between the two conceptions 'leader' and 'entrepreneur' could be important to include in our discussion since it must be a mutually constitutive process. Warren and Down (2008) presented that in the process of constructing narratives of enterprise aspirant entrepreneurs used clichés as an element in creating entrepreneurial self-identity; such sheer ordinariness provides a caution against any prior assumptions concerning self-identification with either entrepreneurship or leadership.

Before employing the theories of entrepreneurial leadership and learning to examine the empirical material in this study, it is necessary also to deal with how entrepreneurs are recognized and legitimized as professionals (Middleton, 2013; Warren, 2004a). Warren (2009) notes the reshaping of founder identity in an early stage firm, a counter point to the shared perspective identified by Patton and Higgs (2013). Thus, the topicality of entrepreneurial identity construction provides valid ground for in this paper including how the identity of an entrepreneurial leader is constructed and reconstructed over time (Donnellon, Ollila, & Middleton, 2014; Ollila, Williams Middleton, & Donnellon, 2012). Cohen and Musson (2000) argue that entrepreneurs represent their nascent ventures/enterprises in a variety of ways relying on the circumstances and explained in a local and contextual way. This expands our view

in this paper not just to fixed identities and representations of the role as an entrepreneurial leader but also to a diversified representation which Kullasepp refers to as 'dialogical becoming' (Kullasepp, 2008). The concept of legitimacy further provides an understanding of factors influencing the process of becoming an entrepreneur. Some authors (Downing, 2005; Middleton, 2013) highlight conforming, selecting and manipulating strategies being constitutive for gaining legitimacy in the nascent phases, meaning that the entrepreneur must complete actions associated with being an entrepreneur. In the light of the present investigation, it is interesting to explore whether actions associated with being an entrepreneurial leader can also be characterized.

For a nascent entrepreneur failure is also part of the lived experience, why this must also be included in the examination of factors supporting learning entrepreneurial leadership. Failure has been found to be a very distinctive form of learning providing important insight to the entrepreneurial process (Cope, 2011). Another perspective is that of critical incidents or moments where important decisions or experiences about the future progress and strategies of a business can be identified (Cope & Watts, 2000; Cope, 2003; Rae, 2013).

Summing up we now have both evidence and grounds for investigating this concept. We chose the specific context of nascent food entrepreneurs, because of the size and significance of the agri-food industries in EU and Denmark. As food-based SMEs are significant drivers of the economy in both countries, more understanding of how they are formed and led is important in maintain the health of the sectors.

## **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

Four qualitative semi-structured interviews have been conducted in each country (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Due to limitations only the Danish interviews are included in this paper. The data from New Zealand will be included at a later point. The interviews lasted 35-55 minutes based on a semi-structured interview guide and were audio recorded and verbatim transcribed. The analysis of the data is based in Malterud's (2012) 'meaning condensation', a descriptive and explorative method for thematic cross-case analysis of different types of qualitative data, such as interview studies, observational studies, and analysis of written texts. The method represents a pragmatic approach, although it inspired by phenomenological ideas, and various theoretical frameworks can be applied. As such, it is a useful approach offering methodological rigour, particularly at the early stages of analysis. In this study, the extraction of key areas of interest from the

literature review guides the analysis of the data, highly inspired by Cogliser & Brigham (2004), namely 1) vision, 2) influence, 3) leading in the context of innovation/creativity, and 4) planning. We further extend our analysis with the perspective of identity development.

## OUTCOMES

### Overview of informants

Four different food entrepreneurs participated in interviews. They all had between one to four years of experience.

	Type of venture	Registration	Owners/partners
DK-1	Dinner delivery concept	16.12.2014	Two owners
DK-2	Production of snack bars	08.11.2012	Three partners
DK-3	Bee-keeping and honey	01.04.2011	One owner
DK-4	Yoghurt ice cream stores	01.04.2014	Four partners (franchise)

Below we present initial, tentative outcomes from the four Danish cases introduced using the five key topics from the literature review. For the purposes of this brief paper, we supply illustrative quotes.

More discussion will be provided in the full paper.

### Entrepreneurial leadership and vision

The first aspect concerns making big decisions and preparing for these:

*"If it is larger decisions meaning changes in the company or larger financial decisions, then it is something that we deal with internally... In that relation I try to include everyone in decisions on how the company is run. Also so it isn't just me taking the heat if something goes wrong."* (DK2, 19.20)

Areas of responsibility and expertise within the companies is something all of the entrepreneurs have thought about in relation to develop and fulfil the visions of the companies:

*"We quickly found out that we both had our areas that we were good at. My partner is good at marketing and to create some life on the social media platforms. I'm more a structured type...so quite naturally we have both found our own responsibility areas."* (DK4, 7.30)

*"We are a very young team. Not one of us four is above 30. I think this as an effect to our suppliers. We have a lot of energy. A lots of drive and we dare to go in new directions."* (DK4, 19.15)

*“Organizing is something that we deal with from case to case but on the overall scheme it is me responsible. Production we have someone. Commodities, sales, marketing, quality is my area. But it is also all interaction, and you can’t split things into fragments. It is still a whole circle that needs to function.” (DK2, 19.45)*

*“I’m good at saying: Let’s just do it and move on. My partner is good at saying: It needs to be perfect...Something we do really well is to have each our responsibility area. I think this has enormous importance when you work with someone...My partner is dependent on me and I’m dependent on him.” (DK1, 8.00)*

### **Entrepreneurial leadership and influence**

Influence in the light of learning to become a leader seems to be an approach for all informants:

*“I picked up a lot of tips purely from being around. Brought my experiments in here for them to taste. The ones that would taste it would give me feedback. From that technical point I was able to use the knowledge. I actually asked him if could come in the evening and extract my own honey. It was learning whilst working. I couldn’t have really have dreamed of coming to it cold.” (DK3, 13.00)*

*“It is about contacting a lot of people and learn by doing. The incubator has also helped us underway in this. The education also helped us move on. One thing is to get all the tools and knowledge and another thing is to act on it in reality. It is a lot about just seeing what works.” (DK1, 5.00)*

*“How else would we know if things work on a larger scale? We are enriched also with the experience that lies in it.” (DK4, 31.15)*

*“I was forced into because it was me that had to run with it. I don’t lead that many others. But to guide the company is something you learn step by step. You take the tasks and solve them in the best possible way. It is ok to make a mistake but not to do it twice.” (DK2, 15.50)*

The learning process: being asked questions on how the entrepreneurs learn throughout the process of developing their business they can all reflect on the learning process in various ways:



*“We learn things continuously. It has cost us a lot of money and a lot of time. Learning by doing. But we have come really well through it. We have made a lot of mistakes but also really many successes.”*  
(DK4, 12.45)

*“It is also about acknowledging what you are good at and what you are not. And use your energy right. In that relation I just throw myself into it – my conception is this. Maybe we need to go a bit right or left and then we need a lot more. To start a new venture is one thing. Then there’s the product, the marketing part and social media. There is inconceivably many things to learn in the beginning.”* (DK2, 5.30)

*“In the beginning you had 8-9 new hats to juggle with. Three of them being interesting, but the rest of them maybe not so funny. But you had to do it anyways.”* (DK2, 5.50)

*“I will just throw myself into it and then we solve things along the way. Let’s just make it happen. That is my approach.”* (DK2, 16.30)

*“I saw this as a job but even more as a learning opportunity. I felt like I was at bee-university for the first three seasons I was here.”* (DK3, 12.30)

### **Entrepreneurial leadership in the context of innovation and creativity**

*“Ding! Lightbulb moment. You got this fantastic product that is honey. I never really bought it. Think it was too sweet. Thinking wow this is good. At the same time I really thought that these guys got no idea how to market it. There is no innovative thoughts. It was a totally untouched world.”* (DK3, 6.30)

Innovative thoughts about the future of the business is something that everyone reflects upon:

*“I want to up production. I want a couple of tanks. You got to buy things in stainless steel. That is a hell of a lot of honey you have to sell in order to do that. I have a lot of stores that order it on a regular basis, but the financial part is crucial. I think that has been sort of the major struggle. Until it gets to a point where it’s kept alive.”* (DK3, 23.50)

Growth clearly shows as a thematic for exploration:

*“Our thoughts in the beginning were that we should be first-movers...We never thought in any way that things would happen this fast. We had a three-year plan that said we should open up one more store within the first year and aim at an annual turnover of \$150.000. We did that within the first month and we opened up two new stores before the end of the second month...And facts are now that we have 15 stores all together after a year and the largest provider in the country.” (DK4, 11.30)*

*“Plans for future is to open up 15 more shops within the next year. We know what we can do and how to do it.” (DK4, 12.30)*

*“If you don’t think things through or think the project through or planned enough then you fall through sometimes. If things are ad hoc solutions then you are more bound to make mistakes. Instead of making a strategy for a longer period and put things into plans and systems, so you can oversee things in a much better way.” (DK2, 16.50)*

*“I think it is crucial in order to keep up with the process. In order to staying business and I think ownership means everything. It crucial for development both for us as individuals and the company.” (DK2, 9.10)*

### **Planning as ways of organising**

Planning and ways of organising are very different in the four cases:

*“We talk a lot together but keep within our areas of responsibilities...we have a chat going on at Facebook where the four founders write together daily and discuss what to do. It is very liquid. Once in a while if there are many topics to consider then we take a meeting, get some lunch, eat together and basically have a cozy talk..Then we just organize things over Facebook.” (DK4, 28.15)*

*“How can we make it funny at the same time as we have to deal with this toilsome task? Where are we and where are we going? From a simple datasheet where you can follow a plan to a vision board posted on the wall...everything is about it being easy in the day to day business.” (DK2, 18.00)*

*“I just think it happened. We haven’t sat down and agreed on how things should work. It’s a long time*

*since we started...Because it is just working then we don't see much purpose in it. But we deal with it in day to day work together." (DK1, 10.30)*

Learning through action as a specific form of learning in the nascent phases is important:

*"Suddenly we were at this cross-road. We thought that the next step would be to put action behind our thoughts. We know everything now. We have researched everything thoroughly and talked to suppliers. Then we went to the bank and asked if we could start." (DK4, 3.15)*

*"The opening of our shop was a total chaos. I don't think our guests realized it but we felt it. We could see on our event on Facebook that 4500 people signed up for the opening event. Our experience was that only half of them would come...We had between 2000 and 2300 people through the first day. We sold out everything and were totally not geared for it." (DK4, 8.35)*

### **Entrepreneurial leadership and identity development**

Reflections on the developments in their identity and conception of themselves stand out clear:

*"It has been quite a learning journey. You have an idea and a conception of things. But if you are someone like me then you are not afraid of just doing it. Maybe you don't have all facts and information about what it takes to start a business in place but then you learn. That resembles much the type of person I am. Learning by doing." (DK2, 3.20)*

*"After a week we had 10 employees. The whole beginning of our business has been very hard on us and stressful. Everything was about keeping up with things." (DK4, 10.15)*

*"The job also got something of my whole identity about being in Denmark. I missed something outside my girlfriend's world. I didn't know anyone when I moved to Denmark. I had my own thing to do." (DK3, 5.00)*

Some also report a change in their role in the daily business today being different:

*"We have also changed a lot. You have to think in other ways. You can't be selfish and only think about your own shop but a lot of other people will be affected by your decisions." (DK4, 17.45)*

*"I don't think we have realized how big this is yet." (DK4, 23.55)*

*"For me personally there has also been many things about the processes in themselves and also how I handle these things. Of course it is individual how you cope with this. I keep on working until I drop or is done with the task. It's a bit off. If you have to be able to run a business like this with all the different hats...then it is important that you also take some time off, relax, and rest your head. That took me a year and a half. There's always something to do. That was a big learning process for me in the beginning." (DK2, 7.25)*

*"In that course I worked really independent with another project of mine. I found out that I'm not good at that because then my motivation goes down. I need someone to work together with. That is also why the match with my partner is so good. The things I'm not really motivated by, is where he is strong and vice versa. We supplement each other really well. I couldn't run a company alone." (DK1, 3.00)*

*"You get a lot of time to think as a beekeeper. You are out doing the routines task. You get a lot of headspace." (DK3, 8.50)*

## **DISCUSSION**

While we are still at an early stage in our analysis, some initial points of interest seem apparent. One position on the nascent food entrepreneur businesses in this case would be the level of organizing (Gartner, 1985) where communities of practice could be a valid way of discussing this (Lave & Wenger, 1991) investigating ways that could facilitate a higher degree of learning where continuous and timely support for the cycles of venture creation. In the nascent phases the levels of crucial decisions is high compared to the level of accessible knowledge and experience. A suggestion for the early phases could be advisory boards because stimulating and sustaining growth requires access to resources and new knowledge for the entrepreneurial leadership, using a variety of external sources (Zahra, Filatotchev, & Wright, 2009; Warren et al, 2009), or shared leadership (Patton and Higgs, 2013).

Another position could be that entrepreneurial leadership might very well could be the wrong notion and term using in the case of nascent entrepreneurs. One informant in the presented case uses the phrase

“...guiding the company...” instead of using the word leading. Can you lead such novel and complex organizations and projects if you don’t have previous leadership experience to draw on from that exact context? In that relation guiding or manoeuvring in a relational context (Patton and Higgs, 2013) could be better understandings that would take the divergent complexities of nascent entrepreneurship into account.

## **CONCLUSION**

We are proposing further investigation of entrepreneurial leadership seeking a more incisive understanding of leadership that reflects the early stage concept. The contribution of the paper when complete will be to the literatures in the areas below:

- Entrepreneurial leadership (development in nascent ventures)
- Entrepreneurial learning
- Agri-food SMEs
- Social constructionist approaches to entrepreneurship research.

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