Article

Relations-oriented leadership in practice: Empirical insights from Danish public managers

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Abstract

Social relationships within organizations are widely recognized in research as a vital resource for motivating and retaining engaged employees. Supporting these relationships is therefore a key managerial responsibility. Relations-oriented leadership offers considerable potential to foster such relationships, yet there remains a notable gap in practice-oriented research that explores how managers can concretely enact this leadership style. This article illustrates how relations-oriented leadership is practiced from the perspective of managers, offering empirical examples of leadership behaviors that strengthen social relationships. The analysis further shows how managers can navigate relational challenges through strategies involving physical presence, digital accessibility, and mental closeness. In addition, the article introduces a set of reflective questions designed to support practitioners in critically engaging with and refining their own relations-oriented leadership practices.

Key words

Relations-oriented leadership, leadership behavior, organizational relationships, public management

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Extra information

This article is an adjusted translation of the Danish article *Relationsorienteret ledelse i praksis: Illustrative ledelsesindsatser på et fundament af nærhed*, which is part of my PhD dissertation *Relations-Oriented Leadership in Public Organizations* [1].

Introduction: The importance of relations-oriented leadership

To ensure a well-functioning public sector capable of addressing both current and future societal challenges, it is essential that public managers are able to motivate and retain engaged employees who thrive in their roles [3]. However, public managers face persistent challenges, including recruitment and retention difficulties [4], absenteeism [5], and emerging phenomena such as quiet quitting [6]. Social relationships represent a vital resource within public organizations [1]. Empirical studies demonstrate that strong interpersonal relationships in the workplace enhance employee commitment [7], increase job satisfaction ([8], [9]), and mitigate stress [7], absenteeism [5], and turnover intentions [9]. Supporting these relationships is therefore a critical managerial responsibility. Consequently, identifying effective strategies for strengthening social relationships within organizations has become an important research priority [1].

Relations-oriented leadership offers a promising approach to cultivating strong social relationships grounded in mutual trust and collaboration [10]. A recent literature review synthesizes insights from multiple theoretical perspectives into a comprehensive framework comprising five core dimensions of relations-oriented leadership: showing individual consideration, developing employee skills, supporting social interactions, fostering task coordination, and communicating a shared vision [1]. These dimensions are summarized in Table 1 and elaborated upon in the following sections. Empirical research confirms that managers can strengthen social relationships in the workplace by engaging in these five leadership behaviors [1].

While the literature outlines the theoretical foundations of relations-oriented leadership, there is still a lack of practice-oriented research exploring how managers can concretely implement these behaviors ([1], [2]). Leadership scholars emphasize the need for actionable insights into specific leadership practices to equip managers with a practical and effective leadership toolbox ([11], [12], [13]). Furthermore, fostering reflection on how to apply relations-oriented leadership in everyday practice can help realize its full potential ([1], [14]). In this context, a practice-oriented perspective can offer valuable guidance by providing empirical illustrations and contextual understanding of how managers can enact relations-oriented leadership [15].

The article seeks to illustrate how relations-oriented leadership manifests in practice from the perspective of public managers. Drawing on qualitative data from an interview study conducted in a large Danish municipality, the study aims to generate empirically grounded insights into the everyday leadership behaviors that support strong social relationships. In doing so, it

contributes to the development of a practice-oriented leadership toolbox intended to inspire managerial reflections and support the implementation of relations-oriented leadership in public sector contexts. Details on the method are given in the Appendix.

Relations-oriented leadership: Important dimensions and leadership practices

Relations-oriented leadership encompassed a set of behaviors aimed at cultivating and sustaining strong interpersonal relationships within organizations ([1], [11], [10]). Drawing on a recent conceptual critical literature review, five key dimensions have been identified that systematize and synthesize leadership behaviors that focus on fostering strong social relationships. The five dimensions are: (1) showing individual consideration, (2) developing employee skills, (3) supporting social interactions, (4) fostering task coordination, and (5) communicating a shared vision [1].

Each dimension captures a specific facet of how managers can actively foster social relationships within the organization. For instance, showing individual consideration involves focusing on responding to the individual employee's needs related to their welfare, while communicating a shared vision focuses on providing identification with a shared vision and thus shared goals for interactions. Table 1 provides an overview of these five dimensions (see [1] for more details on the conceptual framework and its theoretical underpinnings).

Emerging empirical evidence underscores the relevance of these dimensions for enhancing strong relationships between employees within teams and across teams [1]. Accordingly, managers seeking to strengthen social relationships in the organization are encouraged to engage deliberately with these five dimensions as part of their leadership practice.

Table 1: Five important dimensions of relations-oriented leadership

| Dimension	Focus
Showing individual consideration	Focus on meeting individual employee needs related to their well-being
Developing employee skills	Focus on developing each employee's skills and competencies to solve work tasks and facilitate their career advancement
Supporting social interactions	Focus on facilitating a positive social climate among coworkers
Fostering task coordination	Focus on coordination of work tasks and collective efforts among employees
Communicating a shared vision	Focus on providing identification with a shared vision and thereby shared goals for interactions

Note: This table is adapted from [1].

This section presents empirical illustrations of the five dimensions of relations-oriented leadership, derived from a thematic analysis of qualitative interview data. The thematic analysis yielded a range of leadership practices that correspond to the five dimensions of the framework.

These practices, as conveyed through the perspectives of public managers, offer concrete insights into how relations-oriented leadership is understood and enacted in everyday organizational contexts. Grounded in the managers' own descriptions, the findings reflect their interpretations and experiences of leadership in practice.

As a central outcome of the thematic analysis, Figure 1 presents a synthesized overview of the leadership efforts identified across the interviews. This figure visually represents how the five dimensions of relations-oriented leadership are empirically manifested from the standpoint of those in managerial roles.

Figure 1: Relations-oriented leadership in practice
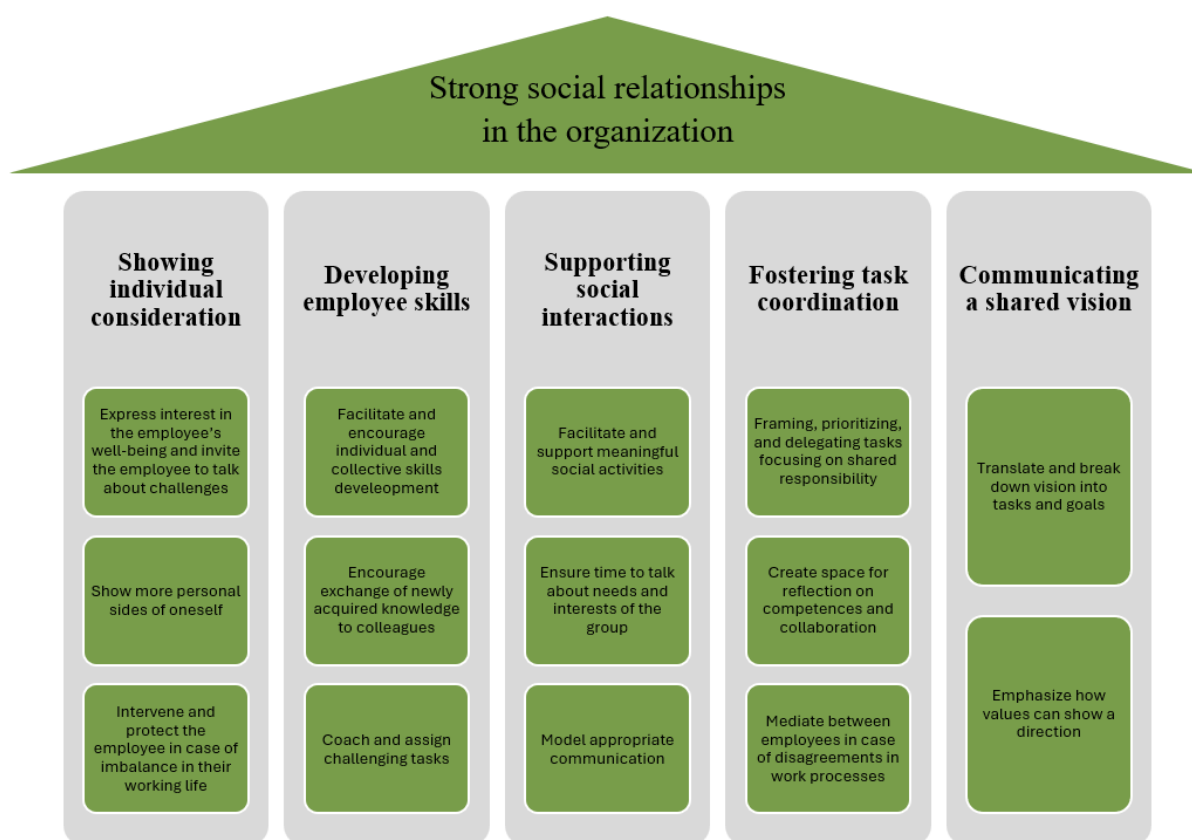
Note: This figure is adapted from [1]

The following sections present the five dimensions of relations-oriented leadership, accompanied by illustrative leadership efforts derived from managerial accounts. These examples serve to clarify how relations-oriented leadership is understood and enacted from the perspective of public managers.

Showing individual consideration in practice

The dimension *showing individual consideration* represents emotionally supportive leadership behavior that focuses on expressing interest and respect for the individual employee's psychological needs and well-being [1].

The interviews show that managers in their relations-oriented leadership practice pay great attention to the individual employee's psychological needs and strive to demonstrate individual consideration through various forms of emotionally supportive leadership behavior. When the interviewed managers describe what they do in practice to demonstrate individual consideration, three efforts stand out as particularly central (see Figure 1). First, managers express a strong focus on showing an interest in the employee's well-being and inviting employees to talk about challenges. There is also consistent attention among managers to work with an open-door policy to their own office as a passive invitation to employees to approach them when in need of support. Managers also emphasize the importance of being proactive throughout the year. For example, one manager describes how she has addressed concerns about an employee's well-being in an informal one-on-one conversation by saying:

> *"I know it can be difficult, especially if you are sick. And you can choose to speak openly and honestly about it, and you can also choose to tell me that you don't need to talk about it right now. I just have a point of attention because I can see that you are not thriving". (Manager M3)*

Such proactive invitations can make it easier for the manager to take the necessary considerations. One manager explicitly states that he cannot do anything about the unspoken. Lack of openness from the employee about their needs can thus be experienced by managers as a barrier to their ability to take the necessary individual considerations. A point of attention for the manager might therefore be to create a space where employees are not only invited to talk openly about their challenges and needs, but where they also experience sufficient psychological safety to speak up when necessary [16].

A second effort concerns expressing their more personal sides. A common aspect in many managers' descriptions is a focus on knowing the individual employee and their specific challenges and needs to be proactive in different ways. One manager says:

> *"They are very different employees. There are some where I know that if something is wrong, I will probably know it approximately five minutes before. And then there are some (...), where I don't. So, here I actually need to be even more attentive and just drop in and say 'Hi, how is it to be you? What are you dealing with right now?'". (Manager M4)*

The quote indicates a tendency identified across the interviews, namely that managers prioritize being around their employees and engaging in informal conversations with them. They do this, for example, by walking around and greeting everyone daily or drinking coffee with their employees. This can be seen as an attempt to create an ongoing informal dialogue with employees where it becomes natural to ask curiously about each other, also at a more personal level. An example of a more structured way to enable time for informal conversation is scheduled quarterly one-on-one meetings without an agenda, as one manager describes:

> *"This is our time to just stick our heads into each other's office. And then there is no agenda for what we should talk about. Whether it's their cat they want to talk about, or whether it's task pressure". (Manager M5)*

The manager sees these scheduled meetings as a good investment:

> *"At first, I thought, I can't possibly manage that. How will I ever be able to allocate so many half-hours in each quarter? But it has just given me much more time. In the long run". (Manager M5)*

Additionally, several managers describe how they consciously share information about themselves on a personal level to humanize and encourage employees to open up more. This effort has also been systematized by the manager above:

> *"I want to invite them in, and it also makes me seem a bit more human. So that's why, when I send my newsletter, there is always something personal about me. And it can be what I'm going to do at the weekend, or something funny that happened, or something else". (Manager M5)*

Opening up about oneself, for example in regular newsletters, and creating space for curiosity about each other as whole persons may according to leader-member-exchange theory create reciprocity and trust between manager and employee [17]. This can make it safer for the employee to give their manager the necessary insight into their challenges so the manager can take the relevant considerations.

Thirdly, managers describe an active focus on being attentive to and intervening in signs of unhealthy priorities in the employee's work life. Such efforts do, however, often require deep understanding of the individual employee's situation.

As part of your relations-oriented leadership practice, you might consider:

- When and how do I show individual consideration?
- How do I show my employees my interest in their well-being?
- What do I do to ensure that my employees feel comfortable telling me about challenges?
- When is it difficult for me to focus on the individual employee's needs and well-being?
- Do I focus mostly on certain employees, and am I overlooking something?

Developing employee skills in practice

The dimension *developing employees' competencies* consists of development-oriented leadership behavior focused on coaching and encouraging development of skills and competencies [1].

When the interviews focused on employees' collaboration, managers mentioned several examples that can be categorized as developing employees' competencies. As illustrated in Figure 1, the behavior examples can be summarized into three central leadership efforts. In practice, this dimension primarily involves facilitating and encouraging various forms of competency development, e.g. in terms of participation in shorter and longer development programs and courses. Importantly, the interviews emphasize a focus on facilitating and encouraging both individual and joint skill development. Specifically, managers express a concern about they may facilitate that employees' competency development not only benefits the individual employee but also the development of their colleagues. Leadership literature has traditionally not focused much on this joint perspective on skills development (see, e.g., [10]). One manager points out that prioritizing joint skill development can be beneficial for social relationships:

> *"Being together about it [development courses] gives us something completely different in terms of social capital. Because then we also have to eat together.*

And we also have to suddenly joke about when we fail, and when we have misunderstood something". (Manager M2)

Joint competency development can, for example, take place in the workplace with external consultants. The quote indicates an expectation that joint skill development can make openness about mistakes and misunderstandings a more natural part of the interactions. Such openness can strengthen psychological safety in the group and thus help develop learning communities [16]. The manager also describes how, for example, joint courses enable a common language and common understandings among employees:

"Let's say a course, where you always have to say blue if something applies. Then you walk around saying blue in the hallway, and everyone knows what it is, and then you smile at each other". (Manager M2)

Another leadership effort involves encouraging employees to share newly acquired knowledge and experience with colleagues. Managers often experience that individual skills development does not benefit collaboration enough without a leadership effort because employees do not sufficiently share newly acquired knowledge and experience themselves. The literature points out that developing employees' skills can strengthen collaboration through the creation of shared mental models ([1], [18], [19], [20], [21]). The analysis indicates, however, that to activate this mechanism in practice, it requires that the manager is a catalyst for spreading and transforming knowledge in the organization. This may happen, for example, by encouraging employees who have attended a course to communicate about it at the next staff meeting or circulate slides from the course to colleagues.

Third, managers may focus on coaching and assigning challenging tasks. Managers may offer professional coaching at scheduled meetings and be available for sparring continuously during workdays. One manager ensures availability by having meeting-free periods in their calendar weekly, where employees know they can approach the manager in their office. Another manager emphasizes a particular focus on sparring with professionally isolated employees who, for example, due to a small employee group, do not have access to sufficient collegial sparring. Managers may also consciously work on identifying potential in the employee and assign tasks outside the employee's comfort zone. One manager gives an example of how such a task can be communicated to the employee:

"There is this task that we have discussed in the leadership team, and we think you can handle it [...] We know it's not something you usually work with, or it will be new for you in some aspects. But you will be doing it together with this-and-this, who has a lot of knowledge about it, which you can draw on in connection to this. And you have also taken this project management course or you have also taken this course. So you can also try to apply some of it in practice from that. And you will have a steering group, or you will have the opportunity to talk to me". (Manager M6)

Here, the manager expresses trust in the employee and ensures support for the process through sparring partners, which can strengthen the employee's self-efficacy regarding task completion [22]. Several managers do, however, stress the necessity of knowing employees' professional strengths and weaknesses well to coach and guide them appropriately.

As part of your relations-oriented leadership practice, you might consider:

- When and how do I develop employees' skills and competencies?
- How do I prioritize between individual and collective competency development?
- How do I help employees share professional knowledge and experiences with each other?
- When do my employees have the opportunity for sparring with me?
- How am I attentive to employees' different needs for sparring and development?

Supporting social interactions in practice

The dimension *supporting social interactions* encompasses socially supportive leadership behavior that has a collective focus on showing interest in the social environment of the group, meeting the needs of the employee group, and encouraging social interaction among employees [1].

Managers provide many different examples of social support for employees, indicating a strong awareness of facilitating a positive social climate as part of their relations-oriented leadership practice. As Figure 1 shows, the descriptions can be summarized into three central efforts. First, the manager can facilitate social interactions by creating space for and supporting meaningful social activities for employees. This may happen through joint lunch breaks, scheduled coffee breaks, morning bread across employee groups, and various social events throughout the year. The manager may also encourage or demand physical presence at the workplace in cases where employees' tasks do not necessarily require presence. Importantly, one head of department points out that due to employees' different social needs, social activities must be organized as meaningfully as possible for the individual employee. This dimension thus requires attention to what is relevant and meaningful social contact for different employees.

Second, managers can give employees space to focus on the group's needs and interests, for example by allocating time at joint meetings to discuss what is important for the group and what the group needs from the manager. However, within this collective dimension, the manager must also make sure not only to invite discussions about the group's interests and needs but also to ensure the necessary safety in the group for such discussions. To this end, the literature on psychological safety, for example, points to the importance of responding constructively with recognition and support in discussions [16].

Third, the manager can be a role model in shaping the culture of social behavior in the organization by guiding and ensuring appropriate communication both verbally and in writing. Managers describe, for example, how they make sure to say good morning to employees and participate in informal chats over morning coffee. Regarding verbal communication, one manager emphasizes a focus on how employees talk to and about each other in the organization and tries to help employees put themselves in each other's shoes:

> *"We express at office meetings and department meetings, that we focus on (...) not articulating others as someone who is annoying (...) We must try to put ourselves in the other's place and say (...) it may actually be that they are measured on something else or have something else that is important. Or just have a bad day". (Manager M6)*

Additionally, managers may strive to be aware of employees' written communication internally in the group and in the broader organization. Traditionally, there has not been much attention to written communication in the relations-oriented leadership literature (see, for example, [23], [10]). Nevertheless, the analysis highlights the relevance of managers both using appropriate written communication themselves and articulating to employees that a positive constructive tone is important. The following quote summarizes the argument:

> *"If you can write it nicely (...) then you can also avoid some conflicts and maintain good relationships". (Manager M7)*

This dimension thus involves a need to be aware of adapting relations-oriented leadership to the different forms of interactions their employees engage in daily.

As part of your relations-oriented leadership practice, you might consider:

- When and how do I support social interactions among my employees?
- How am I attentive to employees' different social needs and requests?
- What do I do to create focus on the interests of the employee group?
- When is there a need for special attention to how my employees communicate? And do I remember both verbal and written communication?
- How am I a role model for my employees in terms of social behavior?

Fostering task coordination in practice

Fostering task coordination involves prioritizing, delegating, and coordinating collective efforts, communicating decisions and standard procedures for collective task completion, and creating space for employees to reflect on interdependencies [1].

In managers' descriptions of how they support collaboration and employees' relationships within and across employee groups, there is a strong focus on leadership behavior that can be categorized as various forms of fostering task coordination (see Figure 1). In practice, this dimension primarily involves defining, prioritizing, and delegating tasks with a focus on clarifying employees' shared responsibility. This may be facilitated through committing fixed teams to coordinate and solve tasks themselves, as described by one manager:

> *"I have created the overall framework for them, and then we put a core task into their team. How they solve the task is up to them". (Manager M3)*

In this case, the manager may help clarify expectations and show trust in the team in the task solving process. Generally, the managers describe a strong focus on giving space and demonstrating trust in employees. One manager explains:

> *"If you want to maintain relationships, there shouldn't be too much of 'Now you have to do this.' It's not laissez-faire, but we try to involve them, so they make decisions themselves". (Manager M1)*

By simultaneously emphasizing employees' shared responsibility for task completion, managers may contribute to creating a shared expectation of mutual support in the team. Central to this leadership effort is that the manager ensures to have insight into and an overview of employees' tasks, so that prioritization and delegation can be done appropriately. One manager stress that this may happen through status meetings with employees or teams:

> *"I always have an overview of what is going on, and who could help with what, and who could help whom". (Manager M7)*

An important point of attention is that the manager ensures that new employees and more reserved employees are included and involved in such collective coordination among employees. This may happen, for example, by inviting new employees to informal meetings with extra time for questions and setting expectations, and by assigning specific roles to more reserved employees.

Although defining, prioritizing, and delegating shared responsibility can clarify the conditions for and benefits of collaboration, the interviews show a need for two additional efforts to ensure that collaborative relationships are productive and respectful. As illustrated in Figure 1, managers may as a second effort create space for employee reflections on competencies and collaboration of the employee group. Managers especially point out that scheduled time for professional discussions within and between teams can help reduce divisions and open employees' eyes to each other. For example, the manager may establish fixed buddy teams where time and space are allocated for sparring across two teams. One manager describes how she supports reflections by regularly allocating time for status and dialogue at staff meetings:

> *"Each team is obliged to say in plenary: 'How are we doing? Is there something that challenges us? Is there something we need help with? Or is there something we succeed with that others could learn from?'". (Manager M3)*

Another example involves mapping and jointly discussing competence profiles in the employee group to increase awareness of each other's preferences and what they can use each other for. Some managers highlight how such joint discussions give the employee group a common language to better understand and respect each other and thus adapt behavior and collaboration appropriately.

A third leadership effort involves facilitating appropriate task coordination by mediating between employees or professional groups in cases of challenges or different approaches to work processes. Despite an overall framework, there is still a risk of disagreement among employees or professional groups about what is perceived as the core task and important priorities in this context [24]. In such cases, one manager describes how she actively helps solve professional issues between colleagues:

> *"It varies whether I go into dialogue with them, or whether I spar a bit with the one who finds this problematic, and then she chooses to move forward with it herself". (Manager M4)*

The manager can thus step in and guide when employees need more help with prioritizing and coordinating collaboration. However, the interviews point out that it might be more difficult for managers to have a sufficient overview to promote appropriate task coordination across

employee groups if the managers themselves lack a strong manager-network in the organization. While some managers draw on experience-based knowledge of the organization or spar with management colleagues about opportunities and resources to adapt collective task completion and establish appropriate collaborations in the organization, less experienced or isolated managers may need support for their own horizontal relation-building. This indicates the need for attention to strengthening the manager's own social relationships with management colleagues so that they can appropriately promote task coordination among employees in the organization.

As part of your relations-oriented leadership practice, you might consider:

- When and how do I foster task coordination among employees?
- When do I have the best overview of employees' tasks and opportunities for collaboration?
- How do I help employees recognize each other's competencies and opportunities for collaboration?
- When do my employees find it difficult to contribute to joint decisions and coordination? And what do I do to help them with this?
- What can make it easier for me to have an overview of resources and opportunities for collaboration in the organization?

Communicating a shared vision in practice

The dimension *communicating a shared vision* focuses on formulating common goals for employees and communicating and encouraging engagement in a shared vision that represents a desirable future for the group or organization [1].

In the descriptions of what the managers do to strengthen social relationships, they do not spontaneously mention communicating a shared vision. However, when asked specifically about their work with visions and goals in the interviews, their examples point to two central leadership efforts. As summarized in Figure 1, this dimension in practice involves how managers can communicate shared visions in indirect ways that make sense to employees. First, managers can translate and break down the vision into a core task and some very concrete goals for the employee. A recurring theme in the interviews is a reluctance to explicitly talk about visions with employees because managers experience that employees do not see it as meaningful or relevant to relate to visions. Especially, one manager emphasizes that employees close to citizens find it difficult to relate to visions. Another manager emphasizes that it can be perceived as a waste of time in a busy performance-oriented workday:

> *"It's simply too fluffy when we are so filled up in our everyday work life (...) to go out and say: now you have to hear what visions we have. They will sit and look at me as if something was wrong with me. That's not where we are". (Manager M3)*

This reluctance to communicate visions directly is particularly pronounced in interviews with managers whose employees have a high degree of citizen contact and prevalent performance-based management and/or do not have an academic background. For example, when it comes to discussing visions, one manager states:

> *"Sorry to say it, but you have to be careful not to become too academic. When you have a lot of employees who are not academic. Because they are not interested". (Manager M8)*

The quotes can be seen as an expression of a relatively narrow understanding of vision communication, which involves rather directly referring to overarching visions that may seem distant and abstract to employees. In the interviews, managers therefore describe a focus on replacing discussions of visions with something more concrete and meaningful in the employees' specific context. Among other things, the managers do this by referring to the law being administered and clarifying the various quantitative and qualitative goals for employees' work. One manager gives an example of how to break down visions into a more concrete core task:

> *"I don't use the word vision. They fall off their chairs as soon as you do that. But we can talk about what we are put in the world to do. And I do that regularly, and I do it a bit based on their numbers". (Manager M5)*

By "*numbers*", the manager refers to the specific work goals and results for the employees. The manager thus helps translate and break down visions into a more specific core task by highlighting some concrete goals. Another manager describes this focus of translating and concretizing for the employees:

> *"So it's about unfolding the political intentions and decisions so that it becomes accessible for the frontline employee". (Manager M3)*

Several managers describe how they involve employees in meaningful discussions about the core task, for example by jointly defining and regularly discussing the core task with employees at joint and individual meetings. However, one head of department points out that even though it may be relevant to break down visions into concrete core tasks, the manager still has an important role in showing the direction. This is in line with literature on visionary leadership ([25], [26]) and is also reflected in the theoretical understanding of this dimension of relations-oriented leadership [1]. Visions are often intertwined with values, where the vision reflects certain values ([26], [27]). Articulating values to clarify a shared desirable future which the employees can identify with and engage in, may thus be appropriate, when managers strive to communicate a shared vision in their relations-oriented leadership.

This points to the second central leadership effort in this dimension: Managers can work on motivating employees to unite around something common by highlighting how values come to live in the employees' concrete work. For example, one manager emphasizes that joint discussions of shared values can focus on clarifying how values can come to live in their work. Research shows that communication of vision builds more psychological meaningfulness around common goals, if visions are framed in a way that matches employees' personal values [26]. The focus on values can thus be seen as an indirect way to encourage employees to engage in something common.

However, an important point of attention is that translating vision and working on creating meaning through values requires insight into employees' concrete work and values. Another point of attention is that in the interviews, the managers do not themselves link these efforts to strengthening social relationships. This indicates that the managers do not consider communicating a shared vision to be part of their relations-oriented leadership. However, recent research shows that communicating a shared vision is one of the most important dimensions of relations-oriented leadership, when it comes to strengthening relationships within and between

employee groups [1]. This suggests that there is important potential in communicating a shared vision that managers may not be sufficiently aware of and thus not fully utilize.

As part of your relations-oriented leadership practice, you might consider:

- When and how do I communicate a shared vision to my employees?
- When do I talk about visions and when do I talk about goals and core task?
- What common goals and values might make sense for employees to unite around?
- How do I work on showing a common direction for the employees?
- What can make it difficult to communicate a shared vision to my employees?

**Challenges and possibilities in relations-oriented leadership**

Based on the thematic analysis of the interviews, the remaining part of this article discusses some of the challenges that managers may face in their relations-oriented leadership practice and in continuation hereof the article discusses different possibilities for developing their relations-oriented leadership in different contexts.

Prioritizing between collective and individual level leadership efforts

One prevalent theme across the interviews is a challenge of balancing between concern for the individual employee and concern for the employee group. For example, one manager expresses concern that showing special attention and individual consideration towards some employees may lead other employees to suspect a privileged inner circle around the manager. This in-group/out-group mechanism is stressed in leader-member-exchange theory [17] and indicates that the manager's individual consideration for certain employee risk evoking feelings of unfairness among other employees. This may strain trust and willingness to cooperate in social relationships [24]. As argued in servant leadership theory [28], demonstrating individual consideration may therefore require being attentive that all employees feel seen and heard and that there is transparency regarding why and how certain individual considerations are taken.

Thus, there may be a tension between, for example, showing individual consideration and supporting social interactions in terms of balancing individual and collective needs. Likewise, tensions may occur between a collective focus on, for example, a shared vision or task coordination on the one side and an individual focus on psychological needs or skill development on the other side. This tension is especially prevalent when managers describe the prioritization between skill development that especially benefits the individual employee and skill development targeted more common purposes. Thus, different individual and collective dimensions of relations-oriented leadership may in different cases either counteract or support each other. Therefore, managers are encouraged to consider how the different dimensions of their relations-oriented leadership interact in their own leadership context. Figure 2 can serve as a reflection tool when it comes to relations between the different dimensions of relations-oriented leadership in practice.

Figure 2. Relations between dimensions of relations-oriented leadership
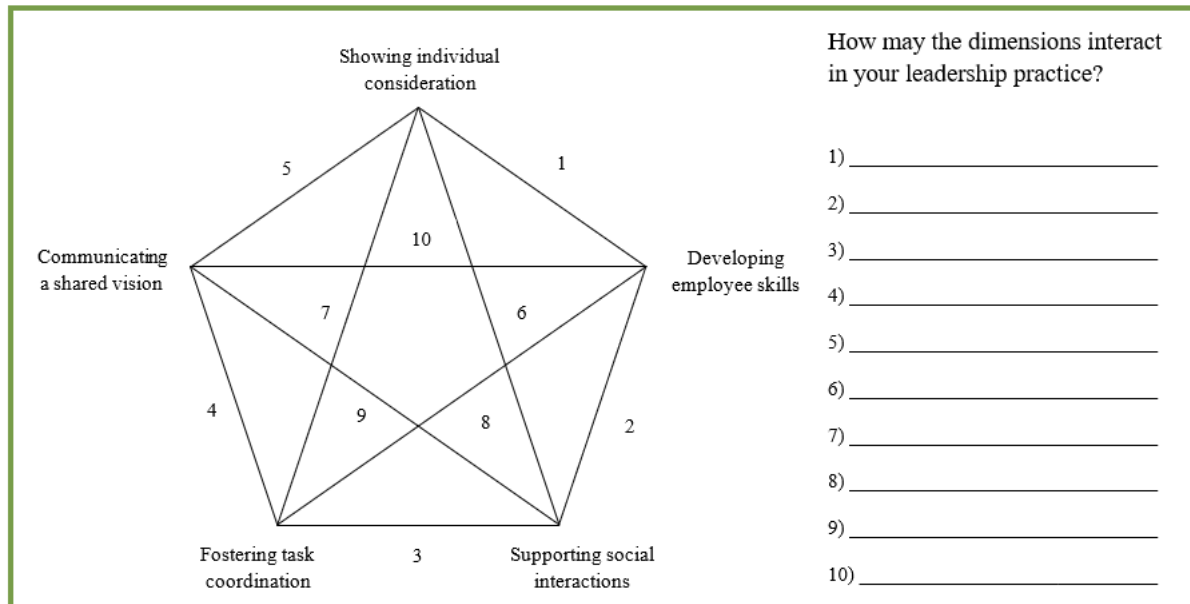
Importantly, recent research shows that when it comes to employee relationships within and between work groups, the collective dimensions are most important. Specifically, fostering task coordination displays the relatively most important dimension followed by communicating a shared vision and supporting social interactions, while developing employee skills and showing individual consideration has the relatively lowest importance for employee relationships within and between work groups [1]. Hence, managers are encouraged to prioritize collective efforts, including fostering task coordination, communicating a shared vision and supporting the social climate, when aiming to foster strong social relationship within and between work groups. The questions below may support considerations in this regard.

As part of your relations-oriented leadership practice, you might consider:

- Are my employees expressing different expectations of me?
- How do I prioritize between concern for the group and concern for individual employees?
- When is it important for me to prioritize a collective focus on the employee group?
- When is it difficult for me to prioritize a collective focus on the employee group?

Navigating between proximity and distance

A prevalent theme in interviews across the five dimensions of relations-oriented leadership is that insight into and contact with the employees are considered crucial for their efforts on strengthening social relationships in the organization. Managers describe an awareness of being accessible and close to employees, as well as being curious about and having an insight into each employee's specific situations. This can be characterized as managerial attention to

proximity in their relations-oriented leadership practice. The interviews show that proximity in relations-oriented leadership involves being close to both the individual employee and to the employee group.

Proximity towards the individual employee involves direct contact between the manager and the employee. In the interviews, this especially includes facilitating dialogue about well-being or professional sparring. This form of proximity may enable the manager to timely identify and take the necessary considerations for individual employee needs (which is the focus of the dimension *showing individual consideration*) and more tailored work on developing employees' skills (the focus of the dimension *developing employee skills*) in a way that is adapted to the different employees' strengths and weaknesses. Thus, managerial proximity towards the individual employee may facilitate more appropriate conditions for the employee to engage in strong relationships in the organization.

Proximity towards the employee group includes being close to employees' relations with each other. According to the interviews, this may include a thorough overview of the employee group's different tasks, resources and competencies (the focus of the dimension *fostering task coordination*), and being attentive to employee perspectives on common goals and direction (the focus of the dimension *communicating a shared vision*) and to the social dynamics in the employee group (the focus of the dimension *supporting social interactions*). Managerial proximity towards the group can thereby enable appropriate structures for professional and social communities, based on detailed knowledge of specific needs and opportunities in employees' interactions with each other.

However, even though the interview study identifies proximity as a relevant point of attention within all five dimensions of relations-oriented leadership, the managers also describe challenges related to establishing managerial proximity. Some of the managers mention how a larger leadership span limits their possibilities to be close to the individual employee and the employee group in a busy workday. For example, one manager explains that he previously had a larger leadership span but now enjoys having a small employee group that allows him to be very close to both the individual employes. This manager also consciously chose to work in a shared office among the employees, which also enables the manager to engage in employees' relations with each other.

Moreover, having employees working from different locations challenge relations-oriented leadership efforts. Some of the managers have employees who work to a large extend from home, while others have employee groups geographically spread to different locations. In such cases, the employees do often not meet other colleagues and their manager regularly.

In sum, the interviews point to differences in managers' conditions for creating sufficient proximity in their relations-oriented leadership practice. And specifically, large leadership span or physically distant employees may require greater attention to proactive initiatives that can give employees a sense of proximity in different ways. The succeeding section therefore discusses possibilities for working with proximity in different contexts.

Exercising relations-oriented leadership within three domains of proximity

The different conditions for working with relations-oriented leadership stress the necessity of being able to establish proximity in various ways. Distinguishing between different aspects of proximity provides a greater understanding of managers' possibilities in different contexts. Antonakis and Atwater [29] conclude in a literature review that employees' perception of whether there is leadership proximity involves the degree of physical distance between manager

and employees, the degree of psychological distance between manager and employees, and the degree of interaction between manager and employees. When synthesizing Antonakis and Atwater's proximity distinction with the conceptual framework for relations-oriented leadership [1] and insights from the interview study, three relevant aspects of proximity in relations-oriented leadership practice can be identified: proximity in terms of (1) physical presence, (2) digital accessibility, and (3) mental closeness. These are briefly presented below.

Physical presence among the employees is one aspect of proximity in relations-oriented leadership. This may include being visibly present among employees, having face-to-face contact with employees, working with an open-door policy as much as possible, and having scheduled meeting-free time slots, where the manager is available at the workplace. When physically present, the manager can more easily observe employees' daily interactions and thus gain greater insight into the employee group and engage in the social interactions. By demonstrating availability, the manager may also encourage more contact between manager and employees. Conversely, lack of physical presence makes it harder for the manager to influence relationships appropriately [30]. For example, it may be more difficult to communicate visions in a meaningful way when managers are distant from the employees [13]. As some managers point out, proximity in terms of physical presence is in some cases limited by having employees working from home or at geographically separate locations.

Another way to be visible and inviting contact is by being digitally accessible. Managers may be digitally present to the entire employee group by using newsletters, collective emails, and online meetings as communication tools to coordinate tasks, clarify goals and direction, and articulate opportunities for social interaction. Managers can also use emails as a dialogue tool, where they can demonstrate digital accessibility by quickly responding to emails if employees express a need for professional sparring or social support. This involves working with virtual proximity, where the manager communicates and interacts with employees despite physical distance ([29], [31], [32], [33]). Thus, digital accessibility provides an alternative form of proximity, which may be relevant for example in cases of physical distance (see [34] for a discussion on digital distance leadership in a Danish context).

While both physical presence and digital accessibility may provide conditions for working with the different dimensions of relations-oriented leadership in practice, it does not per se say much about the *quality* of the manager's contact with and knowledge of the employees [29]. Proximity in relations-oriented leadership practice therefore also involves a focus on the manager's mental closeness. Mental closeness towards the individual employee may include demonstrating approachability through empathetic verbal/written/body language and by listening attentively to the employee, bringing attention to important milestones for the individual employee, being respectfully attentive to power imbalances between manager and employee, and inviting employees to a closer relationship by asking curious questions and sharing information about themselves as a person. Mental closeness towards the employee group may include expressing curiosity regarding the employee group's interests, strengths, and weaknesses, being attentive to unconstructive communication and sociopsychological dynamics in the group, using inclusive language, creating a thorough overview of and being in close dialogue with employees about collective tasks, and consciously acting as a role model for desirable social behavior. While mental distance risks negatively affecting the manager's relationship with employees ([34], [35]), mental closeness makes it easier to understand and respond appropriately to both the individual employee's situation and the employee group's needs [29].

These different aspects of proximity can serve as inspiration to how managers may work with the different dimensions of relations-oriented leadership in various contexts. The article therefore encourages managers to reflect on how they can work with proximity as part of their relations-oriented leadership in their specific context. Based on the analysis, the reflection questions in Table 2 are therefore formulated as an invitation and support for such reflections. The manager may apply the questions as part of their individual reflections. They may also adapt the questions to seeking feedback from peers and from their employees.

Table 2. Reflection questions within three domains of proximity

	Domains of proximity		
	Physical presence	Digital accessibility	Mental closeness
Reflection questions	• When do I prioritize physical presence? How do I show that I am physically present? • When is it important that I am physically present among my employees? • When am I available to my employees at the workplace? • How do I show that I am available to my employees at the workplace? • When is it difficult for my employees to get in touch with me at the workplace?	• How does digital availability look like in my workday? When am I digitally available? • How do I show that I am digitally available to my employees? • Why do I prioritize digital availability at certain times? • How does my digital contact with different employees look like? • How am I digitally accessible to the employee group?	• When am I mentally close to my employees? When do I find it difficult to be mentally close? • How do I show that I am mentally close to each individual employee? • When and how do I pay attention to the relationships between employees? • What am I curious about and what am I not curious about regarding different employees? • What am I curious about and what am I not curious about regarding the employee group? • Do I have employees with whom it is more difficult for me to be mentally close?

Concluding remarks

This article has introduced a practice-oriented toolbox designed to support and strengthen relations-oriented leadership. By translating theoretical insights from the conceptual framework of relations-oriented leadership into actionable strategies, the aim is to equip managers with tools that enhance strong social relationships within their organizations. The hope is that these insights will not only inspire reflections but also inform concrete leadership practices.

To support implementation, the article concludes with a practical checklist that managers can use as a guide when developing their relations-oriented leadership.

> ### *Checklist for relations-oriented leadership practice*
>
> ☐ Engage in diverse leadership efforts: Focus on (1) showing individual consideration, (2) developing employee skills, (3) supporting social interactions, (4) fostering task coordination, and (5) communicating a shared vision.
>
> ☐ Prioritize collective efforts over individual efforts: Reflect on how your leadership emphasizes collective efforts and social climate, while still attending to individual needs when relevant.
>
> ☐ Cultivate proximity: Be physically presence, digital accessible, and mentally present – both to individual employees and to the team as a whole.
>
> ☐ Use reflective questions: Incorporate structured reflection to continuously evolve your relations-oriented leadership practice.

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Appendix

Methodological foundations of the interview study

This article explores what relations-oriented leadership can look like in practice from a Danish public management perspective. The empirical foundation of the study is a qualitative interview-based investigation designed to elicit managers' own accounts of how they enact relations-oriented leadership in their daily practices [36]. The empirical material comprises semi-structured interviews conducted in 2022 with ten managers from a large Danish municipality. Danish Municipalities functions as decentralized, multi-purpose units responsible for a wide array of public service, including social care, schools, infrastructure, and administration. These organizations are further characterized by relatively informal and close relationships between management and employees ([37], see also [2] for a detailed case description).

Participants were purposefully selected from two municipal departments known for their strong emphasis on social relations and high scores on internal assessment of workplace social capital, albeit differing in their degree of citizen interaction [1]. Initial interviews were conducted with the heads of these departments to gain information and contextualize the leadership practices of subordinate managers. Subsequently, eight section managers were selected for in-depth interviews. These managers varied in terms of leadership experience, leadership span, gender, and age. Table 3(A) provides an overview of the participants.

Table 3(A): Overview of participants in the interview study

#	Position	Gender	Department
M1	Section manager	Male	Citizen and labor market
M2	Section manager	Male	Citizen and labor market
M3	Section manager	Female	Citizen and labor market
M4	Section manager	Female	Citizen and labor market
M5	Section manager	Female	Citizen and labor market
M6	Section manager	Male	Joint administration
M7	Section manager	Female	Joint administration
M8	Section manager	Male	Joint administration
H1	Head of department	Female	Citizen and labor market
H2	Head of department	Female	Joint administration

The primary objective of the interviews was to elicit concrete, experience-based accounts of relations-oriented leadership as perceived and practiced by public managers. The managers were invited to reflect on and describe specific efforts they employ to cultivate and maintain strong social relationships within their teams. The interviews were guided by a thematic, semi-structured interview guide developed in accordance with the five-dimensional framework of relations-oriented leadership [1], summarized in Table 1.

After briefing, each interview started with background questions and open-ended questions about the manager's leadership practices and social dynamics among their employees. Follow-up questions were then used to ensure comprehensive descriptions of each dimension by addressing themes that had not yet been sufficiently covered in the interview. The interviews concluded with summarizing and validating questions, followed by debriefing [38]. Each interview was conducted individually in either the manager's office or a meeting room at the workplace and had a duration of 60 to 80 minutes. The eight management interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using Whisper Transcription software within the GDPR-safe platform UCloud at the University of Southern Denmark.

The interview data were coded and analyzed thematically, drawing on established qualitative methodologies ([39], [40]), to obtain verbal descriptions of the five dimensions of relations-oriented leadership ([1]). Hence, the code development was theory-driven, utilizing the five theoretically derived dimensions of relations-oriented leadership [1]. The primarily deductive analysis strategy consisted of two phases [41]. In the first phase, a thematic meaning condensation was performed, where managers' behavioral descriptions were categorized within the five dimensions of relations-oriented leadership to illustrate how the dimensions may manifest in practice. Central examples of what managers can do when exercising relations-oriented leadership in practice were condensed, and quotes were identified to illustrate examples of leadership efforts (all quotes are translated from Danish). In the second phase, patterns across dimensions were identified to gain a greater understanding of conditions, challenges, and possibilities for relations-oriented leadership in practice [1].

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