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Leadership and Humor, the Moomin Way

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Abstract: Drawing on an ethnographic study in the Moomin business we explore how a discourse on humor enables organizational members to enact a particular form of leadership. While the Moomin heritage and philosophy steers leadership towards supporting and caring for people and respecting their differences, the relational and contextual nature of organizational interactions renders leadership and humor subject to friction and tensions. We elucidate how humor plays out between leaders, in meetings, in supporting people, and in parties, and how humor is constantly on the edge. Our study contributes to understanding leadership as discursive practice steered by humor.

Keywords: leadership, practice, discourse, humor, Moomin

Introduction

How can leadership be done in and through humor? In this paper, we view leadership as interaction and practices (Crevani et al., 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012) and explore how a particular discourse on humor enables organizational members to enact leadership that supports and cares for people and respects their differences. We show how humor plays out in organizational interactions that are contextual. Humor comes with some edge, however, and renders leadership subject to friction and tensions.

For studying leadership and humor, we engage with the Moomin business (see moomin.com). Moomins are amiable troll creatures with pear-shaped faces who live with their friends in the Moominvalley. The Swedish-speaking Finnish artist and writer Tove Jansson created the first Moomin images and stories in the 1940s and soon expanded into comic strips and animation films. She created a unique world of happiness, equality, rebellion, and adventure. Tove Jansson's stories and images continue to give people comfort and joy and her heritage lives on in the Moomin business. At its core is Moomin Characters Ltd, the company responsible for Moomin copyright supervision. Offering comfort and joy has turned into a profitably growing business with over 800 licensees and a global annual retail value of close to a billion euros.

Moomin business is based on corporate values of love, equality, and courage. These values help steer activities and practices in the organization in the spirit of Tove Jansson. In this paper, we draw on an ethnographic study in the Moomin business and focus on how humor plays into its leadership. We find that like in Moominvalley, witty and wild humor keeps life interesting in the Moomin business, enabling the organization to support and care for its people. Based on our study, we argue that leaders use humor to achieve multiple and sometimes contradictory ends, and that the consequences are not always as expected. We apply a discursive approach to leadership that is both appreciative and critical.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Next, we share the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of our study. We then introduce Tove Jansson's legacy and the Moomin business, before outlining our study. We offer glimpses of leadership and humor the Moomin way and discuss the implications of our study for understanding leadership as discursive practice steered by humor.

Leadership and humor

We are interested in how leadership activities and practices emerge in social interaction and how institutionalized notions of leadership are brought into these activities and practices (Crevani et al., 2010). We view leadership as collective in that it resides in interpersonal relationships rather than individuals (Ospina et al., 2020). It is grounded in discourse and communication as it centers around meaning and meaning making, and it is a site of contestation as well as agreement (cf., Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). We are especially interested in mundane manifestations of leadership. These are often "extra-ordinarized" when done by individuals who are designated leaders (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). Like Tove Jansson and the Moomin business, however, we are suspicious of heroic leaders and take distance to viewing leadership as something that only individual leaders do. Our focus is on how organizational members do leadership together, and how a specific discourse on humor helps to steer it. Discourse is

understood here as established and taken for granted ways of making sense of experience in an organization (cf., Foucault, 1972). We hold that specific socio-cultural conditions (e.g., Tove Jansson's heritage in the Moomin business) give rise to discourse that helps make a particular form of leadership possible. Rather than looking at leadership discourses (Koivunen, 2007), discourses of leadership (Ford, 2006) or discursive leadership (Fairhurst, 2008), we study how discourse on humor plays into leadership as joint activities and practices.

Humor is arguably a timely and relevant lens to study leadership. As human beings, we can accomplish a lot through humor in our relations and interaction with others. Humor can be used to make a point or to test ideas. However, it can highlight inconsistencies, ambiguities, and contradictions in the organization (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993) and it can help us deal together with the paradoxical situations that we face (Jarzabkowski & Le, 2017). Humor helps us let off steam. It can be used to reduce stress, enhance group cohesiveness, and foster creativity (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). It can be used to express taboo feelings and impulses (Fineman et al., 2000) and to reframe situations and to negotiate identities (Martin, 2004). Subversive humor can confront serious issues in a playful way. However, humor in organizations can also be spiteful and hurtful (Plesner, 2015).

There is a plethora of practitioner-oriented research to support the idea that good leaders have a sense of humor, and that humor enhances leadership. Stanford University scholars Naomi Bagdonas and Jennifer Aaker, for example, argue that humor is one of the keys to great leadership because sharing a laugh accelerates feelings of trust, closeness, and comfort (Constantino, 2022). Leadership researcher and edutainment entrepreneur Emilia Bunea argues that people trust funny managers, that they are often seen as better leaders, and that they increase work engagement in organizations (Bunea, 2022). It is notable that much of the research on humor and leadership comes from the field of psychology with a focus on leaders as individuals rather than on leadership activities and practices. For example, leaders using positive and self-deprecating humor are found to enable effective leadership (Gkorezis & Bellou, 2016) and to foster employee creativity (Huang, 2022). As such, humor is understood as a “key interpersonal resource” for individual leaders (Cooper et al., 2018).

However, in keeping with our understanding of leadership as practices (re)constructed in interactions, we note that humor plays into, and draws from, power relations in organizations. Humor is not only about socio-cultural conditions that give rise to specific discourses, but about dominance and submission as well as inclusion and exclusion. While management can use humor to exert control over the organization (Plesner, 2015), humor can also challenge management by facilitating effective forms of resistance under a protective cloak of ambiguity or anonymity (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). However, while oppositional humor may appear subversive, it can also reinforce existing power relations in the organization. Humor can be both the prerogative of those in authority and a vehicle for resistance (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). As such, it has a dualistic dynamic nature (Westwood & Johnston, 2012) that begs for contextual understanding. We study humor as something shared that plays into leadership as it is enacted. A specific discourse on humor can contribute to an institutionalized notion of leadership in the organization; deeming what can and cannot be done (cf., Crevani et al., 2010). We find, for example, that Tove Jansson's legacy steers what kind of leadership becomes possible at Moomin and helps determine what is out of bounds.

In all its incarnations, humor is notoriously difficult to analyze. When analyzed it can become annoyingly serious. Writer E.B. White famously remarked that "humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind." We aim to avoid seriousness in our study of leadership and humor in the Moomin business and to keep the humor alive in all its messiness.

Tove Jansson's treasure trove for Moomin leadership and humor

Tove Jansson (1914–2001) was an artist who embodied a rare but powerful combination of skills: she was both visually and textually gifted (Westin, 2014). In the 1940s, Jansson created the Moomin characters, their friends, and the idyllic Moominvalley where they all live. In Jansson's stories, Moomins

function as a collective. They live in harmony with nature, and they welcome all visitors to their home. Sometimes their adventures take them far beyond the Moominvalley, but they always come back. They meet strangers and befriend them, home and away.

The Moomins convey a powerful message in a world that is characterized by sadness and violence. Moomins are on the side of those who are small and vulnerable. Everyone is different, and everyone is accepted as they are. However, respecting difference comes with some edge as Moomin is also about positive rebellion. Things do not always play out neatly and the Moomins deal with a variety of hardships and emotions in Tove Jansson's stories. They struggle but they eventually solve the problems they face. Rebels are part of the story fabric, and they blend into the community.

The Moomins and their philosophy have attracted scholarly attention. For example, the linguist Christian Matthiessen (2022) argued that in her Moomin stories Tove Jansson provides us with an enlightened understanding of the family that is caring and inclusive. Writer and philosopher Jukka Laajarinne (2009), in turn, carved out what Moomin characters and stories can offer for us in figuring out questions related to ourselves and our experiences. He portrayed the Moomins as therapeutic.

Delicate balancing acts between conformity and resistance depicted in Tove Jansson's Moomin stories can be found in all societies. The Moomin family and friends are based on archetypal figures. Their relations and interaction, sometimes arguing and quarrelling but always making up, are key to the stories. As such, the Moomins communicate a universal storyline. As a guiding light in life, the message of equality and friendship endures. It can be discovered and rediscovered time and again in different societal and cultural conditions. The Moomins also deal with injustices and loneliness in ways that we can recognize and identify with. We can find ourselves in the Moomins.

Moomin business values of love, equality, and courage are grounded in Tove Jansson's work and spirit. As an artist and writer, she had business acumen. She founded what became Moomin Characters Ltd together with her brother in 1958. Today, the company is responsible for Moomin copyright supervision. Moomin is a worldwide registered trademark with over 800 licensees that are allowed to use

the Moomin brand for a set time (typically 2–3 years) in their products, services, and campaigns. Moomin licensees range from manufacturers and publishers to theme parks, and from animations to apps. Almost 50 percent of the licensees are based in Finland and the Nordic countries. There are some 260 licensees in Japan, which is an important market for Moomins since the 1960s. In sum, the Moomin Characters business is about developing and selling the Moomin brand and protecting it from wrong uses and associations. Around 100 new licensing agreements are signed every year.

Rights & Brands, founded in 2016, is a company that deals with all aspects of character representation and branding, from publishing and public relations to licensing. It is the licensing agent for Moomin Characters, working with Moomin licensees around the world. The Moomin “business ecosystem” also comprises other companies apart from Moomin Characters and Rights & Brands (Savage & Tienari, 2024). Moomin is a family business, with Tove Jansson’s niece Sophia Jansson as majority owner in Moomin Characters. Sophia Jansson’s husband Roleff Kråkström is its CEO. Roleff, known as Rolle, is part owner of Rights & Brands alongside, among others, Moomin Characters. We refer to Sophia Jansson and Roleff Kråkström as “top decision-makers” below. Others include Sophia’s sons Thomas and James Zambra, who both have prominent positions in the Moomin business.

We find that Tove Jansson’s legacy encourages a form of leadership at Moomin that is caring and supportive. She also offered a grounding for a discourse on humor. Tove Jansson exhibited a curious mix of humor and melancholy in her work. Her humor did not deny sadness or grief. It was often found between the lines, taking the form of irony and parody. Tove Jansson’s humor showed the importance of love, equality, and courage in how we interact with each other, comprising what we call the Moomin way.

Studying the Moomin business

Our study of Moomin is based on a variety of empirical materials. First, with Moomin Characters Ltd as his home base, the second author observed

the business and its management for more than two years, hanging around the workplace and attending its meetings and workshops online and offline. He interviewed a total of 54 people in different organizational positions from managers to employees, and partners to suppliers. Also, the second author sat in 32 meetings ranging from two to 74 participants, and had numerous informal conversations with managers, employees, and stakeholders at Moomin Characters and other companies in the ecosystem. The second author developed close ties with key decision-makers at Moomin and took part in social functions and parties they organized, including birthdays and seasonal festivities. He had access to the weekly calendar of the management, as well as the agendas of meetings. The second author's ethnographic study enabled us to get a sense of how the Moomin ecosystem and organization functions, how it is managed and led, and how it is experienced by those who are a part of it. The first author remains an outsider to Moomin.

Second, we collected other materials on Moomin. The second author collected books, visual images, videos, documents, and artifacts, with access to historical documents, the artist's correspondence, her artwork, the merchandise warehouse and archive, exhibition materials, publications of and related to Tove Jansson, and all that the company had available. The first author searched the internet for materials on Moomin, including interviews that its key decision-makers gave for different media outlets across the world; feature articles by journalists and writers covering different aspects of the Moomins and the Moomin business; and social media materials by a variety of posters and commenters. Complementing the ethnographic study, these materials comprising texts and visuals enabled us to get a sense of how the Moomin brand was appropriated in different forums and how the Moomin business and its leadership looks when viewed from the outside.

In this paper, we focus on leadership and humor at Moomin Characters Ltd. As the pinnacle of the business ecosystem, the company has around 70 employees. It is characterized by an informal atmosphere and a lack of explicit hierarchy. In the second author's ethnographic materials we located instances where humor surfaced and where it seemed to play a pivotal role in how the events and situations unfolded and in how leadership was done

together to achieve things. We considered how leadership was done when a decision was reached, when a solution was found and, for example, when an organizational member was supported. We approached humor as a discourse, paying attention to its recurring features; how its specific forms were established and how it steered activities and practices (cf., Foucault, 1972). We studied how its dominant forms were justified and how alternative forms of humor were addressed. We considered parallels to Tove Jansson's work and humor, and how her legacy seemed to be reflected in relations, activities, and practices at Moomin Characters.

Our study is inspired by hermeneutic phenomenology and, drawing on the work of philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1981) and others, the idea that understanding a part requires understanding the whole, and vice versa. Sometimes we researchers may overlook elements such as non-interview data, our influence in the settings we study, and the contextual background of our observed phenomena (Hansen et al., 2023). Throughout the analysis, we attempted to get beyond simplistic understandings of observations, interviews, documents, and other materials. We discussed the various empirical materials and our interpretations of them, and jointly developed an understanding of the Moomin business and how it is managed, before focusing on leadership and humor. With an emphasis on observation and interviews, the second author revisited the materials from this perspective. He extracted events and instances where humor seemed to play a role and, together with the first author, interpreted what was going on and why.

Our process of discovery and hermeneutic cycle of deepening understandings is grounded in our different positioning vis-à-vis Moomin. Through his ethnography, the second author became a sort of insider to the organization in that he befriended its people and continues to mingle with the key decision-makers outside his study. This reflects an effort to appreciatively understand the study context and the worldviews of those being studied (Robinson & Kerr, 2015). In contrast, the first author remains an outsider to Moomin with no personal connections to any organizational members. The insider-outsider dynamic enabled us to engage in a dialogue of different "readings" of what was happening at Moomin. Relying on our reasoning and reflexivity helped us

develop an increasingly in-depth understanding of how leadership worked (for example, through humor); how organizational members behaved and felt, and how they ascribed meaning to their own behavior and feelings, and to those of others (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018; Einola & Alvesson, 2019). Of course, other readings of Moomin business, management, leadership, and humor are possible. Our study is not exhaustive or exclusive.

Glimpses of leadership and humor, the Moomin way

We witnessed a lot of humor in how people relate to each other at Moomin Characters. This could take different forms. Spontaneous humor could lighten up a conversation over a cup of coffee, in a meeting, or at a workshop. An appropriate humorous remark could unlock tensions or take the discussion forward or to a new level. Humor could help organizational members to reach decisions and find solutions to a problem. In interviews with the second author, they could revert to humor in describing their experiences – and they could share further examples of humor in how the organization functions.

Next, we elucidate how humor plays out between leaders, in meetings, in supporting people, and in parties. We also show how humor is constantly on the edge, at times contributing to friction and tensions. Our examples demonstrate how leadership comes into being as discursive practice steered by humor at Moomin Characters.

Between leaders

Top decision-makers – or leaders, viewed in a traditional sense – in Moomin Characters do not have standard resumés for corporate bigwigs. They have backgrounds in teaching and publishing, for example, and they are not burdened by established understandings of how businesses should be run. The second author witnessed how the atmosphere they help create in the organization is informal and friendly. Like the Moomins and their friends in Tove Jansson's stories, they sometimes argue and quarrel but always make up.

The second author noticed in his ethnography how the leaders defer to experts in the organization, and often do so through self-deprecating humor. Many of his interviewees referred to Roleff or Rolle the CEO by occasionally signaling the jovial nature of his bearing mixed with respect for his business acumen. Laughing and rolling their eyes, they nonetheless deferred to him when he was determined. They also told the second author that they felt the humor sometimes went too far or cut too close to the bone. This humor set the tone for leadership that could be both jovial and rough.

The way top decision-makers at Moomin Characters relate to each other with respect and love, tempered with a slightly antagonistic sarcasm from time to time, was difficult for the second author to understand in the beginning. Leaders openly banter with each other in front of others, and if one wanted to worship or admire Sophia the board Chairperson or Rolle the CEO beyond common sense, it would be difficult to hear. They take to heart a Tove Jansson character's quote, "You can't ever be really free if you admire somebody too much" (Jansson, 1964/2018). They do not agree on everything and real disagreements, if not handled at home or in private, were direct and absent of the ambiguity humor can offer.

However, humor surfaces in the leaders' relations and interactions often, particularly in moments when disagreements were not important enough to warrant clear language and where the subtext was, "You will do what you want anyway, and I cannot be bothered about this." Top decision-makers at Moomin help each through failure stories both personal and professional, that may not have been funny at the time, but become so in the re-telling. It is keeping them honest, in some way, as if by saying, "I know you. Blemishes and all." By disagreeing with the idea but joking with the person, there is an underlying admonishment that this matter is now on your shoulders, and you will be held accountable. In a constructive way, they are offering freedom and trust but with a burden.

There is also a similar self-narrative of acknowledging the blemishes in a humorous way, as Sophia mentioned in an interview with the second author, "I've always had an inflated ego and thought I was capable of more than I actually am, which has served me well in many situations, but has also had [bursts into

a laugh] its repercussions on what I've done." For us, this felt genuine. In one conversation with one of the leaders of the organization, the second author referred to something another leader said, and the response was, "Yes. I've heard that a lot, and I always think, 'yeah, yeah, that'll happen someday' [laughs], but that's not what should be driving us." It concerned a quite serious question about the vision of the company, but it felt to us that they were saying, "I disagree but it's not so important after all."

As one person in the leadership team said, "It's not meant to be boring for anyone, but some days it is for all of us. It is a job. And that is part of Rolle's intuitive genius, that he keeps everybody interested, everybody kind of following like [continues in a playful voice] 'Where are we... where are we going now?' and so far [knocks on the table] there is no intrigue or people being vocal about their role." We felt that this was recognizing that Roleff the CEO can be difficult to keep up with. By the same token, putting on an animated voice, being a bit lost, is a lighter version of uncertainty. They add that, despite the pace, people do not seem unhappy at Moomin.

In reference to who speaks on behalf of Moomin, Sophia's son Thomas, or Tom, who was in a business development role explained that it is (or was at the time of the interview) Sophia and his brother James, and then maybe after them Roleff and Tom and others. When asked why it was so, he elaborated on the fact that Moomin is a body of art so there is a separation somehow between the artists (Sophia and James) and the business (Roleff and Tom), "I mean, it's not like the business is saying [switches to a villain voice] 'Let's sell to Disney!' and the artists are saying, 'Let's only publish the books!' ... and in the end if Sophia feels strongly about something being true to the brand, she will decide." Tom's humoristic portrayal of himself and Roleff as "villains" is a legitimate expression of the eternal struggle in a business based on art, and their commitment to protect the brand by deferring to the artists.

Ultimately, until retirement and perhaps even afterwards, Sophia and Roleff can make the final decisions. Both admit to being frustrated from time to time, but they seem to use humor to lessen the impact of their power. There is an appreciation of the irony of leadership or the serendipitous nature of coming into a position of leadership and this is often expressed in humorous

humility. In many ways, we see this discourse to be steered by Tove Jansson's legacy.

In meetings

There are recurring activities – practices – that put structure around work at Moomin Characters and set the tone for its functioning. Monthly meetings that all employees are welcome to attend form one such established practice. The second author noticed in his ethnographic study how humor is very much present in these meetings, reflecting a sense of equality and friendship that can be found in Tove Jansson's stories. Everyone is allowed to be humorous, and everyone's humor is at least tolerated, if not always directly appreciated. Meetings with everyone present offer a setting for shared humor, jokes, and laughter. Leadership is sometimes done with detachment, using irony, for example, to show acceptance of risk and of general circumstances. As Tom said in a light tone with a smile, in reference to a project, "We are making all the possible mistakes we can in [country X] and fixing them before the big launch in [country Y]." This was understood not as condemnation of the project members but his own defense of the process. By exaggerating the mistakes through humor, he was also saying that there are not that many mistakes, and it is fine.

The second author noticed that the discourse on humor in meetings and in the office often had the leaders opening themselves to critique. In discussing facilities in the new building where Moomin was thinking to move, one of the people present in the meeting asked Roleff the CEO: "And your jacuzzi? Where will that be located?" Amid a roar of laughter, he said with a smile and dry tone that "I am not an enthusiastic bather. I prefer showers." This was perhaps understood in different ways. On the one hand, Rolle was deflecting the suggestion that he needs special treatment. On the other, he indicated that they will be able to enjoy themselves without his presence.

The second author witnessed many times how some people felt comfortable poking fun at Roleff the CEO, and how he kept the joke going. In a monthly meeting held online, one of the media specialists had a filter that gave her bunny ears. She

explained that this was from an application that few older staff had. A senior female employee then spoke out, "Rolle, let's meet in the app. It's a channel for younger people." Most people chuckled. His response was quick and dry, "Maybe later... much later" ...as in, "Never." In terms of leadership, we felt that he acknowledged the age joke but took it further with "much later." This contributed to the relaxed atmosphere that helped to constructively discuss the matters at hand.

In another example, we saw correction through humor, making light of a general weakness that some people may have without accusing anyone in particular. We considered this as another discursive leadership practice. Roleff pointed out in an all-hands meeting, "as someone does something really nice, and then all of sudden in different parts of the organization people start copying it, but not as well [he talked in a light humoristic tone, and this was followed by several background comments or laughter]. So, you get sort of diluted versions of it." This felt like a correcting comment, but with acknowledgement for people's enthusiasm or, perhaps reading too far into it, their laziness, cloaked in humor.

In the interviews, Moomin Characters employees told the second author that it can be difficult sometimes to understand whether a certain story is directed towards them, or if it is simply a funny story. This could be a tool to guide and to steer without the heavy hand of correction or instruction, in a way, leaving it up to the individual to figure it out. At the same time, this could lead to a mild paranoia in which one tries to read too much into what is joked about.

In supporting people

In his ethnographic study, the second author noticed how people who were facing difficulties in life received special support from other organizational members at Moomin Characters, managers and employees alike. This is where the caring ethos that characterizes the functioning of the organization surfaced particularly visibly, reflecting Tove Jansson's stories where the Moomins deal together with hardships and emotions. It was pointed out in one interview with a leader, that "everyone has problems in life, but this office [looks around and laughs] seems to collect people who are a bit extreme. Many have had a tough time." This was reflected upon and then followed up with, "I know that we could have someone

who is more experienced or more capable in one or more positions. But that is not our way. And it is a strength that we don't throw people away if someone better comes along." This momentary chuckle about the tough backgrounds, the speaker included, seemed to be grounded on their priorities and values. Humor was again very much present in how managers and employees responded to each other's struggles, playing out as supportive and caring leadership.

For example, an employee told the second author how she was some time ago diagnosed with cancer and how a shared sense of humor in the workplace helped her through her tribulations. This employee was one of many that the second author met who feels deeply about Moomin, its values, and its people. After the initial shock, the employee decided that she wanted to continue working. "I wanted to work during the treatments so that I had something meaningful to do and think about. And I couldn't be more grateful for my workplace, how they have let me be sick and let me work all that time," she recalled all that she had been through. "Working at Moomin kept me sane!" She told the second author:

My colleagues here at Moomin bought bracelets that said, 'Fuck cancer!' and gave them to everyone. When I joined them for a video meeting, everyone raised their hands to show it, and I got a photo of them with the text, 'You can do it!' And all the cards I got in each phase... the chemotherapy, the surgeries, and so on. I am just so grateful.

This empathy is not only between employees or from the leaders to the employees. It goes both ways. One employee said, "We want to make the best artist-presenting site with tove.com, and the sky's the limit. No pressure [laughs]. Luckily James is in charge of the visual side [smiles]. I think he has even more pressure seeing as his mother is Sophia and great aunt is Tove [adopting a warm light tone]." This was a release, we felt, sharing with humor the weight of expectations regarding a huge project. At the same time, a lighter tone and warmth is used to point to Sophia's son who is the Artistic Director. It is a shared weight, but more on him than on the interviewee. In this sense, making light of the stress but seeing the project lead in a more nuanced way, we feel the employee is also supporting the leader. This ability to see leaders

in the organization including their weaknesses or just personal characteristics is something a specific discourse on humor can facilitate. Another employee commented on Roleff the CEO:

One thing that I think is always nice is that Rolle says that we only work with the best, so that everyone in the room [laughs softly] thinks they are the best [laughs harder]. And the work is going so well so... [voice bubbling] you feel like you're one of the chosen ones [splits up laughing for a moment] uh... yeah. I'm the best! [Still laughing] Yeah.

This is an interesting interchange because the interviewee is being both cynical and appreciative. They are self-aware that it feels good to hear that one is among the best, even though they feel it is not totally true. And seeing it applied to anyone who comes near the work as a partner or collaborator does dilute its value. However, it is still appreciated despite the broad application.

Seeing the top decision-makers in their fullness came out regularly in the second author's interviews. For example, "Rolle! [laughs]. That man knows how to make money. He came in and said, 'I'll need the power to make decisions, otherwise, I won't come.' And Sophia made a wise choice and hired him [laughs loudly] and got a husband in the mix [still chuckling] but that was later." The interviewee was discussing the changes in the Moomin organization and business over the years that contributed to its profitable growth. It was a long section of the interview, but this sudden laughter felt like amazement or chagrin. They bluntly shared their view that in becoming CEO Rolle did what he said he would do, which was surprising. The laughter here also felt a bit like a recognition of Sophia as a person like anyone else.

Perhaps we are giving too much meaning to micro-moments of laughter, a sardonic tone of voice, or an embarrassing anecdote, but as part of a specific discourse on humor it was a pattern that repeated itself nearly every day when the second author was doing his study. Small, funny comments, particularly self-ironic on the part of Sophia and Roleff, injected an attitude into the room (and it was one big open office) that made it difficult to keep them at arm's length. This is also a way to undermine any efforts to shift responsibility onto them for one's

work, in a way, as they are as human and fallible as everyone else. We would not suggest it is consciously done, but it does seem to bring everyone up or down to about the same level, as in Tove Jansson's Moominvalley.

In parties

In his ethnographic study, the second author learned that parties are a key fabric of the Moomin Characters organization and the business ecosystem. Parties serve as one means of retaining its sense of common purpose and togetherness. They symbolize how everyone is different, and everyone is accepted as they are. Tove Jansson enjoyed parties and they feature prominently in her Moomin stories. Parties are a fundamentally important part of the Moomin philosophy. In these less formal occasions outside the workplace, humor tends to blossom freely.

There is a discourse around parties at Moomin. During a workshop to define or narrow down the company values, one group of participants was looking at how to make newcomers feel welcome. Someone was saying that there was "a lot of debt" accumulated during the Covid-19 pandemic. The second author asked what that meant, and several spoke over one another, "Party debt," "We haven't met for such a long time," and "We haven't had a chance to party for a long time." Roleff then explained, "For you to understand, we have a very long tradition... to have these crayfish parties, spring and autumn meetings, license meetings, where everyone is invited regardless of how long they have been in the company. Or we go once a year maybe to see a Moomin exhibition in London or take the whole company to Japan. It is the glue that holds us together." In the background was a quiet comment from someone, "We like glue!"

In parties, humor blends into the fabric of interaction and runs wild and free. It arises in the way in which most people open themselves to risk, from costumes, karaoke singing that does not need to hit the right notes, to a conscious disregard for status. There is a lot of laughing at Moomin parties for the simple reason that they put work on hold and invest time in each other... and they have been partying together for a long time. There are still hierarchies, but we are not convinced this separation can ultimately be removed since the event is a manifestation of the company that is managed by family members.

In the interviews, Moomin Characters employees told the second author how important parties are in retaining Tove Jansson's spirit. Many times, both when discussing the planning of a party or while being there, people would say to the second author, "Tove loved parties" as though he might have needed something explained. This kind of historical reflection seemed to be an integral part of the story, of leadership, and of the discourse on humor. Parties also had a more hands-on reason and practical meaning. An employee told the second author that "We need parties! [laughs] You can fix problems much faster, in the months after a big party because you know people better."

On the edge

At Moomin Characters, the second author noticed in his study that humor acts as a safety valve when pressure mounts and people get tense. Humor is important because tensions and conflicts are a natural part of any community, and people need to be able to let off steam from time to time. However, the second author observed that there is a sense of harshness at times in Moomin humor. Wild and witty humor can turn prickly. It can be interpreted in different ways, and sometimes it can lead to misunderstandings. Humor can thus contribute to friction and tensions in the organization, and it can render leadership subject to vagaries that create uncertainty. For example, an employee confided in the second author, telling him that "There are no secrets here. If you want something to be a secret [tight laugh] you don't talk about it at work. There are no doors – actual doors. The conference rooms are open at the top [giggling]. It is transparency, for sure [laughs]. If you want to know what's secret, just sit at your desk without headphones." It seems that part of the humor here was that the employee shared a secret about "no secrets" with the second author.

Perhaps all the laughter arises from the tension between wanting transparency and feeling uncomfortable with so much transparency. This often came up in the second author's informal conversations with managers and employees, and it would be difficult to assign its meaning without understanding the greater context, the individuals' histories, and their own ambitions. "Over-sharing" was referred to with rolled eyes and a shrug, followed by a conspiratorial,

“Let’s listen a bit more” look and smile. An employee said to the second author, a little jokingly, as if revealing a dark side of an otherwise constructive and respectful organization:

· Sometimes there is a way of speaking about others that is maybe not so
· nice. A tendency to speak about people behind their backs. It can be said
· as a joke, but it makes some people insecure, or feel that they are falling
· out of favor. And some of the confusion comes from decisions made behind
· the curtain [nervous laugh] by the family at home, and then a decision
· comes to the office, but we don’t know what’s behind it [chuckling]. I think
· it’s normal in family businesses.

Here we understand that the situation is devoid of humor and can be quite stressful. However, in the telling, there is an attempt to poke at some of the leaders’ behaviors, if only to regain some control over or detachment from certain interactions. Another employee said that “There is a husband-wife and sons family tension sometimes and it’s something we joke about [...] These are little issues, so not worth bringing up elsewhere. Don’t get me wrong. It’s rare. Maybe that’s why I think of it now.” We think that these kinds of reflections allow employees as well as managers to distance themselves from family-related tensions and create a bond or comradeship in the office, to do leadership apart from or in addition to the family. The second author was also told multiple times by different people how new organizational members at Moomin go through a baptism of fire when they engage with humor that is at times quintessentially harsh. In his ethnographic study, the second author saw how this works out in practice. He noticed how some newcomers come on board relatively quickly, while for others Moomin humor is noticeably absent from some contexts.

Further, as someone said, “Even if we are very busy, there’s still time for a joke. In [another company in the Moomin ecosystem], they are so busy and serious, so when I’m there and joke around, they look at me like, ‘Don’t you have something to do?’ Where I am sitting, we are just less stressed [chuckling].” There were a lot of indications that different parts of the organization seem to have their own versions of the discourse on humor. The second author learned that humor does

not necessarily carry over from the Moomin Characters core to other companies, or from one department or section to another without contextualization.

Rebels are part of the fabric of Tove Jansson's Moomin stories. The second author realized that by invoking the separation between the importance of the work and the ironic nature of the self, top decision-makers are accepting and inviting people to be and do what they would like. If someone would come in and take themselves too seriously, or take the legacy of Tove Jansson too lightly, we imagine they would not last long. There are exceptions, but the leadership of Moomin Characters seem to be allergic to self-importance. A dear friend of Roleff's told the second author with a big smile on their face, standing next to the butt of the joke, "Oh you'll never hear the end of how humble he is." And everyone laughed.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have contributed to understanding leadership as discursive practice steered by humor. We set out to explore how leadership, viewed as practices constructed in interactions (Crevani et al., 2010; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012), is done in and through humor. In our study in the Moomin business we witnessed how a specific discourse on humor steered leadership. It conditioned organizational interactions that are relational as they move responsibility and accountability around through a layered dialogue. Humor facilitated admonishment but also recognition, wherein neither was totally clear. This lack of clarity opened possibilities for others to contribute and bring their best to work without the restrictive micro-management seen in many companies. By making themselves the focus of jokes and humorous banter, top decision-makers or leaders gave organizational members an opportunity to let off steam rather than build up to a major conflict. However, that same lack of clarity could inculcate mild paranoia in those who wanted to know where they stood with the leaders.

As such, our study shows how leadership and humor reflect a more fundamental view on professional life. We found that at Moomin, it is alright to joke about oneself and with others, and even about the inanity of some of the work done. However, the corporate values of love, equality, and courage never came under

attack. Everything else could be the source of an amusing story, a critical jab, or rolling eyes, but not Tove Jansson's legacy. The crucial but hardly surprising point is that jokes and comments are contextual in that they only become understandable when one is able to place oneself and the speaker in proper relation. These relations are embedded in practices that are discursive: there are established and taken-for-granted ways of speaking and referring to things related to a worldview that structures interactions. This is both enabling and restricting, as it offers each the freedom to be themselves, but comes with certain obligations to accept others. At Moomin, a particular discourse on humor helps organizational members to enact leadership that is caring and respectful of differences and, through repetition and recognition of the others, to institutionalize it (cf., Crevani et al., 2010).

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