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Phenomenological
Perspectives in Dialectical
Leadership: Influence of
Aesthetic Experiences on
Managing Organisational
Complexity and Paradoxes

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Abstract: Through a critical literature review, the study analyses the influence of leaders' sensory and emotional experiences on shaping their capacity to navigate contradictions and tensions inherent in complex organisational environments. By engaging with concepts of embodied perception, multisensory engagement, and aesthetic judgment, the article highlights how these factors contribute to leaders' decision-making processes and their ability to foster creative resolutions in paradoxical situations, offering a phenomenological perspective that emphasises the importance of leaders' subjective experiences in managing organisational complexity. The article answers the following research questions: 1) How do subjective aesthetic experiences (including sensory perceptions and emotional responses) influence leaders' decision-making processes and ability to manage organisational paradoxes and complexity? 2) How do embodied perception, multisensory engagement, and aesthetic judgments enhance the efficiency of dialectical leadership in resolving tensions and fostering creativity within organisations? The article concludes by underlining its limitations and proposing future research directions.

Keywords: discursive leadership, management aesthetics, management art, humanistic management, phenomenology

Introduction

In an era marked by rapid change and increasing complexity, leaders are challenged to navigate the multifaceted dynamics of contemporary organisations. Traditional leadership models (rooted in rational and strategic decision-making)

have been critiqued for their limitations in addressing the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in organisational life (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2004). As organisations become more interconnected and dynamic, there is a growing recognition of the need for leadership approaches that go beyond the cognitive and rational dimensions, incorporating the aesthetic, emotional, and sensory aspects of human experience (Strati, 1999; Szostak, 2024).

This article explores integrating aesthetic experiences (comprising sensory perceptions and emotional responses) into the practice of dialectical leadership. Dialectical leadership, characterised by its ability to hold and reconcile opposing forces, offers a robust framework for understanding how leaders can effectively manage organisational tensions and paradoxes. The concept of aesthetics in this context is not limited to visual or artistic elements but extends to a phenomenological understanding (Ingarden, 1981; Merleau-Ponty, 2005) of how leaders perceive, interpret, and respond to the complexities of their organisational environment (Grint, 2001). This article situates the discussion within the broader discourse of relational and transformational leadership, emphasising the importance of relational processes and multi-level interactions in efficient leadership. Integrating aesthetic sensitivity into leadership practice is argued to enhance leaders' ability to engage with the beyond-rational aspects of organisational life, fostering a more profound understanding (aestheticisation) of the emotional and symbolic dimensions that influence decision-making (Putnam et al., 2016; Szostak, 2024).

These considerations are related to the theory of the aesthetic situation (Gołaszewska, 1984) in the context of a metaphoric approach that a leader (manager) is an artist who (dealing with employees and other stakeholders) within and by an organisation (considered as an artwork) influences the environment (Szostak & Sułkowski, 2020). In this context, a leader not only manages a tangible organisation and particular processes within it but also manages an intangible aesthetic situation (Szostak, 2023).

The methodology applied in this article is based on a qualitative literature review of crucial monographs in the research area and scientific articles from the following databases: EBSCO, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Mendeley, Scopus, and Web of Science. The applied interdisciplinary and multi-paradigm research

approach is based on the intersection of humanistic management, management aesthetics, and psychology. The following research questions were set to organise the considerations logically:

- 1) How do subjective aesthetic experiences (including sensory perceptions and emotional responses) influence leaders' decision-making processes and ability to manage organisational paradoxes and complexity?
- 2) How do embodied perception, multisensory engagement, and aesthetic judgments enhance the effectiveness of dialectical leadership in resolving tensions and fostering creativity within organisations?

By addressing how aesthetic experiences influence leaders' decision-making processes and capacity to manage organisational paradoxes, this article contributes to the evolving discourse on leadership, offering insights into how leaders can navigate the complexities of modern organisations while fostering creativity and innovation.

Theoretical framework

Phenomenology and aesthetics in leadership

As a philosophical approach, phenomenology focuses on studying lived experiences and the meanings these experiences hold for individuals (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 2005). This approach emphasises the importance of subjective perception and the embodiment of experience, thus offering a unique lens through which leadership can be examined. In the context of leadership, phenomenology provides a framework for understanding how leaders perceive, interpret, and respond to the complex and dynamic environments in which they operate (Ashworth, 2003). Incorporating aesthetic considerations into phenomenological leadership studies further enriches this perspective by acknowledging that leadership is not merely a cognitive or strategic endeavour,

but also one deeply rooted in sensory and emotional experiences (Ladkin, 2008).

The concept of aesthetics in leadership encompasses more than just visual or artistic aspects; it refers to a broader understanding of how sensory experiences, emotions, and the embodiment of leadership influence leaders and their followers. Aesthetic leadership involves recognising the significance of leadership's sensory and emotional dimensions, which can shape leaders' actions, decisions, and overall organisational climate (Hansen et al., 2007). This perspective challenges the traditional, rationalist views of leadership that often prioritise logical reasoning and objective decision-making by highlighting the role of affective and embodied knowledge in effective leadership practices (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010).

Phenomenology's emphasis on lived experience and embodiment aligns closely with the aesthetic dimension of leadership. In phenomenological terms, leadership can be seen as a practice deeply embedded in the lived experiences of both leaders and followers, with aesthetic experiences shaping how leadership is perceived and enacted (Ladkin, 2010). This approach suggests that leadership is not merely a set of behaviours or traits but is also a phenomenon that is felt and experienced through the senses. The way a leader's voice resonates in a room, the physical presence they command, or the aesthetic qualities of the environments they create, all contribute to the experience of leadership (Hansen et al., 2007).

Aesthetic experiences in leadership can be understood through the sensory perception and appreciation of qualities such as harmony, beauty, and rhythm (Ladkin, 2008). Leaders attuned to the aesthetic dimensions of their environment and interactions are better equipped to create conditions that foster creativity, innovation, and engagement within their teams (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). The design of workspaces, the pacing of meetings, or the symbolic use of language can all be aesthetic tools that influence organisational dynamics (Hansen et al., 2007).

Phenomenology and aesthetics offer insights into leadership's relational aspects. From this perspective, leadership is seen as an intersubjective phenomenon, where the leader's presence and actions are co-constructed

through interactions with others (Ropo & Parviainen, 2001). The aesthetic qualities of these interactions (tone, gesture, and spatial dynamics) are crucial in shaping the relational field within which leadership occurs. This understanding moves beyond the leader-follower dichotomy, suggesting that leadership emerges from the shared aesthetic experiences of those involved in the organisational context (Ladkin, 2010).

Integrating phenomenology and aesthetics into leadership studies emphasises the role of embodied knowledge. This concept refers to the tacit, non-verbal knowledge embedded in bodily practices and sensory experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). For leaders, efficient leadership is not solely a cognitive activity but also involves reading and responding to the aesthetic cues in the organisational environment (Ropo et al., 2013). A leader's ability to sense a team's mood, anticipate their followers' unspoken concerns or use space and movement efficiently draws on embodied knowledge (Hansen et al., 2007). Such capabilities are often developed through practice and reflection, and they highlight the importance of aesthetic sensibility in leadership.

Dialectical leadership: concepts and challenges

Dialectical leadership is an approach that embraces complexity, contradiction, and change as inherent features of organisational life. Rooted in dialectical thinking, this leadership style is grounded in the philosophical tradition of dialectics, emphasising the dynamic interplay of opposing forces and the synthesis that emerges from their interaction (Benson, 1977; Putnam et al., 2016). In a leadership context, this approach involves recognising and managing the tensions, paradoxes, and dualities that naturally arise within organisations to foster innovation, adaptability, and long-term success (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

At its core, dialectical leadership is predicated on the idea that organisational realities are characterised by ongoing contradictions – such as stability versus change, control versus autonomy, and individuality versus collectivity (Putnam et al., 2016). Rather than attempting to resolve these tensions by privileging one side over the other, dialectical leaders seek to

engage with and leverage these oppositions to generate creative solutions. This approach contrasts with traditional leadership models that often focus on resolving or minimising conflicts, instead recognising that the coexistence of opposing forces can be a source of strength and innovation (Clegg et al., 2002).

One of the primary challenges of dialectical leadership lies in the leader's ability to balance opposing forces without collapsing into either-or thinking. This requires a sophisticated level of cognitive and emotional complexity, enabling leaders to navigate paradoxes in ways that are integrative rather than reductive (Lewis & Smith, 2014). Leaders must be comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty and be able to tolerate the discomfort that arises from holding conflicting ideas simultaneously. This capability, often referred to as 'paradoxical thinking,' is essential for dialectical leaders as they work to synthesise diverse perspectives and guide their organisations through complex, dynamic environments (Smith & Tushman, 2005).

Moreover, dialectical leadership demands high reflexivity, where leaders continuously reflect on their assumptions, biases, and actions. This reflexivity is critical for recognising when personal or organisational tendencies might lean too heavily towards one pole of a paradox, thus potentially stifling the generative potential of the opposing force (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2019). By fostering an awareness of these dynamics, dialectical leaders can create organisational cultures that are more resilient, adaptive, and innovative.

Another significant challenge for dialectical leaders is the communication of paradoxes within the organisation. Effective dialectical leadership requires transparent and open communication practices that allow for expressing diverse viewpoints and exploring contradictions (Putnam et al., 2016). Leaders must be skilled in framing and reframing issues to highlight the value of opposing perspectives, thus encouraging dialogue and collaboration among team members. This communication process is crucial for building a shared understanding of the paradoxes at play and for enabling collective sense-making (Fairhurst, 2001).

In addition, the practice of dialectical leadership is often complicated by organisational structures and cultures that may resist the acceptance of paradoxes. Many organisations are built on hierarchical models that favour

transparent, linear decision-making processes and may struggle to accommodate the fluid, dynamic thinking required for dialectical leadership (Smith & Lewis, 2011). To overcome this, dialectical leaders must cultivate a culture of openness and flexibility, where employees feel empowered to engage with complexity and are encouraged to view contradictions as opportunities rather than problems (Cunha & Putnam, 2019).

Integrating phenomenology with dialectical leadership

Integrating phenomenology with dialectical leadership offers a compelling framework for understanding how leaders navigate complex, contradictory environments while remaining attuned to their lived experiences and those of others. This integration emphasises the importance of embodied perception, sensory engagement, and the subjective interpretation of organisational dynamics, providing a holistic approach to leadership that acknowledges both the cognitive and affective dimensions of leadership practice (Ladkin, 2008; Merleau-Ponty, 2005).

As a philosophical method, phenomenology is concerned with studying phenomena as they are experienced from a first-person perspective. It prioritises individuals' subjective, lived experiences and considers how these experiences shape understanding and action (Heidegger, 1962; Zahavi, 2019). When applied to leadership, phenomenology suggests that leaders' decisions and behaviours are not merely the result of rational analysis but are also deeply influenced by their embodied and emotional experiences (Ladkin, 2010). This perspective aligns closely with dialectical leadership principles, which recognise the inherent contradictions and tensions within organisational life and view them as opportunities for growth and innovation (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

The integration of phenomenology with dialectical leadership begins with the recognition that leaders operate within a field of constantly shifting and often contradictory experiences. Phenomenological awareness allows leaders to perceive and engage with these contradictions in a manner that is both reflective and responsive to the lived experiences of those within the organisation (Ashworth, 2003). This means that leaders must be attuned to the sensory and

emotional cues that emerge in the workplace, understanding how these elements influence their own perceptions and actions and those of their team members (Hansen et al., 2007).

Dialectical leadership, focusing on managing paradoxes, benefits significantly from a phenomenological approach. Phenomenologically aware leaders are better equipped to navigate the dualities inherent in organisational life, such as the tension between stability and change, or control and autonomy. By being attuned to their team members' embodied experiences and emotional states, leaders can more effectively manage these tensions in ways that foster innovation and adaptability (Putnam et al., 2016). For instance, a leader may recognise that a team's resistance to change is not merely a cognitive objection but is rooted in more profound emotional and sensory experiences of uncertainty or discomfort. Addressing these underlying experiences can help craft more nuanced and effective responses to organisational challenges.

Moreover, integrating phenomenology with dialectical leadership highlights the importance of embodied cognition in leadership practice. Embodied cognition suggests that our understanding and decision-making are grounded in bodily experiences and world interactions (Varela et al., 1991). In dialectical leadership, leaders must be aware of how their physical presence, gestures, and movements influence the organisational environment and the perceptions of those around them (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). This embodied awareness enables leaders to manage paradoxes more effectively by aligning their actions with their team members' sensory and emotional realities, thereby fostering a more cohesive and adaptive organisational culture.

Additionally, phenomenology's emphasis on intentionality—the idea that consciousness is always directed towards something—offers valuable insights for dialectical leadership. Leaders who adopt a phenomenological stance are more likely to engage with organisational contradictions intentionally, approaching them not as problems to be solved but as dynamic tensions to be navigated (Heidegger, 1962). This intentionality aligns with the dialectical approach, which views contradictions as a source of creative potential and organisational growth (Clegg et al., 2002).

Subjective aesthetic experiences in leadership

Subjective Aesthetic Experiences in Leadership will be analysed in the following steps: 1) sensory perceptions and emotional responses, 2) phenomenological values in decision-making, and 3) managing paradoxes and complexity.

Sensory perceptions and emotional responses

Sensory perceptions and emotional responses are crucial in leadership, particularly within phenomenological and dialectical approaches, because these elements are central to understanding how leaders and their followers experience, interpret and respond to the complexities of organisational life. Sensory perceptions refer to how leaders and employees engage with their environment through the senses, while emotional responses involve the affective reactions elicited by these sensory experiences (Hansen et al., 2007). Together, these components shape the subjective experience of leadership and influence decision-making, communication, and organisational interpersonal relations.

Phenomenology, with its focus on lived experience, provides a valuable lens for examining the role of sensory perceptions in leadership. Perception is not a passive reception of sensory stimuli but an active, embodied process through which individuals make sense of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2005), which means that objective reality and previous experiences, emotions, and bodily states shape leaders' perceptions. Sensory perceptions can influence how leaders interpret situations, identify problems, and generate solutions (Bitner, 1992).

Emotional responses are closely intertwined with sensory perceptions, as emotions often arise from sensory experiences. According to the affective events theory, workplace events trigger emotional responses that, in turn, influence organisational attitudes and behaviours (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Leaders' ability to recognise and manage their and followers' emotions is critical for effective leadership. This is particularly crucial in dialectical leadership, where leaders must navigate and integrate conflicting perspectives and emotions. Emotional intelligence, which encompasses perceiving, understanding, and regulating emotions, is a key competency for dialectical leaders (Goleman, 1995).

Sensory and emotional experiences are not merely individual phenomena but are socially and culturally mediated. Cultural norms, organisational values, and social interactions influence how leaders and employees perceive and respond to their environment (Küpers, 2013). The emotional tone of a meeting can be shaped by the sensory atmosphere, such as lighting or seating arrangements, which in turn affects the mood and engagement of participants. Integrating sensory perceptions and emotional responses into leadership practice also has implications for the aesthetic dimension of leadership: the role of beauty, harmony, and sensory appeal in shaping organisational life (Hansen et al., 2007). Leaders who understand the impact of sensory and emotional experiences can use aesthetic elements to create inspiring and motivating environments that align with the principles of phenomenology (Ladkin, 2008).

The interplay between sensory perceptions and emotional responses is central to managing organisational paradoxes and contradictions. Dialectical leadership requires a sensitivity to the emotional undercurrents that accompany organisational tensions, such as the fear of change or the uncertainty discomfort. By recognising and addressing these emotions, leaders can help their teams navigate paradoxes in a way that fosters resilience and creativity (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In this context, sensory awareness enhances a leader's ability to detect and respond to the subtle emotional signals often accompanying paradoxical situations.

Phenomenological values in decision-making

Phenomenological values in decision-making emphasise lived experience, subjective interpretation, and embodied understanding as central to the decision-making process. Within leadership, these values highlight the importance of considering the full spectrum of human experience (including emotions, perceptions, and intuitions) when making decisions that affect organisational life. This approach contrasts with traditional, rational models of decision-making that often prioritise logic, objectivity, and quantitative data over qualitative and experiential knowledge (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011).

Phenomenology offers a framework for understanding how decisions are shaped by the context in which they are made, the experiences of the decision-makers, and the meanings that individuals ascribe to those experiences (Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1970). In leadership, applying phenomenological values involves recognising that decision-making is not a detached, purely cognitive activity but is deeply intertwined with the leader's embodied presence, emotions, and the social and cultural context in which the decision occurs (Küpers, 2005).

One of the critical aspects of phenomenological decision-making is the role of intuition and tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is the unarticulated, experiential knowledge individuals accumulate through their experiences (Polanyi, 1966). This knowledge often informs intuitive decision-making, where leaders rely on their gut feelings or instincts rather than formal analysis. From a phenomenological perspective, intuition is not seen as irrational but as a legitimate form of knowing that emerges from the leader's deep engagement with their environment (Sadler-Smith, 2008).

Also, emotions play a critical role in phenomenological decision-making. Emotions are not merely reactions to external events but are integral to how individuals perceive and make sense of the world (Damasio, 1994). Leaders attuned to their own emotions and those of others can better navigate the complexities of organisational life. Emotional awareness allows leaders to understand the impact of their decisions on the well-being and motivation of their employees, fostering a more empathetic and responsive leadership style (Goleman et al., 2002). This is particularly relevant when decisions involve moral or ethical considerations, as emotions often provide critical insights into the values and principles that should guide action (Ladkin, 2008).

Phenomenological values encourage a more holistic approach to decision-making, where the focus is not only on the outcome but also on the process by which decisions are made. This includes paying attention to the interpersonal dynamics, power relations, and communicative practices that influence organisational decision-making (Van Manen, 2016). Leaders who adopt a phenomenological approach likely involve others in decision-making, valuing diverse perspectives and fostering shared understanding and

ownership. This collaborative approach aligns with the principles of dialogical leadership, which emphasises open dialogue, mutual respect, and the co-construction of meaning (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

Phenomenological decision-making recognises the importance of specific historical, cultural, and organisational contexts, which shape the options available and the potential consequences of those decisions (Heidegger, 1962). Leaders sensitive to context understand that there are no universally applicable solutions and that effective decision-making requires a nuanced understanding of the specific circumstances. This contextual awareness allows leaders to adapt their decisions to their organisations' unique needs and challenges, promoting more effective and sustainable outcomes (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011).

Managing paradoxes and complexity

Managing paradoxes and complexity is a central challenge for contemporary leadership, particularly in an organisational landscape characterised by rapid change, ambiguity, and conflicting demands. Paradoxes (situations where opposing yet interdependent elements coexist) are increasingly recognised as inherent to organisational life (Smith & Lewis, 2011). On the other hand, complexity refers to the intricate and dynamic nature of organisational systems, where numerous interconnected variables interact unpredictably (Snowden & Boone, 2007).

The concept of paradox in organisations has been extensively explored, highlighting the importance of embracing, rather than avoiding, contradictory demands. Paradoxes often manifest in tensions such as stability versus change, individual versus collective interests, and exploration versus exploitation (Lewis, 2000). Rather than viewing these tensions as problems to be solved, dialectical leadership approaches them as opportunities for growth and innovation (Putnam et al., 2016). This approach aligns with dialectical thinking principles, emphasising the synthesis of opposites to generate new insights and solutions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). One effective strategy for managing paradoxes

is adopting paradoxical thinking, which involves recognising and accepting the existence of contradictory forces within organisations. Paradoxical thinking enables leaders to transcend the binary “either/or” logic and adopt the “both/and” perspective (Clegg et al., 2002). This cognitive flexibility allows leaders to see the value in opposing viewpoints and to integrate them in ways that foster organisational adaptability and innovation (balancing the need for short-term results with long-term strategic goals). By adopting a paradoxical approach, the leader can encourage a culture that values immediate performance and future sustainability, enhancing the organisation’s overall resilience.

Emotional resilience is another crucial aspect of managing paradoxes and complexity. Leaders must not only navigate the cognitive challenges posed by paradoxes but also manage the emotional discomfort that often accompanies them. Paradoxical situations can evoke anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty as they challenge individuals’ need for consistency and closure (Vince & Broussine, 1996). Emotionally resilient leaders are better equipped to tolerate these tensions and guide their teams through periods of ambiguity and change. Emotional intelligence, which includes recognising, understanding, and managing emotions, plays a vital role in this process (Goleman, 1995).

In addition to managing paradoxes, leaders must also navigate the complexities inherent in organisational systems. Complexity theory has gained prominence in organisational studies and provides valuable insights into how leaders can manage dynamic and interdependent systems (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). According to complexity theory, organisations are complex adaptive systems composed of multiple interacting agents whose behaviours are interdependent and non-linear (Anderson, 1999). It means that small changes in one part of the system can have significant and unpredictable effects on the organisation as a whole. That is why a holistic approach to decision-making, considering the broader system dynamics and the potential unintended consequences of their actions, is a desired feature of a conscious leader. Complexity theory suggests that leaders should foster conditions that enable adaptability and emergent solutions rather than attempting to control outcomes directly (Snowden & Boone, 2007). This involves encouraging experimentation, promoting diversity of thought, and facilitating open

communication and collaboration within the organisation. By doing so, leaders may create a culture of continuous learning and innovation that is better equipped to respond to the uncertainties and challenges of a complex environment (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009).

Embodied perception and multisensory engagement

The following issues will describe embodied perception and multisensory engagement: 1) understanding embodied perception, 2) the role of multisensory engagement in leadership, and 3) enhancing dialectical leadership through embodied aesthetics.

Understanding embodied perception

Embodied perception, a core concept in phenomenological philosophy, asserts that perception is not merely a cognitive process but is fundamentally rooted in the body's interaction with the world. This perspective challenges traditional Cartesian dualism, which separates the mind from the body, and instead posits that the body plays a critical role in shaping our experiences and understanding of reality (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). In the context of leadership, embodied perception highlights how leaders' physical presence, movements, and sensory experiences influence their decision-making, communication, and interactions within organisational settings.

Perception can be considered an embodied process wherein the body is the primary site of knowing the world; the body is not just a passive recipient of sensory stimuli but an active participant in the perception process. This means that our understanding of the world is always situated, contingent upon our bodily engagement with our surroundings (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). For leaders, this implies that their perceptions and subsequent actions are influenced by their physical positioning, gestures, and sensory engagement with the organisational

environment: the spatial arrangement of a meeting room, the temperature, or even the leader's posture can significantly affect the dynamics of communication and decision-making processes (Strati, 1999).

Embodied perception also underscores the importance of non-verbal communication in leadership. Non-verbal cues, such as body language, facial expressions, and eye contact, are crucial to how leaders convey meaning and influence others (Küpers, 2013). These cues are not merely supplementary to verbal communication but are integral to how followers perceive and understand messages. For instance, a leader's confident posture can instil trust and authority, while a warm smile can foster a sense of approachability and openness. The embodied nature of these interactions suggests that leadership is as much about physical presence and movement as it is about verbal articulation and intellectual reasoning.

In addition, embodied perception challenges the notion of objectivity in leadership. Traditional views often emphasise the importance of objective analysis and detached reasoning in decision-making. However, from an embodied perspective, all perception is inherently subjective, shaped by the leader's bodily experiences, emotions, and prior encounters (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). This suggests that leaders cannot fully detach themselves from their embodied experiences when making decisions. Instead, they must acknowledge and reflect on how their perceptions are influenced by their physical states and the environments in which they operate. Such self-awareness can enhance leaders' ability to understand and empathise with the perspectives of others, leading to more nuanced and effective leadership practices.

The embodied nature of perception also has implications for how leaders engage with complexity and ambiguity in organisational settings. Complexity often arises from the interrelations between various organisational elements, which can be difficult to grasp through abstract, cognitive reasoning alone. An embodied approach to perception enables leaders to engage more holistically with these complexities by grounding their understanding in concrete, sensory experiences (Dreyfus, 1996; Merleau-Ponty, 2005). For example, a leader walking through the workspace may gain insights into organisational culture and employee morale that are not apparent through reports or data alone. This

direct, embodied engagement with the environment allows leaders to perceive subtle dynamics and tensions that may go unnoticed.

Moreover, embodied perception is critical in developing practical wisdom (Aristotle, 2014). Practical wisdom (Aristotle's *phronesis*) involves the ability to make sound judgments and take appropriate action in specific situations, and it is cultivated through experience and embodied engagement with the world. Leaders who cultivate an awareness of their embodied perceptions can develop a deeper understanding of the nuances of their organisational contexts, enabling them to make more informed and context-sensitive decisions.

The role of multisensory engagement in leadership

Multisensory engagement in leadership refers to integrating various sensory modalities (sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste) into the leadership experience. This approach underscores the idea that leadership is not solely a cognitive or verbal activity but involves the full spectrum of sensory experiences. By recognising and utilising multisensory engagement, leaders can enhance their ability to connect with others, make more informed decisions, and create environments that foster creativity, collaboration, and well-being (Schroeder, 2002).

The multisensory engagement concept is grounded in the understanding that humans perceive and interact with the world through a combination of sensory inputs. Each sense contributes uniquely to how we interpret our surroundings and make decisions. In leadership, this means that the sensory environment (the visual aesthetics of a workspace, the ambient sounds, the texture of materials, and even scents) can significantly influence individuals' behaviour, emotions, and organisational performance (Liu et al., 2018). Leaders attuned to these sensory dimensions can create more effective and engaging organisational climates.

Visual perception, for example, plays a crucial role in shaping organisational culture and influencing employee behaviour. The physical design of a workspace, including its layout, lighting, and colour schemes, can affect everything from productivity to morale (Bitner, 1992). A well-designed workspace incorporating natural light, ergonomic furniture, and aesthetically pleasing elements can

enhance focus, reduce stress, and foster a sense of employee pride and belonging. Leaders who prioritise visual aesthetics in their organisational environments demonstrate an understanding of how the physical space can support or hinder organisational goals.

Auditory elements also significantly impact the workplace experience. Soundscapes, which include both deliberate sounds (such as music or announcements) and ambient noise (such as chatter or machinery), can influence mood, concentration, and communication (Blessner & Salter, 2007). Background music in retail settings has been shown to affect customer behaviour and sales outcomes, with certain types of music creating a more inviting and pleasant atmosphere (Hargreaves, 2012). Similarly, in an office environment, the control of noise levels can enhance or detract from productivity and employee satisfaction. Leaders who manage auditory environments effectively can create spaces that promote focus, collaboration, and a positive organisational culture.

Touch, or haptic perception, is another sensory modality that can be leveraged in leadership. The physical interaction with objects and materials (furniture texture, chair comfort, the firmness of a handshake) can convey messages of quality, care, and attention to detail (Peck & Childers, 2003). In leadership, haptic elements are often subtle but powerful communicators of a leader's values and intentions. For example, the choice of materials in an office (luxurious or utilitarian) can signal the organisation's culture and priorities. Physical gestures, such as a reassuring pat on the back or a firm handshake, can reinforce verbal communication and strengthen interpersonal connections.

Olfactory and gustatory perceptions, though less commonly discussed in the context of leadership, also play essential roles in shaping experiences and memories (Piqueras-Fiszman & Spence, 2016). Scents are directly connected to the brain's limbic system, which is responsible for emotion and memory; this connection means smells can evoke strong emotional responses and create lasting impressions. Leaders being mindful of the olfactory environment (ensuring that meeting rooms are free of unpleasant odours or using scents that promote relaxation) can subtly influence the emotional climate of the workplace (Herz, 2016). Similarly, taste can be a factor in leadership during social or celebratory events where food is served, reinforcing communal bonds and shared experiences.

The role of multisensory engagement in leadership extends to the creation of inclusive and innovative organisational cultures. By considering diverse employees' sensory preferences, leaders can design environments accommodating different performing styles: some individuals may be more sensitive to noise or light, and creating flexible spaces that allow for personalised sensory experiences can enhance overall well-being and productivity (Cooper et al., 2009). Multisensory engagement can stimulate creativity by exposing individuals to sensory inputs that trigger new ideas and perspectives (Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004).

Enhancing dialectical leadership through embodied aesthetics

Embodied aesthetics refers to recognising that aesthetic experiences related to beauty, form, and sensory perception are not merely external or superficial but deeply embedded in the leader's physical presence and interactions (Strati, 1999). This concept underscores the idea that leadership is as much an art as a science, involving cognitive decision-making and an embodied, aesthetic engagement with the world (Szostak, 2023).

Dialectical leadership, which involves managing opposing forces and integrating contradictions to achieve a higher synthesis, can be significantly enhanced by embracing embodied aesthetics. This approach allows leaders to harness the power of sensory experiences and aesthetic sensibilities to navigate tensions and complexities more efficiently. The dialectical process, which thrives on the tension between opposites, benefits from the leader's ability to perceive and respond holistically (Putnam et al., 2016).

One way in which embodied aesthetics enhances dialectical leadership is by fostering a deeper connection between leaders and their organisational environment. A leader attuned to the aesthetic dimensions of their surroundings can better understand and influence their employees' emotional and cognitive states (Cunliffe, 2009). Embodied aesthetics enables leaders to engage more authentically with the paradoxes they encounter. Authentic leadership, grounded in self-awareness and consistency between values and actions, is

deeply connected to the leader's embodied experience (Ladkin, 2008). When leaders are physically present and attuned to their embodied responses, they are more likely to act in ways congruent with their values, thus enhancing their ability to navigate conflicting demands with integrity. This authenticity is essential in dialectical leadership, where resolving contradictions requires leaders to be transparent, genuine, and emotionally resonant with their teams.

Practising embodied aesthetics in leadership can foster a culture of innovation and adaptability. Dialectical leadership relies on synthesising diverse perspectives and creating new solutions from conflicting ideas. By engaging with aesthetic experiences, leaders can cultivate a mindset that is open to ambiguity and creative exploration; exposure to art that challenges conventional thinking or participation in activities that engage multiple senses can stimulate leaders' capacity for lateral thinking, making them more adept at resolving paradoxes innovatively (Koivunen & Wennes, 2011).

The role of embodied aesthetics in dialectical leadership also extends to communication and relational dynamics. Leadership is inherently relational, and interaction's sensory and aesthetic dimensions often influence the quality of relationships within an organisation. Leaders who are mindful of their body language, tone of voice, and the physical context of their interactions can create more efficient connections with their followers (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). These embodied forms of communication are essential in dialectical leadership, where the ability to negotiate and reconcile opposing views depends on the leader's capacity to engage others in a dialogue that is both intellectually and emotionally resonant.

Aesthetic judgement and creativity in leadership

Aesthetic judgement and creativity in leadership will be analysed by focusing on the following issues: 1) defining aesthetic judgement in organisational contexts, 2) fostering creativity and innovation through aesthetic sensitivity, and 3) addressing organisational contradictions with aesthetic judgement.

Defining aesthetic judgement in organisational contexts

Aesthetic judgement, traditionally associated with evaluating art and beauty, has become increasingly relevant in organisational contexts (Minahan, 2020; Strati, 2009; Taylor, 2023). This concept refers to the ability to perceive, interpret, and make decisions based on the sensory and affective qualities of experiences, objects, and environments. In organisations, aesthetic judgement extends beyond visual appeal to encompass a holistic understanding of how sensory experiences influence an individual's behaviour, organisational culture, and overall efficiency (Strati, 1999). As organisations strive to create environments that foster creativity, engagement, and well-being, aesthetic judgement becomes central to leadership and decision-making processes.

Unlike purely rational decision-making, which relies on logic and analysis, aesthetic judgement (inherently subjective and shaped by individual preferences, cultural norms, and contextual factors) requires leaders to consider their choices' emotional and experiential impact (Gagliardi, 2006). However, it also draws on a shared understanding of what is considered harmonious, appropriate, or beautiful within a particular organisational setting.

The application of aesthetic judgement in organisations is multifaceted. One prominent area is the design and management of physical spaces. The aesthetic quality of a workspace (layout, lighting, colour schemes, and materials) can significantly influence employee productivity, satisfaction, and well-being (Elsbach & Pratt, 2007); open-plan offices foster collaboration and transparency but can also lead to noise and distractions, negatively affecting focus and stress levels. Leaders with solid aesthetic judgement can anticipate these outcomes and design spaces that balance functionality with aesthetic appeal, thus enhancing individual and organisational performance.

Aesthetic judgement also plays a crucial role in branding and organisational identity. The visual and sensory elements of branding (logos, packaging, advertising, retail space ambience) are designed to evoke specific emotions and convey the organisation's values and mission (Schroeder, 2002). A leader's ability to make aesthetic decisions in this context can determine

how efficiently the organisation's identity is communicated to internal and external audiences.

Aesthetic judgement is integral to creating and maintaining organisational culture; culture is transmitted through policies and procedures and the organisational sensory and symbolic environment (Strati & DeMontoux, 2002). Rituals, ceremonies, and practices carry aesthetic dimensions reflecting and reinforcing cultural values (Gagliardi, 2006). Organisational symbols, uniforms, or specific colour schemes communicate hierarchy, unity, or creativity.

However, the exercise of aesthetic judgement in organisational contexts is challenging. The subjective nature of aesthetic experience means that what is perceived as beautiful or appropriate by one individual may be seen differently by another. This variability can lead to conflicts or misunderstandings, particularly in diverse organisations where cultural differences shape aesthetic preferences (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). To navigate these challenges, leaders must develop a nuanced understanding of their own and their stakeholders' aesthetic preferences and negotiate and reconcile these differences to support organisational objectives.

The increasing emphasis on sustainability and ethical practices in organisations has expanded the scope of aesthetic judgement. Decisions about design, materials, and processes are evaluated for their aesthetic appeal and environmental and social impact (Riisberg et al., 2015). This evolution reflects a broader understanding of aesthetics encompassing beauty, function (truth), and ethical (good) considerations.

Fostering creativity and innovation through aesthetic sensitivity

Aesthetic sensitivity, defined as the ability to perceive and appreciate the subtle qualities of sensory experiences, plays a crucial role in fostering creativity and innovation within organisations. The link between aesthetics and creativity is increasingly recognised in management studies, where work's sensory and affective dimensions are vital drivers of innovative thinking (Strati, 1999). Aesthetic sensitivity enables individuals and organisations to engage with their environments in ways that transcend the purely functional, allowing for the emergence of novel ideas and solutions that can drive competitive advantage.

Creativity in organisational contexts often involves breaking away from established patterns. Aesthetic sensitivity facilitates this process by encouraging a more open and exploratory mindset: exposure to diverse art, music, and design forms can stimulate cognitive processes associated with divergent thinking, essential for generating creative ideas (Leder et al., 2004). By engaging with sensory stimuli, individuals develop a richer experience palette to draw upon when faced with complex problems.

The workplace's physical environment is another area where aesthetic sensitivity can profoundly impact creativity and innovation by influencing cognitive processes and emotional states (Dul & Ceylan, 2011): natural light and access to outdoor views improve mood and cognitive function, enhancing creative problem-solving abilities; flexible and modular spaces encourage collaboration and the free flow of ideas.

Aesthetic sensitivity is vital in organisations perceiving and responding to emerging trends and opportunities. In a rapidly changing business landscape, the ability to sense and interpret weak signals can be a critical determinant of success (Mintzberg & Westley, 2001). Aesthetic sensitivity allows leaders to pick up on these subtle cues, whether they are shifts in consumer preferences, changes in the competitive environment, or new technological possibilities. This heightened perceptual acuity enables organisations to anticipate and adapt to change more effectively, positioning them at the forefront of innovation.

Moreover, integrating aesthetic sensitivity into leadership practices can lead to more holistic and human-centred approaches to innovation. Traditional approaches to innovation often focus on technological advancements and efficiency gains, sometimes at the expense of the human experience (Schumpeter, 1949). However, when leaders apply aesthetic sensitivity, they are more likely to consider their innovations' emotional and experiential dimensions (Verganti, 2009). This can result in products, services, and processes that meet functional requirements and resonate with users on a deeper, more meaningful level (Szostak, 2025).

Fostering aesthetic sensitivity within organisations enhances the ability to work with and across different disciplines. Innovation frequently occurs at the intersection of diverse fields, where different perspectives and forms of knowledge converge. Aesthetic sensitivity facilitates this interdisciplinary

collaboration by promoting an appreciation for the unique contributions of different disciplines and by encouraging a more integrative approach to problem-solving (Barry & Meisiek, 2010). In product design, the collaboration between engineers, designers, and marketers can be enriched by an aesthetic sensibility that values both the technical and the experiential aspects of innovation.

Developing aesthetic sensitivity within organisations requires deliberate effort involving exposure to diverse sensory experiences and cultivating an organisational culture that values and encourages aesthetic engagement. Leaders are critical in this process by modelling aesthetic sensitivity in their behaviours and decisions and creating opportunities for employees to develop and express their aesthetic capacities through initiatives like art-based training programs, creative workshops, or even simple changes to the physical environment that enhance aesthetic quality (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009).

Addressing organisational contradictions with aesthetic judgement

Organisational contradictions, manifesting as competing demands, paradoxes, and tensions, are inherent in the complex contemporary environments. These contradictions arise from various sources, such as conflicting stakeholder interests, balancing short-term efficiency with long-term innovation, or simultaneously pursuing stability and change (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Addressing these contradictions requires more than rational analysis and strategic planning; it demands a nuanced approach integrating cognitive, emotional, and sensory dimensions.

Unlike purely rational judgement, which often seeks to categorise and simplify, aesthetic judgement embraces complexity and ambiguity, recognising that contradictions may not always have clear-cut solutions (Strati, 1999). Instead, aesthetic judgement allows leaders to appreciate the inherent tensions within organisational contexts and find creative ways to balance or integrate opposing demands. By carefully considering the tone, imagery, and symbolism in communication, a leader can address the paradoxical demands in a way that resonates with diverse audiences.

Aesthetic judgement is instrumental in managing contradictions that involve cultural and symbolic dimensions within organisations. Organisational

culture is often rife with symbolic tensions like the contrast between hierarchical authority and collaborative teamwork or the balance between tradition and modernity (Gagliardi, 1990). These tensions are not easily resolved through rational decision-making alone, as they involve deeply held values and identities.

The role of aesthetic judgement in addressing organisational contradictions is also evident in design and innovation. Organisations often face the challenge of reconciling the need for functional efficiency with the desire for aesthetic appeal in product design (Verganti, 2009). These two objectives are contradictory, with functionality emphasising practicality and cost-efficiency while aesthetics focuses on sensory perception and emotional engagement. By aesthetic judgement, leaders can transcend this opposition and recognise that functionality and aesthetics are not mutually exclusive but can be integrated into both functional and beautiful products.

Aesthetic judgement is crucial in resolving organisational change and continuity contradictions. Change initiatives generate resistance because they threaten established practices and identities, creating a tension between the desire for innovation and the need for stability (Beech et al., 2004). Aesthetic judgement helps leaders navigate this tension by shaping change processes sensitive to organisational life's emotional and symbolic aspects. A leader might use aesthetic elements such as narratives, symbols, or visual imagery to frame change and connect it to the organisation's core values and history.

Aesthetic judgement is pivotal in ethical decision-making, particularly when organisations face contradictions between profit motives and social or environmental responsibilities. In such cases, aesthetic judgement guides leaders in evaluating the broader impact of their decisions, considering the economic outcomes and the ethical and aesthetic implications (Riisberg et al., 2015). This broader perspective enables leaders to address contradictions that align with the organisation's values and long-term sustainability goals rather than merely pursuing short-term gains (Szostak, 2024a).

Despite its benefits, applying aesthetic judgement in addressing organisational contradictions is not without challenges. One of the primary difficulties is its inherent subjectivity, which can lead to differing interpretations and disagreements among stakeholders. To overcome this challenge, leaders should cultivate

an environment that encourages open dialogue and the exchange of diverse perspectives. This inclusivity allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding of contradictions, enabling leaders to apply aesthetic judgement in a way sensitive to different viewpoints and aligned with the organisation's strategic objectives.

Conclusions

Answering the first research question (1. How do subjective aesthetic experiences (including sensory perceptions and emotional responses) influence leaders' decision-making processes and ability to manage organisational paradoxes and complexity?) it can be said that subjective aesthetic experiences, encompassing sensory perceptions and emotional responses, significantly influence leaders' decision-making processes by providing a richer, more nuanced understanding of complex organisational dynamics. These experiences allow leaders to perceive subtle signals and underlying tensions within their environment, which may not be accessible through purely rational analysis. For instance, sensory perceptions, such as the physical environment's design or the emotional tone of interactions, can inform leaders about the unspoken undercurrents that shape organisational behaviour. This heightened sensitivity aids in recognising and addressing paradoxes – such as the need to balance stability with change – by allowing leaders to engage with the non-rational, affective dimensions of these challenges. In doing so, aesthetic experiences help leaders craft innovative and contextually appropriate solutions, enabling them to manage complexity more effectively by integrating conflicting demands into a cohesive strategy.

Regarding the second research question (2. How do embodied perception, multisensory engagement, and aesthetic judgments enhance the efficiency of dialectical leadership in resolving tensions and fostering creativity within organisations?), it can be stated that embodied perception, multisensory engagement, and aesthetic judgments enhance the effectiveness of dialectical leadership by facilitating a more holistic approach to resolving organisational

tensions and fostering creativity. Embodied perception (leaders' awareness and interpretation of their physical presence and sensory experiences) enables them to connect more deeply with the realities of their organisation, making them more attuned to the emotional and symbolic aspects of leadership. Multisensory engagement, involving the integration of various sensory inputs, enriches leaders' understanding of complex situations, allowing them to draw on a broader range of experiences when making decisions. Aesthetic judgments, which involve evaluating and appreciating the sensory and affective qualities of different scenarios, help leaders to navigate contradictions by finding a balance between opposing forces, such as efficiency and innovation or tradition and modernity. Together, these elements foster a leadership style adept at managing paradoxes and unlocking creativity within the organisation by valuing and incorporating diverse perspectives and sensory experiences into the decision-making process.

Among the limitations of this research can be listed: 1) the reliance on a literature review means that the findings are not supported by original empirical research; 2) the exploration of aesthetic experiences in leadership is inherently subjective, which may lead to varying interpretations and applications across different contexts; 3) the primarily focus on the positive aspects of aesthetic sensitivity in leadership, potentially overlooking situations where aesthetic judgement might conflict with other critical factors such as ethical considerations or operational efficiency.

The perspectives of future research related to the above considerations may be: 1) testing the theoretical insights provided, e.g., examining how leaders in different sectors utilise aesthetic judgement in practice; such studies could involve qualitative methods, such as case studies or interviews, to capture the richness of aesthetic experiences in leadership; 2) verifying potential tensions between aesthetic judgement and other decision-making criteria, such as ethical standards or cost-effectiveness; 3) analysing the impact of cultural differences on the perception and application of aesthetics in leadership: how leaders operating in multicultural environments may face unique challenges in integrating aesthetic sensitivity into their decision-making processes.

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