Understanding the experiences of 'not knowing'

Vijayta Doshi

Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad

Neharika Vohra

Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad

Pradyumana Khokle

Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad

Rajeev Sharma

Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad

Abstract

'Knowing' is respected, recognized, and rewarded. Amidst the emphasis on 'knowing', there is hardly any space for 'not knowing'. Especially those occupying leadership roles are demanded and expected to be 'knowing'. This arises from the influence of the dominant paradigm of leadership which projects leaders as larger than lives and having transformational magic wands. The study explores the experiences of employees in leadership roles in situations of 'not knowing'. We used constructivist grounded theory methodology. Thirty two participants were interviewed in-depth. Our findings capture the essence of the experiences of 'not knowing' in leadership around the core theme- sense of disruption. The sense of disruption was articulated by the participants by expressing 'feeling uneasy' and 'dilemma of unveiling'. Participants' experiences were shaped by leadership notions, expectations, past experiences, relationship with others, and organizational support.

Keywords: 'not knowing', leadership, constructivist grounded theory

Understanding the experiences of 'not knowing'

(Not) Knowing

'Knowing' is the dominant discourse in organizations (Ungar, 2008). 'Knowing' is rewarded, recognized, and respected. Indeed 'knowing' is important in understanding or analyzing a situation or a task or a problem. Amidst the emphasis on 'knowing', 'not knowing' hardly finds a space (French, 2001; Ungar, 2003). 'Knowing' begins with 'not knowing' (Robert, 2012). This signifies a temporal relationship, in the sense, things which are known presently might not be known earlier. Despite the intertwined relationship between 'knowing' and 'not knowing', the emphasis has been on 'knowing'.

A closely related term is ignorance. Smithson (1985), a sociologist called for a social theory of ignorance ("nonknowledge") when the idea of a knowledge age was emerging. He highlighted the neglect of ignorance as a research topic. He was of the opinion that 'sociology of knowledge requires sociology of ignorance'. Ignorance may not be negative or destructive, however, ignorance of ignorance or 'meta-ignorance', as Smithson (1985) calls it, may be deadly. On the same lines, Unger (2008) critically argued for the need of ignorance management. The call of Smithson and Unger has remained unaddressed. Only a handful of researchers have carried out studies in this area, that too conceptually (refer to Israilidis et al., 2012; Roberts, 2012). We aim to fill this gap in the literature.

The usefulness of acknowledging 'not knowing' has been undermined in management literature. Acknowledgement of 'not knowing' may be beneficial in learning, creativity, innovation, and change process (French, 2001; Roberts and Armitage, 2008; Roberts, 2012; Smithson, 1993). Various religious and philosophical texts also propagate the idea of living with 'not knowing' in one or the other form. *Sunyata* in Buddhism and *emptiness* in Taoism believe in the creative power of emptiness (Smart & Hetch, 2007). Likewise, 'S*amyak jnana'* and '*samyak*

darshana' in Jainism promote the idea of living with 'not knowing' where *'samyak'* means proper/ unbiased, *'jnana'* means knowledge and *'darshana'* means perception.

Unfortunately, 'not knowing' is rarely seen in a positive light. Roberts and Armitage (2008) said that 'not knowing' is seen as inadequacy, uneducated, unsophisticated, and unintelligent.

'Not knowing' in leadership

There is a stream of literature which considers leadership to be oppressive and discusses, mainly, about the power imbalance in favour of leaders. This includes the work on the dark side of leadership or domination of leaders (Collinson, 2005), bad leadership (Kellerman, 2004), abusive leadership (Weaver and Yancy, 2010) and the end of leadership (Kellerman, 2012). On the contrary, there is a stream of literature which questions- Are leaders really powerful (as often construed in dominant and authoritative sense)? It presents the idea that leadership is not always about imbalance of power in the favour of leaders (Heifetz, 1996). This stream of literature puts forth the powerlessness of leadership (Humphrey et al., 2008; Humphrey 2012) as well as the demands and expectations that come with leadership roles such as those of being an expert and always having answers to questions (Heifetz, 1996). The study partially draws from the latter stream of literature, but is not limited to it.

French (2001) and Simpson et al. (2002) propagate the idea of 'negative capability' in leadership. In situations where one does not know about an issue, the phenomenon of acknowledging 'not knowing', continuing to feel anxiety (discomfort) of 'not knowing, and grappling with the issue is termed *'negative capability'* by John Keats in his poem (Ou, 2009). Acknowledgement of 'not knowing' creates a space for 'reflective inaction' which may not only prevent mindless actions/ reactions, but also allow emergence of new ideas (Simpson et al.,

2002). Negative capability, mainly, is about having the agency to acknowledge 'not knowing' and grapple with it.

The role of structure can't be denied in the situations of 'not knowing'. In the absence of organizational and social support, workplace expectations, and norms, acknowledgement of 'not knowing' may become difficult to acknowledge or explicate or pursue for those occupying leadership roles.

The present paper is based on a larger study which explored the experiences of 'not knowing' in workplace situations among people in leadership and consulting roles. Two core themes that captured the experiences of 'not knowing' in workplace situations were, 'sense of disruption' and 'attempt towards reinstating'. To be able to provide a concise presentation of the findings in a limited space, this paper focuses on the core theme, 'sense of disruption', in leadership roles.

Methodology

Bryman (2004) said that leadership studies have been later adopters of qualitative research. In the last decade, there have been some qualitative studies in leadership research (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Collinson, 2005, Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Ford, 2010). However, it is still in minority and offers a research potential. Parry (1998) said that if grounded theory is applied rigorously, it can overcome the deficiencies in the mainstream leadership studies.

The study aims to explore the experiences of 'not knowing' among people in leadership role in workplace situations. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2007) methodology has been used. Grounded theory is rooted in the symbolic interactionist school of

sociology. Symbolic interactionism focuses on how people comprehend an event (Blumer, 1998) and how the comprehension is shaped by social interaction (Mead, 1934). The present study is also interested in exploring how people in leadership roles experience the workplace situations in which they have the sense of 'not knowing' and the way their social interactions shape their meanings of situations. Therefore, grounded theory suits the aim of the study.

Snowball sampling technique was used to identify potential participants. The participants included people working in for profit organizations[1] who were either occupying or had occupied leadership roles[2] in their career. Potential participants were approached through electronic mail and in some cases over telephone. Interview method was adopted to collect data. Interviews were in-depth, face to face, and one-to-one. Before the interview, participants were asked to read and sign the letter of informed consent in order to show their agreement to participate in the study. The letter of informed consent explained the aim of the study, assurance of confidentiality of participant's identity, ability to withdraw participation from the study, and permission for voice recording the interaction. Therefore, ethical guidelines pertaining to social science research (Patton, 2002) were followed.

Interviews were semi-structured as enough flexibility was needed to explore different experiences of different people. An interview guide was prepared, but the researcher never used to read the questions from the guide. The guide was used to ensure that all relevant area of the enquiry was covered. The questions were framed and constructed during the conversation according to the experiences of the participants. The interviews usually began by asking the participants to briefly introduce themselves and explain their job profile. During the interviews, the participants narrated certain experiences that gave them a sense of 'not knowing'. The meaning of 'not knowing' was assigned by the participants themselves and accordingly, they

chose to narrate relevant incidents from their past workplace experiences. The participants were

encouraged to talk about how they felt being in the situation and the way they dealt with it. The

focus of the inquiry was psychosocial feelings, thoughts, behaviors, assumptions, and social

processes (Ford, 2010). Participants were also asked if their past experiences had in any way

shaped their approach and outlook towards the situations that gave them a sense of 'not

knowing'.

Sample

Thirty two participants working in MNCs in India in Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Delhi, and

Mumbai were interviewed over a period of four months starting from April till July, 2013. Out of

them, twenty five were males and eight were females. The sample size was deemed appropriate

based on data saturation. Saturation is that stage of data collection where no 'new' insight

relevant to the phenomenon seems to emerge from the data. This saturation is not same as

witnessing repetition of the same events or stories (Charmaz, 2006). Saturation occurs when

gathering fresh data no longer sparks 'new' theoretical insights nor reveal 'new' properties of the

theoretical categories. Determining sample size in qualitative research is a matter of judgment

and experience in evaluating the quality of the information collected against the uses to which it

will be put (Patton, 2002).

The final sample had participants from retail, telecom, IT and services, banking,

insurance, aviation, furniture & appliances, healthcare, and real estate. The participants belonged

to different functions such as consulting, business analysis, project management, general

management, designing, strategic management, personnel and administration, marketing, and

learning & development. Work experience of the participants ranged from over six years to thirty

five years in MNCs.

Ensuring rigor

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were ensured by following the

techniques suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). *Credibility* was taken care of by cross

checking the interpretation with a co-coder (more detail is provided under data analysis). Some

participants were contacted again for seeking clarifications about their intended meaning.

Transferability in qualitative research is about providing thick description to enable those

interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated

as a possibility. The study attempts to provide a thick description of the experiences of

participants. For *dependability*, inquiry audit much like fiscal audit was conducted by a co-coder

and the co-researchers, who were engaged for investigator triangulation. *Confirmability* like

dependability was established through audit trail comprising of auditing the raw data by the co-

coder, and synthesis discussion with the co-coder as well as the co-researchers.

Data analysis

Data collection and data analysis were concurrent and iterative processes (Charmaz, 2006;

Gibbs, 2007). Interviews were transcribed. Transcript files were given identification like P1, P2,

P3, and so on, P meaning the participant number. Transcribed interviews were read carefully and

analyzed using coding manually. Coding helped isolate codes and themes (Patton, 2002). Types

of coding suggested by Charmaz (2006) such as initial coding, focused coding and theoretical

coding were used.

       Phase 1: Initial coding

The idea behind initial coding was to remain close to the data. In this coding phase, along with the first author, another coder was engaged to ensure that a) the codes were unbiased b) more theoretical possibilities were explored c) no idea was missed out. The co-coder was paid for coding on per transcript basis. The coder was provided with training, following which the researcher and the co-coder coded the transcripts separately. Both the coders had prior practical experience of working in qualitative research projects and had attended courses on qualitative research methodology. Also, they had prior experience of working in for profit organizations, therefore, could relate to the phenomenon. The coders adopted line by line coding technique. During initial coding, preference was given for in-vivo codes, the terms used by the participants (Charmaz, 2006). They helped in preserving participants' meanings of their views and actions. After coding some transcripts, the coders would meet to cross check their understanding about the codes as to why and how they were different or similar. The discussions helped in reflexivity about the phenomenon and reduced the bias based on the past experiences or literature review. Initial coding and data collection were concurrently done.

For illustration of initial coding consider the following example. Initial codes are in bold.

> Participant: I had been given a responsibility of leading three different project managers who had four to five years of work experiences in this company (**leading project managers with work experience**). First thing was that I had no knowledge of project management (**no knowledge of the area**) and they were deeply ingrained in that methodology, they were pretty good in that and were project management professionals (**juniors having strong grip of methodology**). So, their knowledge of this was almost complete (**juniors having complete knowledge**) and I had to guide them without having any information about that (**awkward guiding juniors without any knowledge about the area**). That was a big challenge for me.

Researcher: How was it like? What were you feelings and thoughts being in that role?

Participant: So, in the first meeting I did not say quite much just a motivational introduction (**first meeting with juniors, not much to say**). I was given a lot of sheets and numbers and things to be worked on (**provided with lot of information and work**). So, instead of talking about that, the first discussion was about motivating them, communication with client and following them up (**covering up not knowing**). So, went through..I had actually asked them what is the biggest problem in the project. If I had known I should have been able to know from those sheets but since I did not understand I posed this challenge to them only (**hiding 'not knowing' by posing it as a challenge to juniors**).

Phase 2: Focused coding

The next step was focused coding which involved some abstraction of the codes. Focused coding involved clubbing and dropping off some initial codes. Clubbing of the codes was done based on the similarity in the idea of the codes. The decision about retaining or dropping codes was based on a) the relevance of the code to the phenomenon of interest or the initial codes which made the most analytical sense to categorize the data b) constant comparison between the data/ transcripts gave an idea about the emerging pattern of the codes.

Continuing with the aforementioned example, focused coding is illustrated below:

Participant: I had been given a responsibility of leading three different project managers who had four to five years of work experiences in this company. First thing was that I had no knowledge of project management (**technical 'not knowing'**) and they were deeply ingrained in that methodology, they were pretty good in that and were project management professionals. So, their knowledge of this was almost complete and I had to guide them without having any information

about that **(awkward leading others without knowing about the area)**. That was a big

challenge for me.

Researcher: How was it like? What were you feelings and thoughts being in that role?

Participant: So, in the first meeting I did not say quite much just a motivational introduction. I

was given a lot of sheets and numbers and things to be worked on. So, instead of talking about

that, the first discussion was about motivating them, communication with client and following

them up. So, went through..I had actually asked them what is the biggest problem in the project.

If I had known I should have been able to know from those sheets but since I did not understand I

posed this challenge to them only (**hiding 'not knowing' by posing it as a challenge to juniors**).

Phase 3: Theoretical coding

Theoretical coding allowed inter-linkage of the codes identified in focused coding stage. It

involved further abstraction of the data.

For illustrating theoretical coding, let's pick up one of focused codes from the above

illustration- **hiding 'not knowing' by posing it as a challenge to juniors.** Theoretical coding

involved answering questions like- Why was there an attempt to hide 'not knowing'? Under what

circumstances or conditions the participants were hiding their 'not knowing'? Was hiding the

only approach or there were other approaches? The answers to the questions were integrated to

provide them a coherent and comprehensive explanation.

The data and codes were constantly compared with each other to refine the codes. Re-

reading the data and questioning the codes and themes added to the richness of the findings. The

entire process was never linear. Once the themes were identified again the transcripts were read

to ensure that the themes were capturing the essence of the phenomenon. The researcher also

discussed the emerging themes with the co-coder and the co-researchers. Moving back and forth between the data, codes, and themes gave a sense of core-themes.

Findings

Core theme: Sense of disruption

Although there was consensus among the participants about the prevalence of situations of 'not knowing', but when it came to dealing with 'not knowing', their experiences were characterized by a sense of disruption. The term 'disruption' has been used deliberately as opposed to 'loss' because disruption connotes 'temporary' while loss implies 'permanence'. It wasn't a loss because there was an 'attempt towards reinstating' the equilibrium (another core theme of the study not included in this paper because of limited space). Participants articulated their sense of disruption by expressing *'feeling uneasy'* because of 'disruption of self image', 'disruption of identity', feeling of 'being sandwiched' as well as *'dilemma of unveiling'* comprising of 'subtle way of communicating', 'keeping the veil intact', and 'unveiling directly'.

Before discussing the above mentioned themes that are subsumed under the core theme, the context of the findings related to participants' experiences of being in 'not knowing' situations are briefly described.

Understanding participants' meaning and context of 'not knowing'

According to the participants, meaning of 'not knowing' was being in a situation where one was 'not understanding' or being in an 'unfamiliar' situation or being in an 'apparently familiar' situation or where one was left 'confused' or 'uninformed'. Participants characterized the situations of 'not knowing' with terms like 'lack of knowledge', 'confusion', 'complexity',

'unexpected, 'am I in the wrong place', 'ambiguity', 'unclarity', 'challenge', 'problem', 'block', 'uncertainty', 'grey area', 'repeated failure', and 'mess'. 'Not knowing' was construed by participants as situations in which either they had 'no clue at all' or had a vague idea. 'Not knowing' was construed by participants as situations in which either they had "no clue at all" or had a "slight idea". So, in some instances, the distinction between 'knowing' and 'not knowing' existed in black and white, while in other cases, experiences of 'knowing partially' or 'not knowing fully' were narrated as 'not knowing' situations.

Irrespective of the roles or hierarchy or functions or industry, the participants mentioned about experiencing the situations of 'not knowing' 'day in and day out', 'as recent as today', 'commonly', 'daily' or 'everyday'. Participants even generalized the occurrence of the phenomenon saying that 'not knowing' was something that 'happens to anyone and everyone' in workplace.

Experiences of 'not knowing' were in the context of situations such as occupying job in a new industry (P10, P14, P15, P21), being in an uncertain business environment (P3, P7, P18, P30), occupying a new role in same company (P5, P17, P21) or different company (P2, P9, P32), leading a new team (P1, P5, P8, P16, P28, P31), doing a new task (P1, P9, P11), dealing with a new/ old client (P13, P20, P23), dealing with a new product/ technology (P24), dealing with a colleague (P19) and managing a boss (P4, P29). In certain cases, sense of 'not knowing' occurred while facing a difficulty in understanding a situation or a problem or an issue. In others, sense of 'not knowing' was about finding out the solution. In some instances sense of 'not knowing' occurred when things had gone wrong.

> The bank which I was working for had undergone a merger along with other bank. We were told
> to derive an IT strategy for integrating the banks. The big bosses had told and now it was for us to

do. For me doing this was totally new because in my company there was nobody who had done it or we could talk to in the sense that we were devising an IT strategy. (P1)

Given that 'not knowing' was common, it may be assumed that the situations they picked up to narrate were crucial from their point of view. Although 'not knowing' situations had involvement of an individual or a team or an organization, the experiences and feelings were explored from the individual's point of view as to how he /she felt being in that situation of 'not knowing'.

Theme 1: Feeling uneasy

The participants' feelings of being in the situations of 'not knowing' were 'helplessness', 'incompetence', 'frustration', 'choking', 'stress', 'restless', 'anxiety', 'irritated', 'unpleasant', 'embarrassment', 'disappointment', 'frightening', 'shock', 'fear of failure', and 'scaring the hell out of me'.

> There was constant fear that I am doing this, I am on the right track, is this how it is done, will I end up hurting a lot of people by rolling this out, is this going to be a welcome thing or uncertainty, it could have failed..what else..anxiousness obviously comes with the doubt about.. about being able to perform or not perform. (P11)

As mentioned before, the participants were asked to narrate a phase/ situation/ task in their past or current job where they had the sense of 'not knowing'. Usually one or two such incidents were discussed in our entire conversation. It could be safely assumed that they recalled an incident or incidents which were crucial for them as they had to pick up only a few incidents workplace. Since the incidents were crucial, 'not knowing' in certain cases about what exactly

the problem was or how to deal with a situation or why there was constant failure, was causing the unpleasant feeling.

Exploring deeper into the uneasy feelings of 'not knowing', it emerged that such feelings stemmed from disruption of self image and identity as well as pressure of deadlines and organizational finances.

Disruption of self image

Self image in this study denotes 'How I see myself?' It is different from the psychological 'self image' and 'self-concept' (Stryker, 1980) in that it is dynamic rather than static.

Participants' 'self image' was formed from their past social experiences. The experiences of 'not knowing' shook that self. One of the participants who occupied a new role of leading a team had always been a topper in the past. She found it difficult to see oneself struggling to be an average performer in the new role. Self image in this case was – *being a topper*. Another participant said that she had always managed to get along with people at workplace in her career of 20 years, but here was one person whom she could not manage. She questioned her 'self'- *"I couldn't understand why I am not able to get along with this person when I have always managed it so well"*. Self image in this case was- *being able to manage people well*. In both the cases when things were not in congruence with the self, there was a sense of disruption of self. In the first case, the participant said 'I felt frustrated'. The participant in the second case expressed her disruption of self image as 'helplessness'. In another case, the participant said, 'human beings have inherent tendency to be seen as competent'. This was his way of saying that he always wanted to be seen as competent in job. Self image in this case was- *being competent*. He

further said that 'not knowing' somewhere implies 'being incompetent'. Therefore, 'not knowing' gave him a sense of disruption of self image and 'anxiety'. Another participant said that he loved 'challenges' in that particular situation of 'not knowing' he couldn't understand why he was not able to manage that challenge. Self image in his case was- *being able to manage challenges*. Some participants said that they had self image expectations or 'benchmark'. When one failed to meet those 'benchmarks', one felt 'disappointed' with self. Participants were buried under their self image expectations. One of the participants said that he had so much of work experience and still wasn't able to take a decision which was leading to the feeling of 'choking'. The common feeling across these participants was- My '*self*' has always been able to do it, but why not now?

Disruption of identity

Self and identity are seen as overlapping terms (Sveningssson and Alvesson, 2003). Some do not distinguish between the two for example Giddens (1991) talked about self- identity. Others see self as constituent of multiple identities (Stryker, 1980). 'Self' means 'Who am I'? The 'identity' used here is specific to the role one holds in an institution, such as, self as a mother or self as a leader or self as a consultant. Therefore, identity here denotes - Who am I as a consultant or leader?

Participants were found to assume expectations related to their identity as a leader or consultant. These assumptions were related to what others expected from them as a leader. The assumptions were formed from a) past experiences, b) reinforcement by their organizations, and c) in some cases were self construal.

While dealing with subordinates, participants had experienced subordinates relying on them for decisions or solutions. Moreover, some participants had seen that their boss always knew (or so it appeared to them) what needed to be done all the time, therefore, wanted to be like them. So, past experiences influenced their assumptions about their identity as a leader.

Some participants perceived organizations to be shaping their conduct, behavior, way of communication, and assumptions about the identity as a leader. A participant said that the day he entered the organization he was inducted to behave or speak in a certain manner with others. Likewise, the organizational arrangement of promoting a person to a leadership position implied that the person was either more experienced or more capable than others to supervise them. Such criteria of promoting people shaped their assumptions about their identity as a leader.

In certain cases, the assumptions about identity of a leader were self construed by the participants. For example, some participants while leading their team perceived themselves to be the one who had to be the navigator and motivator of the team. They worked with an assumption that the leader has to be the centre of responsibility and be answerable to the team members.

The following paragraphs discuss the participants' notion about leadership roles which were formed either through past experiences or reinforcement by their organizations or were self construed.

Leadership notions

From leader's point of view, participants had notions and implicit assumptions that leaders were 'expected to know' and leader had to behave like a 'fatherly figure' where one couldn't frighten others by expressing his 'not knowing'. A participant, director of a hospital, said that she treated her nurses as her 'darling daughters'. Participants said:

"as a leader you are looked at for answers" (P3)

"quick fix is expected from me..for subordinates the buck stops at me, they are unaware if the buck goes beyond me or not"(P18)

"My other managers, my medical superintendent, my nurse were dependent on me, how I will react" (P30)

Terms like 'father' and 'daughter' carried with them a sense of responsibility/ obligation towards team or department. Participants had aforementioned leadership notions, so felt that they were under an obligation to be by their team or department, and be responsible for them.

"you could take a stance that ok let me just move out and because I am in a grey area let me go to a place where I think that I have clear thought and clear path and settle myself there. That is the time you feel that how can I be so selfish about the entire gamut of things. I need to be with my organization which has given me opportunity at a time when I needed it most and my team requires me" (P18).

"It didn't feel very good because it (own behavior in situation of 'not knowing') impacted my team, me and everyone' performance so feeling was not good". (P19)

 This expectation built a pressure to update oneself constantly which was positive only until a point. One of the participants who was the President and Executive Director of a company said, 'one has to have a split personality as a leader'. On being asked to elaborate the meaning of split personality he added 'you are a role model, can't be expressing your actual feelings because then how can you motivate them (subordinates) to see them as a winning team' (P3). For him split personality meant expressing differently from how he was actually feeling. Amidst such implicit

theories held by the participants, 'not knowing' was discomforting for most of them. Expressing the pressure arising out of responsibility as a leader, one of the participants said:

> It was more like scared not for yourself actually that you are scared because there are.. in those days we had 5000- 6000 employees whose lives are going to get determined. One wrong decision of yours that they lose their jobs and you become just another airline or lose our competitive edge and all those dreams that we had planned for ourselves so it's a bit of fear, it is uncertainty, and you feel that you know some darkness is closing in on you. (P3)

Participants views may be concluded as: *Leaders are expected to know- I am a leader- I am expected to know- 'Not knowing' is in contradiction to my identity, therefore, causing its disruption.*

Majority of the participants were not happy with their identity of 'leader' as understood in conventional authoritative sense. Some participants felt that sometimes their image of a leader was a barrier in building rapport with others. One of the participants said that he did not like to be called a leader rather preferred being called a 'mentor'. A couple of participants said that they did not like to behave like a leader, meaning, someone who is not 'friendly', 'available', 'kind'. This showed that implicitly there were negative connotations attached with the term 'leader'. In a way, the notions of leadership were hindering leadership itself. The term 'leader' as propagated by the dominant paradigm in leadership studies brings with it a sense of heightened responsibility as was evident in the discourse of some of the participants who used the terms like "quick fix" solutions expected by others, "role model", "fatherly figure", and "darling daughters".

Being sandwiched

It was not just the disruption of self image and identity, participants also expressed how they felt stuck between 'not knowing' on one hand and deadlines and organizational finances on the other hand.

In some cases the deadlines were explicitly given by the organization while in others they were implicit. One of the participants said it was obvious that the task he was working on would have taken no longer than one month. He said, 'it wasn't a standard thing (explicit) but was given (implicit)' that it would not take more than a month. Another kind of pressure faced by the participants was in terms of the organizational finances involved in the situations of 'not knowing'. In some cases, participants felt that there was huge investment of money and budgetary constraints involved in the situation. They felt frustrated and at the same time were fearful about why things were not proceeding. In one of the cases, a participant said, 'most of the times you (as a leader) are left on your own. Especially in the last two changes I had, I was the business head and you are responsible for the P&L (profit and loss) of the business' (P17). Another participant said:

> We had been spending a lot of money and everytime we were going and asking them (seniors) money. It was like we were being told that you are spending extra, you are spending more than budgeted and if it doesn't happen still, it will be a very very difficult thing to digest for anyone. (P1)

Theme 2: Dilemma of unveiling

Participants, being in leadership roles, faced the dilemma of whether to unveil or disclose their 'not knowing' to others or not? Another dilemma was- how to disclose? Owing to the potential threat of further sense of disruption, in certain situations, the unveiling was in a subtle

way, in some there was direct unveiling- 'I don't know' and in certain situation the veil was kept intact. There seemed to be a sort of mental cost benefit analysis involved in participants' decision about whether to unveil their 'not knowing' or not.

Subtle way of communicating

Participants rarely said- I don't know. Participants used verbal communication tactfully. Most common way was to 'buy time', be it from the subordinates or bosses. Some of them used the phrase 'I will get back to you' or 'give me sometime' or 'please explain it to me'- learning about the issue while the subordinates explained. In some cases, the participants were found to be throwing up the issues of 'not knowing' as challenge to the subordinates themselves.

Keeping the veil intact

Some participants preferred keeping their 'not knowing' to themselves. This primarily happened in the cases where others did not know about participant's 'not knowing'. One of the participants said, 'when you have no clue you don't know whether something is fundamental or high level to ask and how would one look'. So, he said it was better to keep it to himself. Participants did not want to expose their 'not knowing' and cause further sense of disruption. Participants said that they would not go around saying that they didn't know. In such situations participants preferred being a 'silent spectator'.

Unveiling directly

In very few instances, participants were found to directly say or admit –I don't know. When either the 'not knowing' was exposed to others or others explicitly asked something

related to the area of participants' 'not knowing'. Only in some cases participants voluntarily admitted it.

Loss versus gain

Participants felt that by admitting 'not knowing' there were certain gains as well as losses. They assessed most of their instances from the point of view of contemplating losses versus gains.

The primary reasons for not admitting 'not knowing' directly emerged to be firstly, threat of cut throat competition and uncertainty about the hidden agenda of how it may be used against them. In one of the participant's words, 'It's a competitive situation. There is a growth prospect, there is politics involved and people compete (with) each other for that growth prospect' (P3). Secondly, ego of leadership which some of the participants candidly shared as a reason for not admitting their 'not knowing' directly.

Feeling of being judged and impressions being formed emerged to be some of the reasons for keeping 'not knowing' to self. Judgment and impression formation by others was seen as potential enhancers of disrupted self image and identity by the participants. Participants as leaders not only had to deal with their impression in front of subordinates, but also their seniors. 'I did not want to lose my next promotion because those people (seniors) would have judged me based on that. All that while I was able to create a good impression' said P1. Another participant said, 'you don't get the opportunity to meet the seniors daily so you want to put your best foot forward'.

Some participants mentioned that it was better to admit than beat around the bush because they did not want to lose credibility or be seen as someone who 'loose talked' because

they personally disliked people who loose talked. Participants said it was better to admit 'not knowing' than keep quite because if one was put in that situation it would be even more embarrassing and one would 'make much more an idiot of self'. Admitting 'not knowing' to others by making one's stance clear was more liberating for some participants instead of posing and calling for false expectations or/ and targets. One of the participants said that it was not about how he would be looked down by others on admitting 'not knowing' what mattered more was that if the organization was getting impacted negatively, it had to be communicated.

Past experiences

Past experiences of the participants had a great influence on their approach. Participants comfortable with directly admitting 'not knowing' had received positive reactions to acknowledgement of 'not knowing' in the past within the current or past organization. The environment seemed to play an important role. A participant said that if the environment was healthy, people are not judging, and are coming out of the way to help, 'asking is fun'. These participants on admitting 'not knowing' had received no frowning by others, proper training, opportunity to learn more, and grow in the organization. So, there had been a positive reinforcement of their behavior. With time these participants had realized that the consequences of admitting 'not knowing' were not bad. On the contrary, many participants mentioned that they were laughed at or frowned upon on admitting 'not knowing' to others in the past. A participant sharing his experience said 'they (peers) sensed that I goofed up. Most of them made mockery that I screwed up'. Another participant said 'It was not easy (to admit) because many times my boss was like this guy has studied from IIT (a reputed educational institute in India) and doesn't even know this. Many times this came out'. Therefore, the way participants felt or spoke in times of 'not knowing' was influenced by their past workplace experiences.

Relational ties with others

The extent of usage of tactics in verbal communication by the participants also varied depending upon the relationship with the person with whom they communicated. Participants said it was not easy to simply say- I don't know if the other person was not a close alley. A participant said that he was not comfortable with his new boss. The understanding between the two had not yet developed. He said he was not able to say that he wasn't able to do a task. 'So I never really went and said that I have difficulty. I asked him that I am doing something can you give ideas but not say that I was having difficulty or 'not knowing something' said P11.

Organizational lacuna

Some participants said that they could not admit 'not knowing' in public because of fear of embarrassment. They would admit their 'not knowing' to the relevant person in private whom they thought could help. Some participants mentioned about lack of such structure and system such as, one-on-one meetings, in their respective organization which otherwise would have helped them deal with the 'not knowing' situation. Some were of the opinion that the arrangement was in place but was never followed strictly.

For some participants leadership was a lonely journey where they were left on their own. In some participants' view when they occupied the leadership role nobody provided training, they were provided with broad guidelines and had to figure out on their own. Some participants also mentioned about lack of induction by the organization when they occupied leadership roles. Participants had experienced that there was an assumption that those occupying leadership roles didn't need induction since generally they were hired from the same industry. This led to difficulties for those who were from a different industry or had never worked in that vertical.

Discussion

We do not make any claims here about the effectiveness of acknowledgement of 'not knowing'. Rather, here we described a range of assumptions held, emotions felt, and behaviors exhibited by participants in situations of 'not knowing'. The experiences of participants related to 'not knowing' are captured by the core theme **sense of disruption**. 'Not knowing' was discomforting and difficult to admit in most of the instances.

An issue of disruption of self image and identity was observed. Self image and identity can be presented to others in a modified manner which is also known as impression management (Schlenker, 1980) or improvisation (Miner, Bassoff & Moorman, 2001). There were instances when participants were either embarrassed or feared embarrassment in their social interaction, therefore, were resorting to modifying saying/ not saying and expressing/ not expressing what they didn't know or how they felt. Likewise, their identity of a leader brought with it certain leadership notions that were inconsistent with 'not knowing', thereby, causing a sense of disruption. While some leaders were engaged in emotional labour to influence subordinates' moods and motivation (Humphrey et al., 2008), others were trying to save their face. Emotional labour captures only a small aspect of the experiences of 'not knowing'. The study further explored why one acknowledges/ admits or not acknowledges 'not knowing'? What were the implicit assumptions related to 'not knowing'? What shaped one's approach towards 'not knowing'?

The theoretical contribution of the study is in enhancing the understanding of the experiences of people in leadership roles in times of 'not knowing'. The study puts forth the importance of the phenomenon of 'not knowing' given its prevalence and relevance across

different types of situations. In the author's knowledge, there has been no such empirical study in the past.

Ignorance literature was found to be inadequate in addressing the experiences of 'not knowing'. The term ignorance and 'not knowing' appear synonymous. However, the way 'not knowing' has been interpreted by the participants was entirely different from the way Ungar (2008) and Roberts and Armitage (2008) conceptualized ignorance. They conceptualized ignorance as lack of knowledge arising out of *taking things for granted*. The experiences of 'not knowing' in the present study subsumed such kind of ignorance, but were not limited to it.

As far as the leadership literature is concerned, the study contributes to the qualitative research in leadership which is still in minority. The study addresses the call of Ford (2010) who said that there is a need for more reflexive approach to leadership, which pays attention to situations, events, ideas, social practices, and processes. A priori, the study did not take a stance that leadership involves the exercise of systematic influence or asymmetrical relationship of power by leaders. A potential powerfulness or powerlessness of leaders was allowed to emerge, as suggested by Alvesson and Spicer (2012). It was found that 'not knowing' situation is one such area where the power imbalance is not in favour of leaders rather in favour of those around. The study contributes to the literature by providing critical evidence against leaders as larger than life having a romanticized role (Meindl at al., 1985). The participants as leaders were not free agents who enjoyed power and privileges of their positions, but people with complex psychosocial tensions and anxieties. Ford (2010) recognized that such tensions and anxieties in leadership is an under-explored research area in organizations. Participants faced difficulty in 'doing leadership" (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003) in times of 'not knowing'. Further, the study provides argument against the notions that leadership is characterized by masculine (dominant)

connotations such as aggression and control (Collinson, 2005). Instead, the participants in times of 'not knowing' in leadership roles displayed feminized position characterized by submissiveness and confusion.

The study has practical implications for policy makers. The findings provide an evidence of presence (rather prevalence) of 'not knowing' situations at workplace. Practical implications can be drawn from the interpretation and understanding about the influence of presence/ absence of open structure & systems in the organization.

The study also has practical implications at social level. The way people behave and socialize with each other in the work place, influence others or get influenced by them. Leadership studies often fail to recognize that almost all leaders have a hierarchy above themselves as well as below (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). The study creates awareness by demonstrating the way other people sometimes create powerlessness for those in leadership roles.

We recognize that the study has the limitation of taking data only from those in the leadership roles and not from their subordinates or peers or seniors because of not having the opportunity to go to the field again. Further field work will focus on this aspect. The study is based on thirty two interviews with participants of particular profiles and backgrounds. Therefore, while interpreting the findings and applying them, appropriate judgment needs to be taken. Moreover, the study doesn't purport to trivialize the cases in which people make use of 'not knowing' situations to shirk work or procrastinate. All it says is that, it may be erroneous to see all situations of 'not knowing' in negative light.

It's high time to rethink a) Is 'not knowing' bad across situations? b) Are leaders powerful even in 'not knowing' situations?

Endnotes

[1]Public sector organizations were not included. Being more hierarchical, the leadership dynamics and the experiences of 'not knowing' may have differed in such organizations. This was not to exclude the variation in the experiences. Instead, it was to better capture the experiences within for-profit organizations.

[2]To be able to target our sample we had to have a criterion of including people who had experience of leading others. We acknowledge that leadership doesn't come from a position and rather is a role which could be attained by any person in the process of leadership. We further acknowledge that leadership is relational (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Leadership studies often fail to recognize that almost all leaders have a hierarchy above themselves as well as below (exceptions Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Ford, 2010). Besides, leadership activities are horizontal too (Gronn, 2002). Our inquiry therefore, was not limited to how participants experienced the situations of 'not knowing' as a leader, but also included the way their experiences were influenced by their relationship with their colleagues, subordinates as well as leaders.

References

Alvesson, M., & Spicer, A. (2012). A stupidity-based theory of organizations. *Journal of Management Studies, 49*(7), 1194–1220.

Alvesson, M., & Sveningsson, S. (2003). The great disappearing act: Difficulties in doing "leadership". *The Leadership Quarterly, 14,* 359- 381.

Blumer, H. (1998). *Symbolic Interactionism*. Berkely and LA, CA:University of California Press.

Bryman, A. (2004). Qualitative research on leadership: A critical but appreciative review. *The Leadership Quarterly, 15*(6), 729–769.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.

Charmaz, K. (2007). *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.

Collinson, D. (2005). Dialectics of leadership. *Human Relations, 58*(11), 1419- 1442.

Cunliffe, A., & Eriksen, M. (2011). Relational leadership. *Human Relations, 64*(11), 1425-1449.

Ford, J. (2010). Studying Leadership Critically: A psychosocial lens on leadership identities. *Leadership, 6*(1), 47- 62.

French, R. (2001). Negative capability: Managing the confusing uncertainties of change. *Journal of Organizational Change, 14*(5), 480- 492.

Gibbs, G. (2007). Analyzing qualitative data. London: Sage Publications.

Giddens, (1991). *Modernity and self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Heifetz, R. A. (1996). *Leadership without easy answers.* Universal book traders: New Delhi.

Humphrey, R. H. (2012). How do leaders use emotional labor? *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 33*, 740–744.

Humphrey, R. H., Pollack, J. M., & Hawver, T. H. (2008). Leading with emotional labor. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 23,* 151–168.

Kellerman, B. (2004). *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Miner, A. S., Bassoff, P., & Moorman, C. (2001). Organizational improvisation and learning: A field study. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 46*, 304-337.

Ou, L. (2009). Keats and negative capability. Continuum International Publishing Group: London.

Parry, K. W. (1998). Grounded theory and social process: A new direction for leadership research. *Leadership Quarterly*, *9*(1), 85-105

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Roberts, J. (2012). Organizational ignorance: Towards a managerial perspective on the unknown. *Management Learning, 0(0),* 1–22. DOI: 10.1177/1350507612443208

Roberts, J., & Armitage, J. (2008). The ignorance economy. *Prometheus, 26*(4): 335–354.

Simpson, P., French, R., & Harvey, C. (2002). Leadership and negative capability. *Human Relations, 55*(10), 1209- 1226.

Schlenker, B. R. (1980). *Impression Management: The Self-Concept, Social Identity, and Interpersonal Relations*. Monterey/California: Brooks/Cole.

Smart, N., & Hecht, R. (2007). Sac*red texts of the world: A universal anthology*. Great Britain: Quercus.

Smithson, M. (1985). Toward a social theory of ignorance. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 15*, 151–72.

Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic Interactionism: A Social Structural Version*. Plato Alto, CA: Benjamin/ Cummings.

Sveningsson, S., & Alvesson, M. (2003). Managing managerial identities. *Human Relations, 56*, 10, 1163–93.

Ungar, S. (2003). Misplaced Metaphor: A Critical Analysis of the 'Knowledge Society'. *Canadian Review of Sociology & Anthropology. 40,* 331–47.

Ungar, S. (2008). Ignorance as an under-identified social problem. *The British Journal of Sociology, 59*(2), 301-326.

Weaver, S. G., & Yancy, G. B. (2010). The impact of dark leadership on organizational commitment and turnover. Kravis Leadership Institute, *Leadership Review, 10, Summer*, 104 - 124.