Leadership in a Start-Up: Thought Leadership, Leading People and Propagating Entrepreneurial Mindsets

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Abstract. This article presents an in-depth qualitative research study of nine entrepreneurs. It explores their approaches to leadership as they develop their start-ups. With reference to the processes involved in envisioning and pioneering with new products and services in new markets, entrepreneurship is found to involve *thought leadership*. In addition, entrepreneurship requires *leading people* in a way that encourages entrepreneurial mindsets *throughout* the new firm so as to harness talent and skills that will shape and inform the offering and the overall vision for the firm. The paper includes the development of a theoretical model that exhibits the components involved in entrepreneurial leadership in the start-up context. It also outlines implications for practice that suggest that both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for recruits to a start-up are important. The key contributions of the research are that distribution of entrepreneurial mindsets throughout start-ups rather than traditional top-down approaches to leading, can facilitate meaningful and value-adding contributions in new entrepreneurial firms.

Keywords: leadership, entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial mindset, thought-leadership, leading people.

1. Introduction

Throughout discourse and research, leadership and entrepreneurship have long been linked and the purpose of this paper is to explore leadership amongst entrepreneurs in new start-ups. In particular, the paper explores how leadership is expressed and experienced by entrepreneurs, both as pioneers in markets and in terms of motivating the people they employ in the ventures they create; what Galloway (2022) refers to as *thought-leadership* and *leading people*, respectively. The former pioneering-oriented leadership amongst entrepreneurs is well explored in the literature (e.g., Rose et al., 2006) and there are clear links between this context of thought-leadership and the theorised 'entrepreneurial mindset' (Daspit et al., 2023). Alternatively, the latter mode of leadership – leading personnel in new ventures – is relatively less extensively explored (Ahmed and Harrison, 2023). This gap in the literature is pertinent given the relatively less

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secure employment a new venture may offer, with inherent lack of establishment and reputation, compared with older and larger organisations. The key contributions of this paper therefore include new data on entrepreneurship as an expression of *thought-leadership* characterised by individuals who exhibit entrepreneurial mindsets, and their experiences of *leading people* in new ventures; how they attract people to a relatively risky employment context and motivate and develop them to contribute optimally to the success of the entrepreneurial vision. To these ends, the paper reports an inductive qualitative study with nine new start-up entrepreneurs, and with reference to the theorised distinction between *thought-leadership* and *leading people* and to the theory of the *entrepreneurial mindset*, it explores how these entrepreneurs have demonstrated the ability to both envision and pioneer new offerings and to motivate others to contribute to the realisation of their entrepreneurial ambitions.

The paper proceeds as follows. First a brief summary of the extant literature that relates to leadership and entrepreneurship is presented. This concludes with the generation of two research questions and the following section describes the qualitative methodology deployed to explore them. Findings are presented in the next section, including the key themes that emerge, and these are explored further in the discussion section. The paper concludes with a summary of the contribution of the research and an illustration of a theoretical model of entrepreneurial leadership in start-ups.

2. Definitions and Terms

Both leadership and entrepreneurship are terms that have multiple definitions and interpretations. First, entrepreneurship can refer to any number of things, including the creation of a new organisations (be that self-employment, micro- and any other size of enterprise) (Bygrave, 1994) often via tenacity and clever use of resources (Sarasvathy, 2001). It can also refer to a strategic orientation within a firm, usually involving innovation-based growth aspirations (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). Elsewhere, entrepreneurship is associated with a set of personal qualities of an individual who may or may not own an organisation at all (McClelland, 1961). This is consistent with the idea that, regardless of place within an organisation, the entrepreneur has a specific set of qualities (Fonseca et al., 2001) and in particular, has an 'entrepreneurial mindset' (Kuratko et al., 2021). Daspit et al. (2023: p. 17) define the entrepreneurial mindset as involving creativity, persistence and autonomy, enabling an individual "to create value by recognizing and acting on opportunities, making decisions with limited information, and remaining adaptable and resilient in conditions that are often uncertain and complex". When applied to an individual these are the qualities of an entrepreneur (Galloway and Kelly, 2009).

With an inconsistency similar to definitions of entrepreneurship, leadership can refer to several types of phenomena. According to Harrison et al. (2016), it can refer to an ability to ideate uniquely, pioneer, and see and do things in new and innovative ways. There is no requirement for there to be a pre-established set of followers to lead – only that the leadership activities result in followership of some kind, be that by influencing how people act in the future, the beliefs they hold, etc. In organisations though, where there are others involved, insight and decisions will only take you so far. Leading in these contexts has to involve also the ability to influence others to contribute. Thus leadership can also refer to the more practical application of motivating and engaging people so that they will conduct themselves in ways commensurate with some overarching organisational aims. Galloway (2022) refers to the two types of leading as thought leadership and leading people. Thought leadership is defined as "envisioning new ideas and solutions … pioneering and embracing development and change", while leading people involves "communicating those ideas … and engaging and influencing people so that they contribute effort towards achieving their realisation" (p. 9). The distinction is summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Thought leadership and Leading people (source: Galloway, 2022, p. 10)

Thought Leadership	Leading people
Pioneers new ideas, new approaches to doing things, new process, products, services. Envisions a different (better) future and communicates that, most often with passion and authenticity.	Advocates the vision and values of the organisation or cause. Leads people by influencing behaviours in context so that they contribute effort. Models and tools are useful for leading.

Bringing the concepts of entrepreneurship and leadership together, Daspit et al. (2023) refer to entrepreneurial leadership as the application of the entrepreneurial mindset in a new organisation; entrepreneurial leadership is exhibited by entrepreneurial founder leaders. As per Figure 1, this entrepreneurial *thought leadership* involves independence and imagination. It is most often understood to be an ability to perceive an opportunity to add value, to conceive an outcome of that opportunity, and involves the application of tenacity and ingenuity to create the conditions by which the opportunity may be realised. This is the entrepreneurial 'vision' described in countless studies of entrepreneurial start-ups (Mintzberg et al., 1998; Gupta et al., 2004; Witt, 2007). According to Bygrave and Zacharakis (2004), the entrepreneur brings together knowledge and resources to create the organisation that will realise the vision. In many studies this is conceptualised via an effectuation theory-informed lens whereby entrepreneurs bring together in a creative and tenacious way the resources that will enable the new venture (Sarasvathy, 2001; Perry et al., 2012). This inevitably includes recruiting and leading people in a new organisation, and as such, Gupta et al. (2004) note that entrepreneurial leadership thus involves both envisioning of value-adding opportunities *and* engaging others to participate in the activities

required to realise them; what Galloway (2022) refers to as *thought-leadership* and *leading people*. These two elements of leadership as a part of the entrepreneurial process are extrapolated further in the next section.

3. Entrepreneurs and Leadership

Popular ideas about entrepreneurs often evoke an economically heroic figure, individual and independent (Hessels et al., 2008; Tedmanson et al., 2012). This is congruent with the underpinning notions about *thought leadership* – new ideas, different solutions, pioneering and innovative envisioning are often the properties of a single individual. However, idea refinement can also be a team sport, with countless studies identifying iteration and feedback as central to the development and refinement of opportunities (Reis, 2011; Browaeys and Fisser, 2012; Ramoglou and Tsang, 2016; Kimjeon and Davidsson, 2022). In addition, the commercial environment is complex and dynamic, and for new ideas and new organisations to survive and flourish, they need the people in them to interact and engage within this milieu. This is virtually impossible for one individual (Fitzsimons, 2016). So, while the entrepreneur as a visionary may (rightly or wrongly) conjure a solitary figure, the entrepreneur as a start-up founder will only prevail within a team that is inspired and engaged to participate and make contribution, and that requires that the entrepreneur leads in a way that will enable entrepreneurship *within* the new organisation. Kuratko et al. (2021: p. 1681) note that the entrepreneurial mindset "resides within each of us." That being the case, an entrepreneurial mindset is not necessarily exclusive to the founding entrepreneur in an organisation. The entrepreneurship literature is relatively silent on this, and particularly on the question of *how* an entrepreneur might lead so as to encourage entrepreneurial mindsets within a new venture (Ahmed and Harrison, 2023). The leadership literature has some utility here though. Transformational and person-based approaches to leading people (Bass and Avolio, 1990; Bass, 1998; Antonakis, 2012) seem implied for example. So too are approaches to leadership that present it as relational and social (such as Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995, with Leader Member Exchange Theory and later works on the relational qualities of leadership such as Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). Also, of potential utility here is knowledge on leadership that proposes the importance of sharing and distributing leadership (Pearce and Conger, 2003; Denis et al., 2012; Fitzsimons, 2016), representing a move away from understanding thriving organisations to be characterised as having idealised solitary figures of entrepreneurial leadership, to entrepreneurial mindsets being facilitated *throughout* organisations (Daspit et al., 2023).

   At a practice level, evidence of dispersed leading (entrepreneurial or otherwise) in commercial organisations is limited though and it remains for the large part somewhat abstract and academic. What empirical work there is includes

case studies in Galloway et al. (2009) and Manz et al. (2009) of strategies to distribute leadership in established organisations, and in Kuratko (2007), Darling et al. (2007) and Harrison (2018) in new firms. It has been observed in these latter studies that inclusive entrepreneurial leadership in a start-up requires buy-in and buy-in requires the communication of the vision and ongoing assertion of its value. Consistent with modern theorising on transformational and relational leadership, entrepreneurs must therefore lead people in ways that are perceived to serve the interlinked interests of organisation and individual. However, resonant with the Full Range of Leadership Model (FRLM) that proposes that modern leadership practice is both transformational *and* transactional (Avolio and Bass, 2002; Antonakis et al., 2003), at a pragmatic level in the commercial world, people work for pay and other transactional rewards. In a start-up these may be less compelling (or less abundant) and joining a start-up may therefore be riskier and more precarious than other types of employing situation, precisely because the venture is new and the offering not established in the market. In practice this presents a key challenge for the founder entrepreneur: the vision must incite engagement and action, but competitive financial returns and job security are likely to be elusive, at least in the short term. The promise of deferred rewards in exchange for investment of time and effort may have an effect, but in the main, in the everyday working existence of a start-up, leading people involves inspiring and motivating, often without levels of transactional power comparable with other options in the labour market.

4. A Research Agenda

The preceding has highlighted gaps in understanding leadership in entrepreneurial start-ups. In summary, drawing from conceptualisations of *thought-leadership* and *leading people*, it seems clear that an entrepreneur starting a new venture needs to be both. While the theorised entrepreneurial mindset is antecedent for that entrepreneurial leader there is implication that entrepreneurial mindset may have wider applicability throughout a start-up, and a key role of the founder entrepreneur is extracting that value from the people recruited to the new organisation. This implies transformational and relational approaches to leading as appropriate, but at the same time, a founder entrepreneur must also mitigate and/or compensate for the risks inherent for employees who join an unproven venture, often in a new and unpredictable market.

The research that follows engages with these issues by exploring the experiences of nine new start entrepreneurs. In particular the research asks:

a. How (if at all) have the start-up entrepreneurs in the sample motivated people to contribute and support the vision?
b. How do these start-ups compete with other forms of employment?

The methods used to explore these questions are presented in the next section.

5. Methodology

To explore the ways in which entrepreneurs lead in a start-up situation, the research focuses on nine cases of entrepreneurship. The nine cases were selected using a convenience sampling approach that applied two key criteria: that the firm was started in the last two years, and that it was entrepreneurial. As such, the entrepreneurs explored in this study comply with the definition in Bygrave and Zacharakis (2004: p. 2) as individuals "who perceive an opportunity and create an organization to pursue it … [involving] all the functions, activities, and actions associated with [that]". They also represent the entrepreneurial mindset in that they exhibit creativity, persistence and autonomy to create value, as per Daspit et al. (2023), and continue to do so by their ongoing (and explicitly asserted) pursuit of growth for their new firms, as per Lumpkin and Dess (1996). In each of the cases included in this study, entrepreneurial development has required the input of different stakeholders, including new staff, and indeed, in each case, the entrepreneurial opportunity could not be realised without the support and engagement of others. In this sense then, the study also explores leadership amongst entrepreneurs from a perspective informed by Galloway (2022) in that both *thought leadership* and *leading people* are treated as distinct leadership expressions.

Table 1 outlines some key information about each case in the sample. The heterogeneity of the sample was a deliberate strategy to explore for commonality and divergence of themes across different start-up contexts. This and the use of cases studies is a common means by which to explore the finer details of phenomena in complex contexts (Yin, 2014). The aim of the case study approach was to explore in detail the practices of leadership in small firms and that had informed the choice of qualitative data gathering using documents and first-hand in-depth interviews. Specifically, background information on each entrepreneur and their firm was collated using documentary sources supplied by the entrepreneur or obtained from online public information. In addition, each founding entrepreneur was interviewed online just before or during the Covid-19 pandemic in the period 2020-2021 and these interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Questions posed were informed by the literatures on leadership and entrepreneurship but allowed also for new information to emerge via participants' reflections in their unique circumstances (Stake, 1995); what Bertaux (1981) calls 'their stories'.

Analysis of the data was informed by the literature on narratives and various themes emerged. These themes were coded as per the process outlined in Miles et al. (2014) of *data reduction, data presentation* and *data explanation*, assisted by the use of NVivo software to enhance representativeness and rigour (Johnson et al., 2020).

In the following section, findings from the cases are presented. These findings comprise a snapshot of individual entrepreneurs' unique experiences,

perspectives and approaches to leadership. Yet between them, they identify there are issues common to leading in a new start-up and these inform how we may better understand how entrepreneurs lead and engage people to contribute their best efforts to the achievement of the founder's vision and ambitions.

Table 1. Summary participant information

Founder ID (all pseudonyms)	Offering	Start-up stage	Number in team (excluding founder)
Lynn	Education & training	Trading 2 years	4
Tom	Data analytics	Pre-trading start-up	2
Christine	Events & hospitality	Trading 2 years	7
Ken	Financial services	Trading 1.5 years	6
Carol	Business services	Trading 2 years	16
Anne	Consumer services	Trading 0.5 years	3
Eddie	Medical tech	Prototype testing	3
Graham	Medical tech	Prototyping	4
Karl	Education & training	Trading 2.5 years	4

6. Findings

a. How (if at all) have the start-up entrepreneurs in this sample motivated people to contribute and support the vision?

Findings relating to the first research question evidence much use of others to refine and shape the product or service idea and the direction and quality of the business. Both systematic and more intuitive practices are observable.

First, Graham expresses a highly strategic approach. In his case, the essential technical skills to develop his medical tech idea were missing, so he actively sought partners who would be able to realise it. Graham was similarly systematic in identifying others to bring with him into his start-up:

"*The first thing I did was do an internal audit, the areas I was strong in, including the hard skills but also the soft skills – and the areas where there were clear gaps. I did lots of research to build a picture of the types of people we needed in the team – not just people I might like and identify with, but the skills-sets we needed. I was really analytic about it to get that range so we could develop the product and the business*"

Graham also applied this systematic approach to recruiting contractors to the business:

"*They have to share our passion and be active and insightful in the industry. We've done this with designers, lawyers, accountant, IP firms. It's a long process but it means we have a diversified team*"

These notions of passion and enthusiasm were evidenced amongst the other entrepreneurs too. In her training firm, Lynn, for example, refers specifically to the need to convey an excitement about the idea and solicit direct engagement and emotional ownership amongst others.

"*I discuss challenges with them and encourage them to find solutions. So as a team we find ways to crack things and come up with ideas. They are not just blindly following me, they also feel like they are contributing and that is important… I think as a leader you have to build intrinsic trust and you have to share the vision. I mean you bring the idea to them, but they also chip in and then they own the idea too. So everyone feels that sense of ownership so they will contribute more and they feel that they can flourish and feel proud of the things they add and do. And you have to give them the recognition of the value of their contributions so they feel pride and want the business to do well. It requires respect and trust and my role is to help them succeed* " (Lynn).

Anne in consumer services similarly identifies the importance of the input of staff for developing an investor-ready proposition, beyond the initial identification of the idea:

"*The design of the business plan was done with the new staff. They really helped refine the proposition by researching and their opinions on how that research should shape the idea was invaluable*" (Anne).

Again, Anne's staff feel some ownership of the idea and that has encouraged commitment to making it work.

Eddie's story with his medical devices firm is similar, but in his case, rather than inform the product itself, the consultative approach for new staff informed the market trajectory of the firm. Eddie started his business with a partner – a young man like himself, freshly graduated from engineering school. The idea for the device was aimed at preventing skeletal injuries from impacts and initially these two young men sought to target sports professionals. Upon taking on two further members of staff – an older man with children and a young woman they had graduated with but who had a particular interest in equestrian sports – new information was instantly injected. First, the older man stressed that preventing sports injuries was the top priority for parents and organisations such as schools that have a duty of care for children who are learning contact sports. Second, the women noted the utility of the product for types of sports and activities that the founders had not considered. These included equestrian sports, but the effect of this suggestion acted to widen further the whole team's consideration of the value, utility and alternative applications of the original product.

The evidence throughout all nine cases is that while the founder entrepreneur had come up with the original idea, the refinement of it, what was eventually offered to the market, and the form of the organisations created, were all very much consequences of wider team efforts where entrepreneurial inputs were both facilitated and encouraged to generate a sense of shared ownership and

achievement. How the founder entrepreneurs in the sample were able to attract, retain and develop these inputs in a competitive labour market is explored next.

b. How have the start-ups competed with other forms of employment?
Findings relating to the second research question referred to two broad themes: communication and rewards.

First, the communication of the vision or idea in a meaningful and engaging way was noted by all participants. In each case this was identified as key to engaging stakeholders and recruiting staff. The testimonies of Tom and Lynn are illustrative:

> "*I didn't have to go out and recruit anyone, they all came to me. Really, they came knocking at the door asking if we can work together. In this start-up situation you can't treat them as employees anyway because it's all new and they have to come on the journey with you. You do need some chemistry. But most important is that they buy into the idea. If they don't they won't come*" (Lynn).

> "*Understanding the vision of the founder is what gets people interested in working for a start-up. They buy into that vision and want to work towards it. It is so important its clear and well communicated because nobody will work in a firm if they are not really sure what it does. On the other hand, if they really believe in it, they'll come to build this thing with you*" (Tom).

Lynn stated also the need to maintain ongoing positivity and enthusiasm for the idea and the overall business ambition.

> "*As an entrepreneur you have to try to embed their ambitions, and you have to make sure that you are growing, even if it's slowly. If it is a small business and the growth is not there, you will lose them because they want to see that they can grow with the firm and no one will wait forever; they need to see that there is something happening. As a leader you have to demonstrate your perseverance and create some excitement, news, prospects that are exciting that make people feel like this is still moving and growing. Nowadays job security is hard. Even in big companies there are redundancies and fewer jobs now since Covid. But you have to demonstrate you are not giving up*" (Lynn).

In his training firm, Karl describes the criticality of focusing not on operations and delivery but instead on continuing to develop the business. In this sense he too advocates the need for feelings of ongoing development that Lynn describes as an essential momentum for keeping people engaged.

> "*You should be careful not to be too busy working in the business that you forget to run it and develop it. If you want to develop and be successful you need to look at the strategy and the direction. Don't be so busy baking the cakes or cutting the hair or chopping the food or doing the coding. Other people are usually better at that anyway – that's why you hired them. You should be doing the marketing, the strategy, the financing if you want the business to survive and do well*" (Karl).

Responses that related to the attractions of a start-up compared with other types of employment also consistently implied the value of intrinsic and entrepreneurial motivations. Lynn expresses it thus:

> "*Intrinsic motives are equally, or even more, important than extrinsic ones because everything is too expensive anyway. Not many people nowadays can flourish from a materialistic perspective because everything is too expensive. So when you can't fulfil your financial dreams you pursue intrinsic returns. So you have to listen to them* [staff] *and know their personal ambitions, their work ambitions, and you try to provide some of that in the everyday work they do. As a start-up we cannot provide huge financial rewards, so intrinsic things are important. You just have to think about why people would want to work for a small start-up company*" (Lynn).

Notwithstanding Lynn's comments though, and despite not always able to pay high wages, several participants also noted that it is essential to treat people well from an extrinsic point of view. Ken notes of his financial services firm, that might even include paying for staff at a higher rate than you are paying yourself, an experience shared by Graham who, as noted earlier, used a systematic means of introducing new and high quality talent to his medical tech venture. Christine and Carol also noted the need to engage even relatively unskilled workers in their customer services ventures, stating that retention of good people was critical to the business and that the costs of high staff turnover and training could be damaging, even terminally so. To retain people, both of these entrepreneurs also advocated appropriate salaries and proper contracts and regular shifts rather than the subcontracted labour – or gig work – common in their industries. From this perspective therefore, the founder entrepreneur leaders in this sample simultaneously deployed leadership approaches to develop entrepreneurial engagement, ownership and autonomy amongst staff, but also were familiar with and accounted for the realities of the labour market. Each was expressed as critical to the entrepreneurial ventures represented in this sample.

7. Discussion

The outcomes of this research broadly relate to the founder entrepreneur as a thought-leader and a leader of people, and in turn, to the means by which he or she engages the people being led so as to optimise their contributions to the realisation of the entrepreneurial vision.

The ways in which the start-up entrepreneurs in this qualitative research approach leadership are broadly illustrated by the answers to the following three items, that were asked verbatim of each participant at the start of their interview.

- How did you come up with the idea for your firm?
- What do you provide?
- How did you identify your first target market?

Table 2: The use of 'I ' and 'we'.

	Answers with "I did…"	Answers with "We did…."
How did you come up with the idea for your firm?	9	0
What do you provide?	2	7
How did you identify your first target market.	0	9

Table 2 shows the use of 'I' and 'we' in the responses to each. In every case, the entrepreneur exhibited personal ownership of the original idea by the use of the word 'I'. However, in response to questions immediately following that asked about the offering as it is now and the market that it serves, the entrepreneurs largely switch to the use of 'we'. This implies that at a conceptual level, the entrepreneurs in this sample represent *thought leaders* in so far as they came up with the original idea. They also exhibit a tendency to regard ongoing developments as the outcomes of team working though, implied by the use of 'we' when explaining product/service and market. The reference to the team and their role in shaping the offering and in identifying and serving markets suggests that these entrepreneurs are simultaneously *leading people*.

In terms of how the entrepreneur founders in this sample approached leading people there was a recurrence throughout testimonies of the need to engage passion and excitement amongst colleagues, foster a shared sense of ownership of the idea and the potential for its success, and that these enabled meaningful contribution to shaping and developing the new firm. In the context of the theorised 'entrepreneurial mindset' that involves creativity, persistence and autonomy (Daspit et al. 2023), there is clear resonance. More specifically, founder entrepreneurs throughout the new ventures in this sample sought to harness ideas, skills and experiences of the team to inform and shape the idea and facilitate ongoing opportunities and encourage people to share a sense of commitment to the achievement of success; in effect encouraging entrepreneurial mindsets within the start-up. Lynn, crystallises this by stating explicitly: "you need to inject ideas from colleagues and afford them a sense of ownership of the strategic aims of the firm". Throughout the sample, testimonies suggest that these are achieved by engaging staff through communication and person-oriented means of leading. The techniques of transformational and relational leadership are clearly evidenced, as are attempts to distribute responsibility and leadership throughout ventures. Combined with these is also evidence of the importance of transacting in a competitive labour market though, and the value of both extrinsic and intrinsic drivers to encourage entrepreneurial mindsets and contributions as suggested by the Full Range of Leadership model (Avolio and Bass, 2002). In the firms Carol and Catherine started, for example, where the labour they require is largely considered to be unskilled, their retention and reward approaches treated people well, with shifts appropriate to lifestyles and proper contracts. Elsewhere in their industries businesses commonly rely on gig workers and precarious zero-

hours labour. This practice resonates with much theory of entrepreneurship that presents the entrepreneur as a scavenger of resources, bent on keeping costs low to optimise sustainability and enable profit; a common means by which effectuation is explained in entrepreneurial firms (Sarasvathy, 2001). Here we do not refute or query effectuation theory, but rather observe that the (re)use of resources as a function of entrepreneurship does not to apply to the staff recruited at the starting phases of the new entrepreneurial ventures in this sample. Instead, the founding entrepreneurs in this sample used extrinsic rewards to demonstrate their commitment to the shared nature of the vision and the success of the new venture, to augment intrinsic engagement, and thereby encourage value-adding contribution.

7.1. Implications for Theory

From a theoretical perspective, when viewed through the lens provided in Galloway (2022) that refers to *thought leadership* and *leading people*, and with reference to the theory of the entrepreneurial mindset, it is possible to model outcomes of this research. Figure 2 illustrates this and is presented here as a first step in understanding how the various aspects of leadership and entrepreneurship may coalesce to enhance success in start-up situations.

Figure 2: Leadership and entrepreneurial start-ups
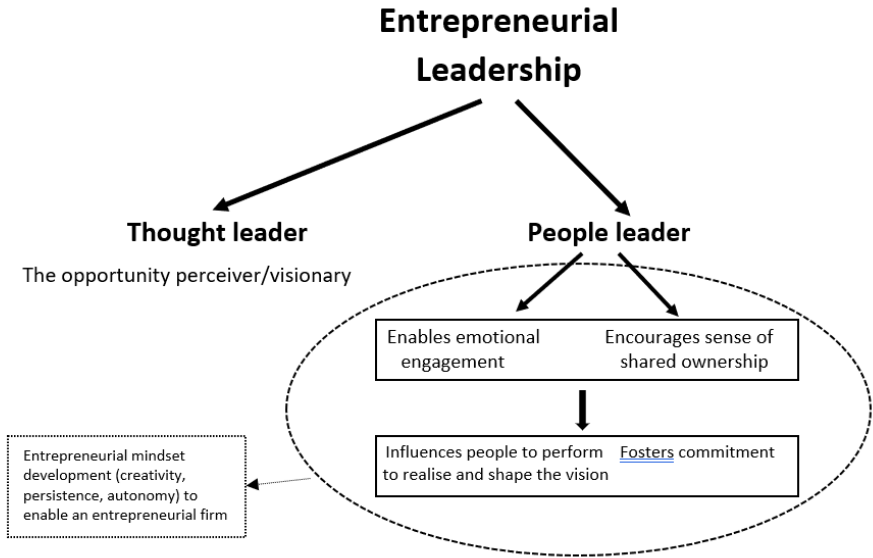
As Figure 2 proposes, leadership for the entrepreneur requires that s/he adopt a leadership approach that encompasses both *thought leadership* and *leading people*. This latter aspect – leading people – involves further nuance in that it involves the facilitation of inputs from stakeholders to contribute to and develop the vision and idea, and also outputs – their work effort. This involves leadership that is person-based and consultative and mutually rewarding, leadership that affords the embedding of the opportunity as mutually sought and realisable as a consequence of the shared efforts and activities of all; essentially transformational and relational leadership, as per Bass and Avolio (1990) and Uhl-Bien and Ospinosa (2012) respectively, that seeks to develop entrepreneurship within the firm. In turn, this resonates with collaborative and distributed or shared leadership (Denis et al., 2012). Fundamentally, the data suggests, in these cases at least, an approach to leading that presents entrepreneurship and an entrepreneurial mindset as collective and even infectious. The founding entrepreneur leaders in this sample maintained a focus on person-based leadership, relational and mutually developmental, and did this to develop more entrepreneurship amongst the people in their new firms.

7.2. Implications for Practice

From a practical recruitment and retention point of view, the passion, enthusiasm, and critically the communication of these, are evidenced as central to the ability to attract and maintain people in start-ups that may not always be able to compete with established firms in terms of reward and security. They can provide intrinsic rewards and a sense of co-creation, even co-ownership, of the ideas, ambitions and outcomes of the new business. Testimonies in this research evidence that treating stakeholders and especially staff as well as possible from an extrinsic point of view, within commercial constraints, was also a critical part of engendering commitment. Broadly, considered and person-focused approaches to leading in the entrepreneurial start-up firms in this sample reflect that good staff are not considered as commodities or resources but rather are perceived as fellow entrepreneurs central to the ambitions and success of the new firms observed.

8. Conclusion

The current paper is limited in that it reports qualitative work with a small sample of entrepreneurs. As a consequence, on another day and with a different sample other outcomes may have emerged. Despite the potential of variance though, there are several consistent themes, and the complexity of these was observed precisely because of the small sample size. A particular contribution of this work therefore is in finding common themes associated with approaches to leadership

amongst entrepreneurs in diverse industries and with diverse backgrounds. Future research may build on this by exploring other contexts of leadership in start-ups using a variety of methodological approaches.

In the present study, the criticality of the business idea and the overall vision for the trajectory of the new firms in this sample were central to the attracting of talent, engagement and refinement of each start-up. In addition, person-based, consultative approaches to leadership and the conveyance of a sense of distributed ownership and investment in the success of the firm were critical success factors too. Uniquely in research on leadership and entrepreneurship, beyond the need for passion, vision and communication was the need to engage people in an unproven business, a potentially precarious type of employment compared with alternatives in other parts of the labour market. This research has considered how important intrinsic rewards, shared sense of purpose and ongoing excitement about a new firm can be to both attract and retain staff. It also evidences the importance of extrinsic rewards for the people engaged in start-ups too – further developing feelings of trust and buy-in that will make optimal contribution to potential and success. These evoke a dissemination and distribution of entrepreneurship throughout the start-ups included in the sample rather than the traditional leader-follower relationship.

To conclude, modern thinking about leadership proposes most effective means of engaging people are by person-centred approaches, that leadership is relational and mutual. Meanwhile the entrepreneur is often represented as an individual acting independently in a new market. This research evidences that this conceptualisation of the entrepreneur may not well represent those who progress successful start-ups since they have particular need to bring people with them, to contribute to the shaping of the ideas and the organisations that they are starting. This has to be done by engaging stakeholders at a personal level and bringing them along on the start-up journey as fellow entrepreneurs. The founder entrepreneur's idea and vision represent the criticality of *thought leadership*, but critical too is the entrepreneur leader's ability to disseminate entrepreneurial mindsets by *leading people* so that they are enabled to contribute value in terms of refinement of that vison to optimise ongoing opportunities and perform commensurate to their realisation.

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