

Leading the Future: Exploring Transformational Leadership in the European Animation, Games, and VFX Industries

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ABSTRACT

This study offers an in-depth analysis of how transformational leadership is currently understood and enacted within the European animation, games, and VFX sectors. Through qualitative insights gathered from 75 professionals across European studios and educational institutions, the research identifies both the promise and the practical limitations of the leadership model that centers on emotional intelligence, mentorship, and shared team ownership. While these principles are widely endorsed in the industries, the study finds that their consistent application is hindered by industry-specific challenges, most notably: the prioritization of technical expertise over leadership capabilities in promotion decisions, a lack of industry-specific leadership training, generational differences, and pressures stemming from intense production demands. Additionally, issues such as blurred boundaries between work and personal life and imbalanced workloads between leaders and teams further complicate leadership in the industries. The findings point to a need for clearer leadership frameworks tailored to the industry's demands and greater institutional support to equip both current and future leaders with the skills needed to foster sustainable, high-performing teams for the evolving demands of these creative industries.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Social and professional topics • Professional topics • Computing profession

KEYWORDS

Transformational Leadership, Creative Industries, Animation, Games, and VFX, Leadership Development

1 Introduction

The work environment in the animation, games, and VFX industries has been gradually evolving away from ‘crunch’ cultures centered on ‘rockstars’, though the pace of change varies across regions and studios. While these ‘rockstars’, exceptionally skilled and independently driven employees, have made significant contributions to their fields, their intense work habits have often resulted in challenging work-life balances and unhealthy environments [3]. In response, a nascent trend within the industry is emerging, with an increasing focus on fostering more positive, sustainable work environments that prioritize work-life balance, adaptability, and collaboration [7, 12]. This shift also recognizes that modern productions are complex team efforts that require cohesive, well-supported teams, ensuring a sustainable workforce that retains talent instead of losing it to burnout [7]. As the move toward a more collaborative and balanced work environment progresses, a critical challenge remains: maintaining a highly skilled, innovative, and competitive workforce in a fast-paced, ever-evolving field while avoiding a return to unsustainable practices. Striking the right balance between competitiveness and long-term sustainability requires strong and effective leadership [5, 14].

Transformational leadership has emerged as a potential solution to address such challenges [5] and is widely used for *“facilitating organizational change and driving success in an increasingly dynamic business environment [4]”* At its core, this leadership model emphasizes inspiration over pressure: leaders motivate their teams to pursue ambitious goals and consistently exceed

expectations [13]. Most research describes transformational leadership through the framework of the four I's: *Inspirational Motivation, Idealized Influence, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration* [13]. Transformational leaders are described “as ‘change agents’ who influence others through visioning activities, role modeling, or appeals to emotions, morals, and standards, thereby ‘transforming’ individuals and/or organizations in broadly positive ways [2]”. It prioritizes both professional growth and personal development of team members. While being one of the most practiced and researched leadership models [13], its practical application remains largely unexplored [9]. Research in the creative industries suggests that transformational leadership is “critical to increasing employee performance in the creative industry [9]”. First research in the animation, games, and VFX industry specifically suggests that transformational leadership is the leading approach in the games industry in Indonesia and positively impacts organizational climate, creativity, productivity, and innovation [10]. However, no significant practical studies on this topic have been identified within the European industry.

This paper, as part of the PANEURAMA project (www.paneurama.eu), contributes to the growing body of research by investigating to what extent and how transformational leadership is applied and developed in real workplace environments within the European animation, games, and VFX industries. By examining the practical challenges companies face in implementing these leadership strategies, this study seeks to bridge the gap between theory and real-world practice. It further explores how (future) leaders are trained and supported within companies and educational institutions. Understanding industry expectations for leadership and their alignment with educational offerings is crucial for ensuring that (future) leaders are equipped to meet the evolving demands of the industry. It also ensures that educational programs remain relevant and responsive to the sector's changing dynamics, preparing graduates for real-world challenges.

2 Methodology

This study is part of a broader qualitative research project involving unstructured and semi-structured interviews, focus groups, panel discussions, and informal conversations from January to September 2024. 75 participants joined interviews online via Teams and participated in offline focus groups, including industry experts, educational specialists, and students from 12 European countries (see Figure 1 and 2). Additional contributions came through panel discussions and informal conversations at key industry events following PANEURAMA presentations, including FMX 2024 in Germany, the Annecy International Animation Film Festival in France, and the Viborg Animation Festival in Denmark. A member of the research team was present in the audience at these events and took handwritten notes of the discussions, which were incorporated into the analysis. Informal conversations with individuals fitting the sampling criteria were also used for triangulation, helping to

validate and refine preliminary findings. However, the exact number of contributors from these settings is unknown.

All participants provided written informed consent. The sample was balanced for diversity in professional experience, academic year, and industry expertise, and participants were recruited through a combination of direct outreach and snowball sampling to ensure a broad representation across sectors. Sociodemographic factors such as gender, ethnicity, and neurodiversity were not explicitly collected, because they were not within the scope of this study. Given that literature highlights the impact of gender, ethnicity, and neurodiversity on experiences in the industry [1, 6, 8, 11], exploring these factors more directly in future research could provide valuable insights into how they shape leadership dynamics and inform more inclusive practices.

Regional diversity was also considered, but most participants were based in Northern and Central Europe. Despite efforts, it proved difficult to recruit participants from Southern and Eastern Europe, which limited broader regional representation. Nevertheless, individual voices from these regions were included, and all perspectives were equally weighted in the analysis to ensure a balanced view. A follow-up study with stronger representation from these regions could help uncover potential regional differences and deepen understanding of leadership and work experiences across Europe.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify prominent themes. The outcomes aim to inform policy debates and contribute to future large-scale research and data-driven initiatives.

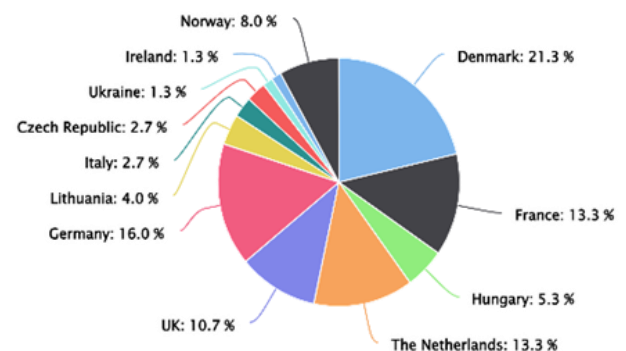


Figure 1: Percentage of Participants by Country of Residence

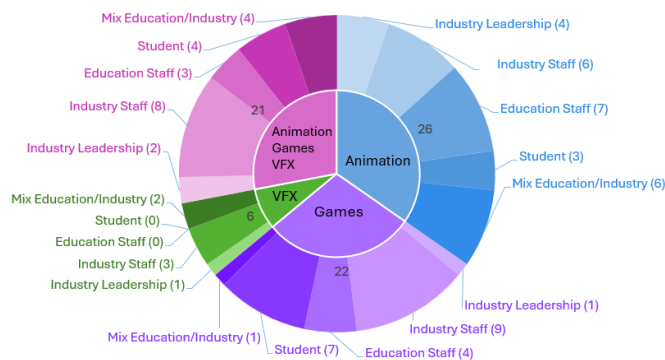


Figure 2: Professional Background Study Participants

3 Findings

3.1 From Managers to Mentors: Evolving Leadership in Creative Industries

The study indicates that while the term ‘transformational leadership’ is rarely explicitly used, its principles are generally appreciated across the industry, though not universally adopted. Participants noted that leadership in the animation, games, and VFX industries is evolving rapidly, requiring more than just technical expertise and project management skills. Emotional intelligence, empathy, and effective communication were identified as crucial for supporting and inspiring teams. Leaders are now expected to serve as role models who motivate through enthusiasm, shared vision, and intellectual stimulation, while also taking on coaching and mentoring responsibilities. This shift reflects a broader expectation that leaders guide teams through both professional and personal challenges, not just tasks and workflows.

Due to long work hours, often spanning days and nights, participants stated that they perceive their workplace as their second home, forming deep personal connections beyond professional interactions with colleagues. They emphasized that this unique environment needs to be understood and embraced by leaders, as the boundaries between professional and personal issues often blur. One participant described their leadership role as “almost like a coach, a father figure, or even like a psychologist at the company,” highlighting the importance of the personal touch. “If you’re only concentrating on the project, you’re really missing the point,” they noted, stressing that understanding individual struggles and fostering open communication is central to leadership in this context.

The psychological demands of creative work were emphasized, especially for junior talents encountering high-pressure situations for the first time. One participant highlighted the importance of approachable and supportive leadership, where employees feel safe to voice concerns and seek help. “When work gets really stressful, I can vent to my lead, and my lead will listen and ask, ‘Hey, what

can I do to make it a bit better for you?’” In these moments, participants shared that they often don’t need more than the conversation itself, as it makes them feel seen and understood. In contrast, participants spoke about colleagues who lack this supportive leadership and often feel isolated, struggling alone without reassurance. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, even when the issue may not relate to their abilities. Participants noted that, in industries like animation, games, and VFX, work is often tied to personal identity and the absence of an empathetic leader can foster self-doubt, lower motivation, and lead to overwork or people leaving the industry. These outcomes pose risks to individual well-being, team success, and workforce retention.

Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of fostering an environment where all voices are encouraged, particularly when suggesting improvements to workflows or products. However, given the high-pressure nature of the industry, they also emphasized the need for leaders to ensure that concerns are voiced at the appropriate time. As one participant put it, “A fast-moving train cannot just all of a sudden stop, but it must be constantly evaluated and improved.” For innovative workplace cultures, it is important that innovation is not only driven by a few individuals. Leaders must create a culture where diverse voices feel safe to contribute, ensuring that every team member’s input is valued and considered.

3.2 Redefining Leadership: Generational Tensions and Work Imbalances

While there have been positive developments in redefining leadership within the industry and more leaders experimenting with new styles, the process is not without challenges. Participants highlighted struggles, including generational tensions and work imbalances between employees and leadership.

An example of a challenge was managing blurred boundaries, where the lines between professional and personal responsibilities become harder to maintain. Leaders balance their teams’ emotional demands with their own workload, while employees benefit from flexible arrangements without facing the same pressure. Additionally, leaders experience unrealistic expectations, and employees pushing boundaries too far, placing them in uncomfortable positions and leading to criticism for not being seen as a good leader, despite already pushing their own limits. As one participant described, adopting more people-centered leadership styles can feel overwhelming: “I was spending a lot of my energy just being this motherly/fatherly figure for these people and trying to get into their minds and their life... it was just a very unproductive period.” This highlights the delicate balance leaders must strike between meeting their teams’ emotional needs and maintaining their own well-being and productivity within a high-pressure context.

Participants also discussed the challenges of managing differing perspectives across generations, noting that older generations

tended to hold on to traditional work habits, while younger generations advocate for new approaches. One participant explained, *“The older and younger ones have some tension sometimes, because of old habits... they [the older generation] say, ‘But when I was young, I was here... working really hard to deliver the project on time,’”* while younger employees are often less willing to accept these intense work demands. As younger employees become the majority in studios, there is growing pressure on leadership to adapt, creating a more complex dynamic. Leaders must balance traditional and new approaches while ensuring effective collaboration across generations.

According to participants, the struggles leaders experience often push them to revert to leadership styles they are familiar with. However, this return to old methods presents a paradox: while these approaches may offer temporary relief, they are increasingly viewed as ineffective in meeting the industry’s evolving needs.

3.3 Growing Need for Leadership Development for Current and Future Leaders

According to participants, companies urgently recognize the need for leadership training to accelerate the development of effective leadership within their studios. Leadership roles have traditionally been awarded based on technical expertise rather than leadership skills, leaving many leaders unprepared for the demands of their roles. As one participant explained, *“Some of them really like to manage, but they were not trained to be a manager... Many are not feeling comfortable because they are not trained.”* This “natural promotion style,” as participants named it, perpetuates outdated leadership approaches ill-suited for the industry’s evolving needs. One participant shared, *“We proposed management training for the team, but it was a little too late. We should have done this a few years before... It’s our [HR] responsibility to give them the skills.”* Despite recognizing this need, many studios struggle to afford such opportunities. As one professional put it, *“The industry is so tight... they can’t afford losing one person for a day. It could be like hell for them.”* These operational and financial challenges create significant barriers to leadership development.

In response to the challenge of leadership training, participants emphasized efforts to collaborate with educational institutions to bridge the gap in leadership development. Their goal is not only to create appropriate workshops for current leaders, but also to nurture future leaders. However, participants pointed out that this initiative faces obstacles. To meet the demanding skill requirements of the industry, young talents are often expected to work beyond 40 hours a week during their studies just to be considered for entry-level positions. This extreme workload leaves little room for developing leadership skills, and confirms findings of the previous PANEURAMA report [7].

This issue extends to educational settings, where students are often assigned dual roles in group projects that simulate real-world production scenarios. In these cases, students are expected to, for example, fulfill both their creative responsibilities as artists and the

leadership duties of team leads. While teachers and mentors are specialists in the creative disciplines, they rarely have the expertise to support students in navigating the complexities of managing team dynamics. As a result, students in leadership roles are left to manage these challenges on their own, without specialized guidance.

“We barely interfere unless there’s truly people wanting to strangle each other. Then we interfere for sure. [...] But coming to resolutions in a 20 plus man team is an incredibly valuable experience. That is also the reason the companies say your students are ready to work the moment they move into our company. Is that a pleasant experience? No. Is that the best teaching methodology? No. Does it work? For some of them, and that’s the problem: it doesn’t work for all of them. And I’m not sure how to solve it. Because it’s exactly that tension: they need to be tough as nails to survive in this industry. But by making them tough as nails, we are continuing the problem.”

While participants acknowledge that such experiences can build resilience, they also recognize that they may not fully prepare students to become effective leaders in a collaborative work environment. Additionally, the traditional skill-based education model tends to prioritize technical excellence, which may inadvertently overlook individuals with leadership potential. One participant shared an example of a student initially rejected from the program but later thrived as a lead: *“We had a student that applied several times and he was not accepted. And he improved and came back. And followed all the advice and finally he got in and he turned out to be a star student that ended as one of the directors. Now, he was not a genius at drawing, but he was a genius at supervising. He was a genius at talking. He was a genius at creating a great mood in the group.”* While participants from industry, educators, and students all recognize the importance of rethinking leadership skills in the curriculum and adapting the admissions process to better spot future leaders, educators face challenges implementing these changes within an already packed curriculum.

4 Conclusion and Future Studies

This study highlights a shift in leadership approaches within the animation, games, and VFX industries, moving away from toxic, high-pressure work cultures and towards more supportive environments. Studios increasingly recognize the importance of emotional intelligence and mentorship in leadership, reflecting transformational leadership principles, and the opportunity to foster healthier, sustainable workplaces. Some companies have already taken practical steps, but this transition is still in its early stages, with participants yet to adopt specific terminology for the leadership styles they envision. No industry-specific approach has been identified to meet the evolving needs of teams and leadership. Participants emphasized the urgent need for change and formal training support from educational institutions, given the challenges they face without expert guidance.

Challenges include promotions based on technical expertise rather than leadership skills, leaving leaders insecure when adopting new, collaborative approaches. Additionally, generational complexities, blurred lines between professional and personal roles, and overworked leaders have caused some to revert to outdated leadership styles that prioritize control over support.

While there is growing awareness of the need for structured leadership development, implementing such programs within the constraints of time, budget, and production demands remains difficult. Moreover, leadership programs tailored to senior staff are rare, and leadership development is rarely incorporated into undergraduate curricula. This gap in formal leadership training makes it challenging to align leadership practices with the fast-paced, project-driven nature of these industries, posing an obstacle for both studios and educational institutions.

Further research is needed to explore how leadership training can be integrated into industry practices without disrupting workflows. Studies on the long-term impact of different leadership styles on team performance, retention, and innovation would provide valuable insights.

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