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Playful Leadership in the Happiest Country of the World: Cultivating radical hope through creativity and adult playfulness

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ABSTRACT

Adult playfulness and creativity are increasingly recognized as important resources of contemporary working life, particularly under conditions of uncertainty and rapid change. This qualitative study explores playful leadership in the Finnish working-life context, drawing on Finland's position as the world's happiest country. Based on semi-structured interviews with eight Finnish leaders working in creative, cultural, and play-related industries, the study examines how leaders understand and enact playfulness in their leadership practices. Using reflexive thematic analysis, the findings indicate that playful leadership is not centered on specific activities but on a cognitive-emotional orientation characterized by curiosity, experimentation, trust, and openness to uncertainty. Playfulness emerges as a purposeful and future-oriented leadership resource that supports creativity, psychological safety, and organizational renewal. Conceptually, the study links adult playfulness with Jonathan Lear's notion of radical hope, demonstrating how playfulness enables leaders and organizations to remain oriented toward meaningful futures even when outcomes cannot be fully imagined. By situating playful leadership within a high-trust, well-being societal context, the study contributes empirical and theoretical insight into playful leadership as an enacted practice grounded in adult playfulness, creativity, and hope.

Introduction

According to the World Happiness Report (WHR), Finland has consistently ranked as the world's happiest country, a position often attributed to high levels of trust and strong social safety structures (Helliwell et al., 2025). Happiness, as a subjective state of psychological well-being and personal strength, is characterized primarily by positive emotions that, in human learning, facilitate cognitive flexibility and creative problem-solving (Reeve, 2018). Our research links positivity and optimism to play and playfulness, and, like renowned play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith, to the uplifting and life-affirming quality of play. In his last book, Play for Life: Play Theory and Play as Emotional Survival (2017), Sutton-Smith argues that play is fundamentally a

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response to core human emotions, both negative and positive, including happiness. More recent research also shows that positive emotions and playfulness are often intertwined and reinforce one another (Tidman, 2021), and that they can jointly promote individuals' creativity, well-being, and capacity to address complex challenges. In work contexts, positive emotions and supportive leadership enable employees to generate new ideas, thereby enhancing both individual and organizational performance (Anwar et al., 2023; Jarkko et al., 2026), thereby fostering playful work (Dodgson & Gann, 2018, ix), playfully conceptualized as 'Plork' (Castro, 2025).

While Finland ranks among the world's happiest countries, this broader societal well-being does not eliminate challenges in working life. Recent Finnish research shows that nearly 40% of employees perceive unexpected changes as a source of uncertainty or threat at work (Väänänen et al., 2024). At the same time, millennials (born approximately between 1981 and 1996) represent the largest generation in the Finnish workforce and, as leaders, may bring different leadership values and practices than previous generations. In a phenomenographic study of Finnish millennial leaders, Karima et al. (2022) found that successful leadership was characterized by humane values, employee well-being, participation, and a service-oriented approach.

We hypothesize that factors such as stable emotional well-being, trust, safety, autonomy, and experiences related to meaningfulness (Helliwell et al., 2025) make Finnish working life a fertile ground for adult playfulness to flourish. For playfulness to be realized in work life, however, playful leadership is worth considering. We speculate that playful leadership may contribute to workforce happiness in organizations by reintroducing emotional vitality, curiosity, and hope into environments otherwise dominated by pressure and control. Snyder (2002) defines hope as a positive motivational state based on an individual's perceived capability to identify pathways toward desired goals and sustain the agency required to pursue them. From the perspective of playful leadership, hope can be seen as emerging through social interaction, experimentation, and the collective exploration of future possibilities. Hope is thus essential to envisioning better futures, and we argue that *play is hope in action.* Although hope is influenced by multiple individual and contextual factors, including personality traits, social support, and organizational climate (Snyder, 1994; 2002), leadership may play an important role in shaping the conditions through which hope is fostered collectively. Previous research has linked hope to employees' ability to cope with change, maintain optimism, and engage in continuous learning in uncertain work environments (Uusiautti, 2016). Finally, we claim that in a world burdened by multiple crises, playful leaders play a crucial role in guiding the workforce toward more well-being-oriented organizations by fostering positive, supportive work-life climates that are conducive to playfulness as part of

adult life.

Previous research shows that playfulness is increasingly recognized as an encouraging approach in working life, organizations, and management (Celestine & Yeo, 2021; Jarkko et al., 2026; Proyer & Sendatzki, 2025). It involves cognitive and social spontaneity, flexibility, and future-oriented thinking, capacities that are essential for addressing complex or "wicked" problems (Ramaley, 2014), coping with stressful situations (e.g. Lee et al., 2021), and engaging in positive and creative interaction with others (e.g. Kloep et al., 2023). Playfulness has been associated with employee engagement, intrapersonal and interpersonal relations, effective teamwork, and stress management through reduced anxiety (Jarkko et al., 2026; Lee et al., 2021; Mukerjee et al., 2023). It also facilitates the mobilization of tacit knowledge in organizations (Spraggon & Bodolica, 2017) and contributes to innovation and well-being (Bateson & Martin, 2013; Lin et al, 2010). Simultaneously, it is a conscious, considered act, meaning that we must purposefully choose it (Castro 2025, 43). In addition, playfulness is increasingly recognized as a trend in management and organizational development and should be actively cultivated by leaders (Jarkko et al., 2026; Lee et al., 2021).

While these insights into playfulness have been widely acknowledged, prior research has predominantly focused on individual-, team-, and organizational-level processes (Jarkko et al., 2026), leaving its role in leadership practices comparatively underexplored. This gap is particularly relevant in contemporary working life, where leaders are increasingly expected to support curiosity, experimentation, and adaptive engagement amid rapid societal changes driven by digitalization and evolving workforce demographics, including the growing presence of millennials. Against this backdrop, understanding how playfulness is enacted and interpreted within leadership practice is critical. Despite its relevance, playfulness in leadership, especially within the Finnish working-life context, remains insufficiently examined. Moreover, while adult playfulness has been widely studied in relation to creativity, resilience, and well-being (Proyer 2013, Clifford et al., 2022, Shen et al., 2025) and hope (Smithson et al., 2022) has been explored as a critical resource in contexts of uncertainty and openness that offer multiple solutions, their explicit conceptual integration remains largely unexplored. Therefore, further research on play as an activity or on playfulness as an attitude is needed in studies of leadership practices.

In this study, we explore playful leadership through theories of *adult playfulness* (Proyer, 2012; 2017) and *positive leadership* (Cameron, 2012), complemented by Lear's concept of *radical hope.* Radical hope allows individuals to orient themselves toward a future whose form cannot yet be imagined but whose emergence is supported through trust, openness, and collective imagination, which is especially relevant in industries facing

ongoing uncertainty. As Dodgson and Gann (2018, p. 87) state: "The primary reason why play is considered important in the world of work is that it gives us options for dealing with uncertainty". Based on these ideas, we set out to explore playful leadership in the 'happiest country of the world', Finland, examining playful organizations whose primary goal is to offer playful products, services, and experiences, and whose success largely depends on their capacity for renewal.

Specifically, we focus on industries and cultural organizations whose core activities are inherently tied to creativity and innovation, such as the game, media, museum, and playground sectors. We believe that by exploring playfulness in the workplace and playful minds of Finnish leaders in creative and startup industries that revolve around the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore 1999/2011) can reveal how leaders' everyday behaviors function as micro-level mechanisms through which playfulness is enabled, constrained, or utilized as a resource for creativity and innovation at work. We see that the study can provide valuable empirical foundations and contributions to the emerging research area connecting playfulness with Finnish work-life and organizational settings. With the primary aim of increasing knowledge about adult playfulness from the leader's perspective, we also aim to influence work practices and organizational cultures directly by promoting awareness of the role of playfulness in human learning, creativity, and well-being.

Our qualitative study focuses on leaders to gain an in-depth understanding of how playfulness manifests in organizational culture. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1) How do leaders understand the role and nature of playfulness in the workplace and in their leadership practices?

2) What elements of radical hope can be identified in leaders' descriptions of playfulness and playful leadership practices?

This study contributes to research on adult playfulness and leadership in four ways: first, it provides empirical insight into how leaders understand and enact playfulness. This area remains underexplored in play research. Second, it situates playful leadership within the Finnish working-life context, offering a culturally grounded perspective from a country consistently ranked highest in global happiness. Third, it conceptually integrates playfulness with Lear's (2006) notion of radical hope, demonstrating how playfulness functions as a future-oriented leadership resource under conditions of uncertainty. Finally, the study advances a process-oriented understanding of playful leadership as an enacted practice–comprising mindset, relational dynamics, and cultural enablement.

Theoretical background

In this study, we distinguish between play as an activity, playfulness as an intrapersonal orientation, and playful leadership as an enacted relational practice. While play refers to concrete activities that may or may not occur in work contexts, *playfulness* describes a cognitive-emotional disposition that enables individuals to approach situations with curiosity, flexibility, and openness (Bateson & Martin, 2013; Heljakka & Kangas, 2026). *Playful leadership*, in turn, refers to how leaders enact, model, and culturally enable playfulness through everyday practices, decisions, and interactions.

In the literature, *adult playfulness* is generally understood as an intrapersonal disposition or mindset that shapes how individuals approach and interpret everyday situations (Proyer, 2017; Whitton, 2022). Rather than referring to specific activities, playfulness is conceptualized as a tendency to frame or reframe situations as enjoyable, engaging, or intellectually stimulating, enabling experiences of curiosity, humor, and light-heartedness (Barnett, 2007; Bateson & Martin, 2013; Proyer, 2017; Whitton, 2022). Although playfulness has been described as a relatively stable personality trait, it is also recognized as a flexible orientation through which individuals engage with tasks, relationships, and challenges in an open, joyful, and exploratory manner (Proyer, 2012; 2017). Adult playfulness is best understood as cognitive-emotional flexibility in framing experience, often oriented toward enjoyment, curiosity, and mild norm transgression (Proyer 2012, 2017; Masek 2025; Lubbers et al., 2022).

In the workplace, playfulness is increasingly recognized as a significant force in organizations and management (Proyer & Sendatzki, 2025) and as an essential mindset for solving complex problems, navigating stressful situations, and engaging in positive and creative interactions with others. It is recognized as a key element in intrapersonal relations and successful teamwork (Jarkko et al., 2026; Kloep et al., 2023), stress management by reducing anxiety (Lee et al., 2021), and a crucial factor in enhancing public health and well-being (Tonkin & Whitaker, 2019). Previous research also indicates that workplace playfulness positively influences employees' creativity and flexibility (Yu et al., 2007) and organizational innovation (Lin et al., 2010). Moreover, playfulness is understood as the most important changemaker in innovative organizations, with an increasing desire to foster a playful workplace (Tonkin & Whitaker, 2019) and support playful work design cultures (Bakker et al., 2020; Scharp et al., 2022). However, a recent systematic literature review on manifestations of playfulness in the workplace shows that playfulness in working life is a complex and evolving concept that lacks a unified definition (Jarkko et al., 2026). The review further suggests that workplace

playfulness operates across intrapersonal, interpersonal, and organizational levels and is discussed in the literature under a range of related concepts and terminology. These include, for example, playfulness climate (Liu et al., 2024), and organizational adaptability, where play is understood as a means through which organizations respond to and navigate continuous change (Andersen & Pors, 2014).

"Organizations are not playful in the sense of what they do, but in the behaviors, they endorse in the people that work for them" (Dodgson & Gann 2018, 221). In fact, as stated in earlier research, playfulness can be changed in the organizational context by deliberate intervention (Proyer et al. 2021)

Positive leadership refers to a leadership approach grounded in positive psychology that highlights respect for individuals, recognition of employees' strengths and capabilities, and the intentional cultivation of an optimistic and supportive organizational climate (Cameron, 2008; DeRue & Workman, 2012). Research on workplace playfulness indicates that an empowering management style that promotes employee autonomy can facilitate it (Smith et al., 2022). In the age of uncertainty and complexity in the workplace, positive leadership can meaningfully be linked to playful leadership practices and Dweck's growth mindset theory.

According to Dweck (2006), leaders with a fixed mindset tend to view people in hierarchical terms, focusing on proving their own superiority and using the organization as a platform for personal validation. In contrast, growth mindset leaders begin with a belief in human potential and development, viewing abilities as malleable and leadership as an ongoing learning process. Such leaders generate positive energy and foster organizational cultures characterized by learning, collaboration, and psychological safety (see also Jarkko et al., 2026). Rather than positioning the organization as a vehicle for individual greatness, they use it as an engine for collective growth (Dweck, 2006). In this way, growth-mindset leadership closely aligns with positive leadership, particularly in its emphasis on optimism, respect for individuals, and the cultivation of supportive environments that enable both individual and organizational flourishing, which we believe is strongly connected to playfulness.

Within positive psychology, playfulness is acknowledged but is typically addressed only indirectly, most notably through the *Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), in which playful, light-hearted engagement is incorporated into the character strength of humor rather than conceptualized as a distinct character strength. In the VIA classification of character strengths, hope is a core strength within the virtue of transcendence, encompassing optimism about the future, goal orientation, and belief in better outcomes. As playfulness is seen as a powerful approach in organizations and management, and as it operates through complex, cross-level interactions in the workplace, leaders play a key role in the

development of playful and creativity-supported working culture (Jarkko et al., 2026; Lee, Wang & Yang, 2021; Proyer et al., 2025; Quinsee & Parker, 2024).

Following these ideas, playfulness can be associated with hope, positivity, and optimism. In Proyer's (2012) conceptualization, sadness and ill humor are negatively related to the expression of playfulness, whereas seriousness represents an orientation that stands in contrast to playfulness. This understanding aligns with Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, which posits that positive emotions broaden individuals' momentary thought–action repertoires and support flexible, exploratory, and creative engagement with their environment. From this perspective, playfulness can be understood as both enabled by and generative of positive emotions, as it encourages curiosity, openness, and imaginative exploration (Heljakka & Kangas, 2026).

Since this research focuses on cultivating hope through playfulness, we suggest that playfulness, beyond humor and fun, forms a core mindset and can play an important role in enhancing hope in the work context. Castro (2025) frames playfulness as a practice, skill, and discipline rather than a spontaneous trait, and underscores its relevance as a construct in studies of creativity and hope. According to Castro, "playfulness is not the opposite of work, but a mode of working that enables norm-challenging creativity" (pp. 44–46): "creativity challenges patterned thought processes and norms, arising from disequilibrium" (Walla 2019, cf. in Castro 2025). Again, following Castro (2025, p. 46), "playfulness is the real facilitator of creativity and creative responses".

Similar to these ideas, Snyder's hope theory (2002, p. 249) defines hope as "the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways". Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2006) develops a stronger, more existential notion. *Radical hope* is defined as a form of courage that imagines a "good" that is, from the standpoint of the present culture, literally incomprehensible. If ordinary hope says "I don't know if this will work, but I can see ways it might," radical hope says, "I can't even yet imagine the form of a good future, but I still orient myself toward the possibility that such a future can be created."

The concepts of radical hope and radical creativity are closely aligned when linked to ideas on playfulness as a future-oriented source of renewal in organizations, as radical creativity or forms of creativity that challenge and transcend existing frameworks and practices, rather than reproducing or merely improving them (Blomberg, 2025). In our study, the concept of radical hope serves as a theoretical lens for understanding leadership under conditions of uncertainty. It illuminates how leaders sustain a future-oriented orientation,

courage, and openness, and enables analysis of leadership as an everyday behavioral practice through which leaders seek to promote hope, imagination, and creativity in their organizations.

Method

Qualitative data were collected from Finnish organizations operating within the creative industries sector. A total of eight leaders and Startup founders (aged 23–53 years; four male and four female) representing roles such as CEOs and directors participated in semi-structured interviews. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling because they represented information-rich cases with extensive experience in leadership roles within creative and innovative work environments (Patton, 2015). The participating organizations represented a diverse range of sectors within the creative, cultural, and play-related industries. These included companies specializing in play and playground design and manufacturing; game and toy design; media; a museum dedicated to play; publishing; digital technology and interactive systems; and natural cosmetics and lifestyle products. These sectors were selected for this first stage of the research because of their established interest in creativity, innovation, and playful practices. This diversity provided rich contextual variation for examining playfulness in different organizational environments. To protect anonymity, the specific company names are not reported, and descriptions are presented at the sector level only.

Two of the interviewed leaders worked in startup companies employing 2–4 people, while the remaining six came from more established organizations with staff sizes ranging from 10–20 to 100–600 employees. The participants represented Generation X (born approximately between 1965 and 1980), Generation Y (Millennials, born approximately between 1981 and 1996), and Generation Z (born approximately from 1997 onwards). Six participants belonged to Generations X and Y, and two to Generation Z. The organizations varied in age, ranging from newly founded startups (2–5 years) to long-established companies with histories of up to 50+ years (Table 1).

Table 1. Participants in the study.

The position of the interviewee	Organization size (number of employees) (years)	Leadership experience	Leader Code W=female M=male Generation
CEO	10–20 employees	>15–20	WX1
CEO	100–600 employees	> 24	MX1
CEO	100–600 employees	>15–20	MX2
CEO	10–20 employees	>10	MY3
CEO	100–600 employees	> 9	MY4
CEO	100–600 employees	> 12	WY2
Startup Founder	2–4 employees	>6	WZ3
Startup Founder	2–4 employees	> 1–2	WZ4

The interviews focused on four themes: *adult playfulness, playfulness at work, organizational playfulness, and playful leadership.* The interviews began with background questions (e.g., age, leadership experience, and leadership education) and then focused on participants' understandings of playfulness in their own lives, the relationship between play and work, the role of playfulness and creativity in work and organizations, conceptions of playful and creative leadership, and future possibilities for fostering greater playfulness and creativity in working life. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes and was conducted either online or face-to-face. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, yielding 50 pages of text. All interviews were conducted in Finnish and subsequently translated into English for publication purposes. The research followed the ethical principles for scientific research established by the Finnish National Board of Research Integrity (https://www.tenk.fi), and all participants provided informed consent. Organizational and personal identifiers were removed from the data before the analysis to ensure confidentiality.

The analysis was conducted in two phases. The data were first analyzed inductively following Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis progressed from familiarization with the data and initial coding to the development and refinement of themes. In the second phase, the themes were interpreted in relation to the two research questions. Regarding RQ1, the analysis focused on identifying manifestations of playfulness in workplace practices and leadership, examining how leaders framed everyday interactions, organizational practices, and leadership situations in playful terms. These findings were subsequently synthesized into an interpretive description of the key characteristics of playful leadership emerging from the data.

For RQ2, the themes were re-examined through the conceptual lens of radical hope. This interpretive phase explored how leaders' descriptions of playfulness and playful leadership reflected future-oriented meaning-making, openness to uncertainty, imagination, and the capacity to sustain agency despite not-yet-defined outcomes.

Throughout the analytical process, the analysis was conducted collaboratively by two researchers who engaged in ongoing reflexive dialogue to discuss coding decisions, emerging interpretations, and theoretical sensitivities. This collaborative and reflexive approach enhanced analytical rigor and supported the credibility of the findings. The themes were developed iteratively through the researchers' interpretive engagement with the data, identifying shared patterns of meaning across participants' accounts rather than relying on individual statements. Representative quotations are presented to illustrate each theme.

How do leaders conceptualize the meaning and nature of playfulness in the workplace?

The inductive analysis generated six interrelated themes that capture leaders' understandings of playfulness at work, the enactment of playfulness in everyday organizational practices, and the characteristics of playful leadership.

1. Playfulness as a way of thinking and framing work

Leaders described playfulness as a cognitive and attitudinal orientation rather than as a form of activity or as "engaging in play" per se. Playful leadership, as an interpersonal quality, may be grounded in a person's upbringing and lifelong thinking that is permissive of play, indicating that a playful mindset may be supported from an early age. Playfulness was also regarded as an existential orientation in life:

Life as a whole is a kind of play. And because work becomes such a large part of life at some point, play is very much connected to work as well. There's that saying that play is a child's work, and in the same way you could say that work is an adult's play—that's how I see it. (WZ4)

I feel that play has always been an important part of my own life and my family life. I was raised in a way where play was enabled and even encouraged—where creative thinking was supported, and we were not restricted by ideas like 'this is not something you're supposed to play with. […] The ability to play is certainly an important part of enabling creativity. (MY4)

Playfulness manifested as an approach to ideas as unfinished, as entering into thinking processes without certainty about outcomes, and as remaining "in the moment," where ideas could evolve freely. Playfulness was often associated with playing with ideas, ideation, and experimenting with alternatives, which include courage, risk-taking, and the possibility of failure through experimentation and exploration.

When we create—when we try to think creatively—we are essentially playing with ideas, playing with things. There is a clear analogy there. We often throw ourselves a bit outside the ordinary and dare to stay there. (MY4)

A lot of what we do is about experimentation. If something doesn't work, it shouldn't be seen as a failure. Instead, you think that this idea didn't work and then you try something else. When this kind of mindset is shared, it actually fuels creativity, because people don't become discouraged by experiments that don't succeed …In any kind of work, it is helpful to have a playful orientation, even when the situation is very serious. It allows you to relate to things in a way that reminds you they are just things. For example, when something unexpected happens, it doesn't feel like the end of the world. You're able to stay in a more positive mindset and see new possibilities in everything. (WZ4)

As the quotations illustrate, the leaders described playfulness as an experimental and flexible way of thinking in which unsuccessful attempts are not perceived as discouraging, but as a part of the creative process. Ideas that do not work are understood as signals to try something else, and such a mindset is perceived as promoting creativity and preventing discouragement. In addition, playfulness was described as a playful, entrepreneurial-oriented mindset through which leaders frame their work and engage with demanding tasks with both grit, resilience, and a sense of lightness:

You keep pushing through even when things are really difficult. And that's exactly the point—if you're not able to approach even the most challenging aspects of work with a suitable sense of lightness, very few people have the mental endurance to keep going. To be able to manage your own stress levels and keep going at work, playfulness is certainly a very important factor. (MX2)

2. Playfulness as a driver of creativity and innovation

I think that all play is creative to some extent. I don't know if all creative activity is actually play. (WY2)

Our findings indicate that play is beneficial for work communities, driving innovation and renewal. Although play is often associated with creativity, our interviewees also distinguished the two concepts. Nevertheless, all leaders strongly associate playfulness with creativity and vice versa, as well as with the generation of something new. Playfulness was seen as a driver of creativity, as a means of breaking away from habitual ways

of thinking, and as a way of daring to be unconventional for a moment. Playfulness enables risk-taking, experimentation, and tolerance for uncertainty, particularly in situations where solutions are not yet visible. Without playfulness, the emergence of something new was perceived as unlikely.

Yes, I think that play is a source of creativity or a starting point for creativity. All creativity is playful to some extent. And it is the need within humans to express themselves, playfully. Traditionally, it has been regarded as an activity characteristic of children, but this perspective has expanded to view playfulness more broadly as part of adult life as well. In recent years, there has been considerable discussion of playfulness, even in the workplace, and how it can improve work communities, enhance the atmosphere, foster creativity, and perhaps also prompt a rethinking of workplaces. Yes, I would see that play has stepped outside of its traditional norms. (WY2)

Interviewees also saw playfulness as crucial in enabling new ways of thinking and doing to emerge, and associated play with 'bold' experimentation outside normative organizational life.

Without play, we cannot really create anything new or get things done in new ways. I see it as a major factor—a kind of culture that makes creation possible for individuals or for an organization. For play and playful experimentation to be possible. I find myself thinking that within certain boundaries, experimentation that happens outside those boundaries is a form of bold play. (MY4)

3. Playfulness as culturally constructed and negotiated

Playfulness is an innate human characteristic that manifests in intrapersonal and interpersonal behaviors (Jarkko et al., 2026). In this study, playfulness was not treated solely as an individual trait; it was also described as culturally constructed. While some of our interviewees recognized new ways of thinking about linking playfulness to adulthood and the growing interest in its benefits in contemporary work, some leaders described work communities in which playfulness was natural and expected. In contrast, others described environments in which it was perceived as unprofessional or even as a threat. Moreover, playfulness was experienced as linguistically and culturally challenging in the Finnish working-life context. In Finnish language, the term "*play*" (*leikki* in contrast to playing games, *pelaaminen*), was often avoided, even though the phenomenon itself was present in everyday practices.

[i]n recent years, there has been quite a lot of talk about playfulness, even in working life, and how it can improve work communities, improve the atmosphere, improve creativity, and perhaps also lead to a kind of rethinking in workplaces. Yes, I would see that play has stepped outside of its traditional norms. (WY2)

The concept of play is just really difficult to implement in Finnish work communities. In Finland, work is often not taken as play at all—play easily becomes associated with not being serious enough, as if real work should involve sweat, blood, and tears. (MX1)

In more formal types of work, or in roles where you have to appear highly convincing, it might not be advisable to show playfulness too much outwardly. In those contexts, playfulness is present more as an attitude than as visible behaviour. (MY3)

These accounts illustrate how playfulness is not accepted or expressed in the same way across contexts. While leaders recognized its value, they also described cultural, professional, and normative constraints that shape when and how playfulness can be enacted in working life.

Our study further reveals that leaders view including playfulness in everyday work as a balancing act: allowing 'bold' play in work must be balanced against productivity, and this requires intrapersonal as well as interpersonal negotiation of how playfulness can manifest in the workplace.

There needs to be a balance: we must offer stimuli that help develop a culture that is more creative and open-minded. At the same time, we have to find the right means—solutions that may not be the same for every company. We must find what works for us and helps us reach our goals. In that sense, organizations themselves must be creative and bold and join the play—challenge themselves and experiment with what it might bring. (MY4)

4. Playfulness as a builder of interaction, trust, and a sense of community

Playfulness was described as a means of lowering hierarchical boundaries, enhancing psychological safety, and strengthening trust and connection between people. Leaders portrayed playfulness as a form of "glue" that brings people together, enables individuals to rely on one another, and supports openness and shared learning. Playfulness was not viewed only as a source of enjoyment but as a social mechanism that promotes collaboration and well-being, supported by psychological trust embedded in work-life culture and within organizational structures.

Playfulness shows up in the fact that psychological safety is always present. It's something I'm not willing to compromise on in any way. It's a fundamental principle I try to protect all the time, and it really hurts to see and hear people talk about it without truly understanding what it actually means. (WX1)

I believe that trust is essential for play—that the culture must be such that it allows it. A trusting and open atmosphere is

a crucial element. (MY4)

A playful leader makes sure that the work feels enjoyable for the employees—not just that the leader enjoys the work or the project. It's about making sure that everyone actually feels good, stays motivated, and works as a team player. (WZ4)

The ability to step outside of the ordinary boundaries was considered an essential capability by many leaders, but the study also revealed the importance of organizational structures and normative ways of working, which provide the safety needed to experiment with the freedom to play.

I do think that creativity perhaps blossoms best in a certain freedom. But yes, we do need structures, yes, they also bring security. (WY2)

Organizational playfulness was also linked to the broader societal aim of elevating the status of play and playfulness as serious phenomena, by 'putting play on a pedestal in every way'.

In my own work (play) is strongly visible because I deal with play in one way or another every day and the mission of our organization (---) is to defend play, that is, it is strongly present in all our activities. We want to maintain its importance, we want it to be discussed, and we want it to be considered important because we want to highlight its social impact. We do not want play to be talked about in a belittling way and as an activity that is somehow not right or real or to be taken seriously. Instead, we want to put play on a pedestal in every way, both in our research activities and in our exhibition activities, in our public work, permeating all of our museum activities. […] Yes, we do have a twinkle in our eye. (WY2)

Recognizing the benefits of playfulness as part of work cultures illuminated its role as a strategic tool, which could be cultivated even more through playful work design and leadership:

We should bring that (playfulness) to work ourselves. We are constantly dealing with play, but perhaps it is precisely in this way that we could use it to build our own work community, to identify people's strengths. (WY2)

5. Playfulness as a leader-enabled space and role modeling

Leaders emphasized their own role as enablers of playfulness. Playful leadership manifested through role modelling and willingness to engage, flexible interpretation of rules, and the creation of space, time, and structures for play and experimentation. The playful leader was often described as an enabler, a pioneer, and a shaper of organizational culture. Playfulness did not emerge through formal instruction, but through the leader's own actions and everyday micro-level choices regarding time use and the stimuli provided to enable playfulness.

There needs to be stimulation—whether through systematically agreed practices, such as having a specific moment where we encourage the creation of something new through play, or through physical spaces or elements that inspire it. These are the kinds of things that come to mind. We build a culture where play is genuinely welcomed—where we can say the culture is playful or supports the emergence of creative novelty, and where that support is real. This might involve dedicated spaces or company-level decisions that spark ideas at the individual level—ideas that wouldn't arise in everyday routines. (MY4)

The leader's role as a champion of playfulness was recognized as crucial to ensuring its presence within praxis and systems.

In my view, a creative leader must lead by example and demonstrate more radical forms of creativity—showing what genuinely new things can be done. Smaller, micro-level creative acts are needed, but sometimes larger moves are necessary. And I believe it is the leader's role to show that these, too, should be attempted and explored. (MY4)

Surely (the playful leader) is such an enabler and open-minded, maybe also a bit of a pioneer that they do not necessarily use all the rules of working life...maybe they are a kind of innovator of work culture. That you don't always have to follow the same formula; you can do things a little differently. You can be flexible without being lazy. (WY2)

Messengers and ambassadors for workplace playfulness are needed to enhance and celebrate the physical, spatial, and temporal cues of playfulness, and to strengthen the permission to play.

I understand in a way that working life needs structures and cannot be abandoned, but perhaps within those structures, enabling how playfulness could be part of that system. But I would say that it also requires messengers—people who bring that playfulness into the work community culture or working life. This is furthered by the fact that it (play) is talked about more and its significance is seen more. […] More play in the workplace! (WY2)

Next example shows how leaders foster psychological safety by modelling and structuring moments of playfulness, enabling creative engagement without fear of premature judgment.

I always have to explain to them (employees) that our brains don't work in a way where we can be creative and critical at the same time. So I make it explicit: now it's time to be creative, and later you can be as critical as you like. Once that's clear, people dare to really throw themselves into it. (WX1)

6. Playfulness as purposeful rather than irresponsible

A salient feature emerging from the data was that leaders distinguished playfulness from light humour or aimless play. Playfulness was described as something to be taken seriously, as purposeful, and as supportive of the quality and impact of work. Playfulness was not viewed as the opposite of seriousness, but rather as "not grave seriousness", the ability to approach even complex matters with lightness and 'free-flowing, floating play', without trivializing them.

Maybe you can compare it in a way that we think that there is a different kind of play—a kind of rule-based play, but then there is also—which is a very important form of play—such as free-associative play, free-flowing, floating play, which is not determined by norms or rules or perhaps cannot be predicted in advance, so maybe you could also compare it in that way to doing work that there are areas of work that proceed according to the rules and by-the-book and they have to be done in certain processes and according to certain norms. (WY2)

Leaders often described playfulness as purposeful and professionally meaningful rather than frivolous. This finding supports recent conceptualizations of workplace playfulness as a resource for innovation, learning, and adaptation rather than as a distraction from everyday work and managerial practices (see e.g., Proyer & Sendatzki, 2025).

Radical hope in leaders' descriptions of playfulness and playful leadership practices

In response to RQ2, the analysis suggests that radical hope does not appear in leaders' accounts as an explicit concept but rather as a future-oriented way of engaging with situations in which outcomes remain uncertain or not yet fully formed. Playfulness emerges as a central pathway through which this orientation is enacted and sustained in everyday leadership practice. The following four interpretive themes illustrate how the inductively developed themes can be understood through the conceptual lens of radical hope.

1. Future-orientation toward an unknown

In response to Research Question 2 (RQ2), the analysis indicates that radical hope emerges in leaders' accounts as a future-oriented stance in situations where outcomes are uncertain, unknown, or not yet fully articulable. Leaders described developmental situations in which the direction of change was unclear, and results could not be anticipated, yet they maintained commitment to action. Playfulness enabled work within a space in

which the future had not yet been defined or articulated. It also included imagining and dreaming about what things might look like. Leaders often expressed this as an acceptance that "we don't know where this will lead and that is okay." At the same time, radical hope manifested as the courage to act without guarantees of success. Leaders described a willingness to experiment without guaranteed outcomes, to challenge established ways of working, and to accept failure as part of the process. This orientation was particularly evident in leaders' accounts drawing on Startup experiences. Here, playfulness functioned as a protective buffer against fear of failure: experimentation was framed not as a high-risk decision, but as a playful possibility. This framing enabled continued action even under conditions of pressure, uncertainty, and incompleteness.

We talk and bounce ideas around, and now and then we allow ourselves to stay in that space of imagining—dreaming about what things might look like in five years and what we could be doing then. (WZ4)

This reflects Lear's notion of radical hope: an orientation toward a meaningful good whose form is not yet known.

2. Imagination as a core leadership capability

Leaders described playfulness as the ability to imagine alternative ways of acting, to see work and the organization differently, and to transcend the limits of the present moment in their thinking. Imagination was not detached from everyday practice but functioned as a practical capacity to open up future possibilities. Playfulness helped keep imagination active even in situations where existing structures or limited resources constrained action. Next excerpt shows how playfulness was used to reframe organizational change as an exploratory and imaginative process, allowing alternative structures to be considered without fear or excessive rigidity.

We literally played around with the organizational chart and played with the idea of what if things were organized differently. (MX2)

3. Sustaining hope through shared meaning-making

Leaders described shared moments in which meaning emerged through joint action, experiences that generated a sense that "this matters," and situations in which shared playfulness strengthened commitment. Playful experiences supported collective hope that was not grounded in specific predictions, but in a shared

sense that the future can be built together.

We don't dramatize It, we just say, this is the situation right now, and we'll get through it. The world hasn't collapsed, and we move forward together. (MX2)

The excerpt shows how playful leadership sustains hope by framing difficult situations calmly, supporting emotional reassurance, and strengthening a shared sense of continuity and collective efficacy. This finding aligns with positive leadership approaches that emphasize the active cultivation of optimism as a leadership practice under uncertainty.

4. Renewal in the face of uncertainty

Several leaders described playfulness as a means of maintaining energy and enthusiasm, recovering from demanding situations, and "re-engaging" with the same work over time. In this context, radical hope manifested as the capacity to continue—not through naïve optimism, but through reorientation. Playfulness enabled emotional regulation, lightening of experience, and the discovery of new perspectives in situations where work demands were heavy or continuously changing.

Playfulness helps you to get going again. Even when things have been heavy or haven't turned out as expected, it allows you to find a new perspective and the motivation to continue (MY3)

This excerpt illustrates how playfulness supports renewal under uncertainty by enabling leaders to reorient themselves, regain energy, and continue forward despite setbacks.

"As a final note, it occurred to me that play is, in the end, about actions. It is a process—and we should approach this as an analogy of play: by simply doing." (MY4)

Viewed through the lens of the concept of radical hope, the reflection above suggests that play functions as a practice of hopeful action. By "simply doing," individuals sustain agency and co-create meaning despite uncertainty, illustrating how playful engagement can transform hope from an abstract expectation into an enacted process of exploring and shaping possible futures.

Discussion

This study sought to explore how playful leadership is understood and enacted by leaders in the Finnish working-life context, and how playfulness functions as a leadership resource under conditions of uncertainty. Drawing on qualitative interviews with leaders in creative and play-oriented organizations, the findings indicate that playful leadership is not primarily about introducing playful activities into work, but about cultivating a cognitive-emotional orientation that promotes curiosity, experimentation, and openness in everyday leadership practices. In the study, playfulness emerged as a purposeful, serious, and future-oriented capacity that supports creativity, trust, and psychological safety. Findings are in line with prior literature that indicates that Generations X, Y, and Z increasingly value leadership practices that emphasize autonomy and flexibility. In particular, emerging insights into Generation Z highlight expectations for highly flexible, creativity-supporting work environments (Berkup, 2014).

Our findings suggest that playful leadership could be understood as an overarching leadership orientation that integrates key elements emphasised in contemporary leadership research, including psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019), employee well-being and participatory leadership (Karima et al., 2022), while extending these perspectives by foregrounding curiosity, experimentation, and a future-oriented stance characterized by radical hope (Lear, 2006).

Playful leadership as an enacted practice

The findings extend existing research on workplace playfulness by demonstrating how playfulness becomes meaningful through leadership enactment. Rather than residing solely in individuals or organizational climates, playfulness was shown to be actively shaped through leaders' everyday behaviors, role modelling, and decisions.

Leaders described playfulness as a way of framing work as open to reinterpretation—an orientation that legitimizes experimentation and reduces fear of failure. This supports earlier claims that organizations are playful because of the behaviors they endorse (Dodgson & Gann, 2018), and adds empirical depth to understandings of playful leadership as relational and cultural practice.

Notably, the leaders in this study distinguished playfulness from irresponsibility or superficial fun. Playfulness was understood as compatible with seriousness and accountability, enabling leaders and employees to

approach demanding situations with lightness without trivializing their importance. This challenges persistent assumptions that playfulness undermines professionalism, and instead positions it as a mature leadership capability aligned with cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation.

Playfulness, creativity, and organizational renewal

Consistent with prior research linking playfulness to creativity and innovation, the findings indicate that playfulness drives both individual and collective creative processes. Leaders repeatedly associated playfulness with the ability to break habitual patterns of thinking, tolerate uncertainty, and explore alternative possibilities. In this sense, playfulness is seen to sustain engagement in creative work.

By framing experimentation as playful rather than risky, leaders created conditions in which failure could be interpreted as part of learning. This reframing appears especially significant in startup and creative industry contexts, where uncertainty is inherent and outcomes cannot be fully anticipated. The findings thus reinforce the view that playfulness is a key mechanism through which organizations maintain adaptive capacity and renewal under volatile conditions.

Playful leadership and radical hope

A central theoretical contribution of this study lies in linking adult playfulness with Lear's concept of radical hope. While radical hope did not appear explicitly in leaders' language, it was evident in their future-oriented stance toward uncertainty, imagination, and not-yet-defined outcomes. Playfulness functioned as a pathway through which leaders could remain oriented toward meaningful, but unclear futures.

In this sense, playful leadership supports radical hope not through prediction or control, but through imagination, experimentation, and shared meaning-making. Playfulness enables leaders to imagine alternatives beyond existing frameworks, and to sustain motivation in situations where traditional goals are insufficient. This extends Lear's concept into organizational and leadership contexts, showing how radical hope can be enacted through everyday practices.

Contextualizing playful leadership in Finland

The Finnish working-life context provides an important backdrop for interpreting these findings. High levels of social trust, relatively flat hierarchies, and strong welfare structures may create conditions that support the legitimacy of playfulness in leadership. The leaders' accounts suggest that playfulness is easier to enact in environments characterized by psychological safety and autonomy, aligning with broader happiness research linking well-being to trust and freedom.

At the same time, the findings also reveal cultural tensions: playfulness was sometimes linguistically avoided or framed cautiously, indicating that even in high-trust contexts, playfulness remains a negotiated and potentially contested practice. This highlights the importance of leadership in legitimizing playfulness and creating space for it within organizational cultures.

Theoretical implications

Taken together, the findings contribute to play and leadership scholars in three key ways: First, they advance understanding of adult playfulness as a leadership-relevant disposition rather than a personality trait or isolated behavior. Second, they conceptualize playful leadership as an enacted, relational practice that operates through mindset, interaction, and cultural enablement. Third, by integrating radical hope into the analysis, the study positions playfulness as a resource for future orientation and organizational renewal under conditions of uncertainty. In sum, this study extends Lear's concept of radical hope into organizational and leadership contexts by showing how playful leadership enables leaders and employees to remain oriented toward meaningful futures even when outcomes are uncertain or not yet imaginable.

Limitations of the study

We identify several limitations in the study: First, the qualitative design and small sample of eight leaders based in creative industries limit the generalizability of the findings. However, the study aims at firsthand insights into playful leadership in Finland. Second, there are national and cultural differences in interpretations of playfulness (Dodgson & Gann 2018, 218). The research is situated within the Finnish working-life context,

characterized by high levels of trust, relatively low hierarchy, and strong social safety structures. These contextual factors may create particularly favorable conditions for playfulness. Third, the analysis is based on leaders' self-reported accounts. While these perspectives are essential for understanding leadership practices, the absence of employee perspectives means that the study does not capture how playful leadership is experienced across organizational levels. Finally, the study draws primarily on organizations within creative and play-adjacent industries, which may already be receptive to playful approaches.

Future research should examine playful leadership across diverse cultural and organizational contexts to better understand how societal conditions such as trust, hierarchy, and job security shape the possibilities for playfulness at work. In addition, future research could examine whether millennials and younger generations of employees and leaders perceive playfulness and playful leadership as important resources for navigating uncertainty, organizational change, and future work. Building on the present findings, our future research will examine playful leadership and playful human minds—characterized by playfulness and entrepreneurial mindsets—their manifestations across diverse contexts, and the ways in which they can be fostered in increasingly complex workplaces.

Conclusions

This study explored playful leadership through the lens of adult playfulness and radical hope in the context of Finnish working life. Drawing on qualitative interviews with leaders operating in creative and play-oriented organizations, the findings demonstrate that playful leadership is not centered on specific activities but on a cognitive-emotional orientation embedded in processes that enable curiosity, experimentation, and openness in everyday leadership practices.

Playfulness emerged as a purposeful, future-oriented resource that supports creativity, trust, and psychological safety in a time of rapid change. Still, playfulness within serious contexts, such as work, is often not discussed in terms of play but rather understood as creativity alone. Therefore, our work aims to address the importance of play and playfulness in discussions on work-life creativity, even in its 'radical' forms. Further, we consider it essential to highlight the crucial relation that play has with radical hope: A hopeful workforce benefits from acknowledging the value of play for hope, as we can see that *play is hope in action.*

In their book *The playful entrepreneur: how to adapt and thrive in uncertain times*, Dodgson and Gann (2018) state

that "playful people are highly productive and valuable in the modern workplace, and playfulness is something to which everyone can aspire and which organizations should promote. Play at work brings progress, enhances our humanity and adds to the distinctiveness of what we can contribute as humans compared to machines" (2018, p. 9).

Indeed, as noted by scholars, such as John Seely Brown, "Play is an essential factor in being able to regrind your conceptual lens in a world of constant change" (Brown 2015, p. 14), bringing with it radical hope, something implicitly recognized as a necessity in "modern playful workplaces" (Dodgson & Gann 2018, p. 26), which increasingly, set demands for human creativity in an era of rapid technologization of work and new work life practices with AI that can be understood as work through the employment of hybrid intelligence. Being playful in work is not equal for all, however: "It is easier to be a player in a playful organization," Dodgson and Gann state (2018, p. 219).

In a working-life landscape increasingly marked by uncertainty, complexity, and emotional strain, this study highlights playful leadership as a vital human capacity understanding the importance of human creativity and playfulness as vital for more promising futures. Drawing on empirical insights from Finnish leaders operating within creative and play-oriented organizations, the findings suggest that adult playfulness functions as a future-oriented mindset that sustains creativity, trust, and emotional resilience at work. By linking playful leadership to radical hope, the study shows how playfulness enables leaders and organizations to remain oriented toward meaningful futures even when outcomes cannot yet be fully imagined. In this sense, playfulness is not opposed to seriousness or responsibility, but rather underpins the courage to experiment, imagine, and renew. As work continues to evolve under the pressures of global crises and technological change, playful leadership offers a pathway toward more humane, hopeful, and sustainable organizational cultures. We think these cultures provide opportunities for individuals to be happier, both individually and collectively. To end, we present an interview excerpt from our study, which illustrates the ultimate connection between work-life play and happiness:

"It (play) could be more visible—it could be more of a kind of glue for the work community; through play we could learn more about each other as employees or colleagues and it could teach us to throw ourselves at each other and perhaps rely on others and trust. I do believe that working communities that play are perhaps happier." (Y2)

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