Organizations are faced with a number of challenges for effectively managing their workforce, such as maintaining and developing employees’ knowledge against the background of demographic shifts, ensuring employees’ pro-organizational behavior, and conducting work in self-managed teams. Across four empirical chapters, the present dissertation investigates learning (studies 1 and 2) and leadership processes (studies 3 and 4) related to these organizational challenges, with an emphasis on the influence of the group context. For example, trainings in organizations are mostly conducted in groups in which employees share knowledge with each other and engage in discussions, thus affecting their learning outcomes. Similarly, leaders must be accepted by the group to establish their position and effectively guide group members’ behavior. Thus, the intra- and interpersonal processes associated with the group context have important implications for understanding contemporary organizational challenges.

Drawing from social identity theory and the information elaboration lens, studies 1 and 2 investigate processes and boundary conditions of knowledge development in age-diverse groups. On the one hand, according to social identity theory, learning in age-diverse groups can be impaired because individuals tend to prefer others whom they perceive as similar to themselves (i.e., “in-group” members) over others perceived as dissimilar (“out-group”). Because dissimilar group members are perceived as a potential identity threat, employees’ willingness to share knowledge with each other might be reduced in age-diverse groups. On the other hand, the information elaboration perspective argues that members of age-diverse groups could potentially tap a larger pool of knowledge from different areas and engage in deeper knowledge processing discussions, which may promote learning outcomes. Indeed, based on 31 in-depth, longitudinal interviews involving young and older trainees enrolled in a full-time intergenerational learning program at an automobile manufacturer, the first study shows that not all types of knowledge (i.e., expert, practical, social, and meta-cognitive knowledge) were exchanged equally between employees from different generation across a group’s lifespan. The data revealed that in newly formed trainee groups, employees from different generations required some time before feeling safe enough to start interacting with the “out-group” (i.e., members from a different generation).
Furthermore, while there was an intense phase of knowledge exchange after employees got to know each other better, participants also tended to split up into sub-groups again towards the end of the program. Building on these findings, this study develops a phase model of intergenerational learning in organizational groups.

Study 2 adds to this perspective by investigating boundary conditions of knowledge sharing in age-diverse groups in a short-term learning experience. 211 employees participated in a one-day collaborative group training and associated survey. In this setting, group members did not have much time to get to know each other, such that the depth of knowledge exchange might have been hampered in age-diverse groups through the occurrence of social identity processes that made participants feel insecure. Indeed, the results showed that perceived age diversity, but not objective diversity, was negatively linked to learning outcomes, and this relationship was mediated by knowledge sharing. Moreover, psychological safety climate was found to act as a buffer against the negative effects of perceived age diversity (moderated mediation model).

Overall, studies 1 and 2 contribute to our understanding of employees’ knowledge development in organizations as a social process that can be influenced by the (time-sensitive) interactions with other training group members.

Turning to the role of leaders in dealing with organizational challenges, in the next two chapters I consider the group context when investigating leaders’ effect on followers’ pro-organizational behavior (study 3) and the development of group members into informal leaders in self-managed teams (study 4). In particular, study 3 adopts a social identity lens to examine how leaders shape followers’ behavior through their effect on followers’ identity. A scenario study with 138 participants and a field study with 225 employees suggested that leaders perceived as ethical influence their followers’ pro-organizational behavior through affecting followers’ moral identity. Furthermore, these identity effects were more pronounced when followers perceived their leader as being highly group-prototypical, i.e., as being representative for the group and embodying the group’s identity.
Study 4 complements this identity-related perspective on leadership by focusing on the social interaction processes through which individuals gain interpersonal influence over time, i.e. through which they emerge as leaders. Particularly, this study adds to leadership theorizing by explicating how emergent leadership is associated differently with task-, relations- and change-oriented communication as the social context changes over a team’s lifecycle. Data were gathered at three measurement points in a sample of 42 self-managed teams working on an 8-week consulting. Multilevel modelling indicated that task-oriented communication was a stable predictor of emergent leadership. Relations-oriented communication gained importance, such that it predicted emergent leadership at the end. Change-oriented lost relevance, such that it was only a predictor of emergent leadership at the beginning of project work.

In sum, this dissertation provides novel theoretical and empirical insights into the role of learning and leadership as dynamic processes embedded in a group context that help organizations to deal with current challenges. The presented studies showcase qualitative as well as quantitative approaches; they rely on multiple sources of data (i.e., supervisor/trainer/mentor narrative, employee ratings, information on objective team composition, behavioral data) as well as different forms of data collection (interviews, survey measures, experimental and field study designs, video-taping/interaction coding). The results are obtained using a range of analytical methods (qualitative content analysis/Gioia method, moderated mediation index, and micro-level temporal interaction analysis). The findings have important implications for conceptualizing and designing learning in organizational groups in a way that promotes active sharing and integration of knowledge. Moreover, this thesis emphasizes the scholarly value of theory development and empirical analysis in understanding leadership as a relational process shaped through the interactions between leaders and followers. The insights presented in this dissertation are also highly relevant for human resource management practitioners who are in charge of training employees in diverse learning groups and responsible for selecting and developing leaders.