



**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

## **Master's Thesis**

# **Culture in Crisis!**

Exploring how employees make sense of corporate culture during economic crisis

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A study of a city hotel business in Thessaloniki, Greece

School of Economics and Management  
Managing People, Knowledge and Change

Supervisor: Mats Benner

Authors: Nikolaos Amoridis, Petréa Wahlfried, Sara Romé

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*Still I Rise*

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may tread me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise

*Maya Angelou (1978)<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Maya Angelou was one of the most celebrated American Poets of our time. Born in 1928 and died in 2014. Her life has spanned much of the African American struggle for racial equality.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the concept of corporate culture and leadership at a hotel in a crisis environment. In particular, we ask to what extent this corporate culture is challenged by the leadership during a crisis situation. The study was conducted in a city hotel in Thessaloniki, Greece. The financial crisis had and continues to have a great impact in the Eurozone. The crisis made its most aggressive appearance in Greece during 2009 and is still going strong. Based upon literature that supports the connection of corporate culture, leadership and commitment, management is vital during crisis. Through loosely structured interviews we investigated to what extent this corporate culture exists in a hotel in Greece and how the specific form of leadership of the management is influencing corporate culture. The study made in Thessaloniki is qualitative and has an interpretive character. The findings of this study suggest that the corporate culture is affected by the leadership style, threatened during crisis but at the same time its employees seem to *connect* and get a *family* kind of atmosphere. Furthermore, our findings could add to the existing literature regarding *corporate culture* and *leadership*. Since we investigate a hotel that strives to survive during crisis with an ambiguous leadership style and its direct implications to the culture of the company, we hope that our study could be used as a base for further research into the three fields mentioned.

Keywords: corporate culture, financial crisis, leadership, organizational environment, employee commitment

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## 1 Introduction

*In this chapter we provide the reader with a background of our chosen theme; the information about us as authors; and the generation of the thesis topic. Relations to earlier research in the field, and the way this study hopefully can contribute to the existing literature, will also be discussed. The area of problem and a broad overview of the theme of this thesis will be presented. Furthermore, the research question is presented and the chapter finishes with a discussion related to contribution and generalization issues around as well as the structure of the thesis.*

### 1.1 Background

The study of organizations as distinct social forms started to be advanced in the late 30's of the twentieth century. In the 40's it differentiated into three directions in organizational research, guidelines related to the names of very important sociologists like: Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, James March and Philip Selznick. Considering the organization as a “structural expression of social action”, Selznick (1948) stressed that, on the one hand, every organization has a use value as a tool for achieving aims, on the other hand, the organization is an active system influenced by both the external environment and the social features of its members (Muscalu, 2014). One example of a negative influence in the external environment of an organization could be a financial crisis like the one that struck Europe the past decade.

The economic crisis in the EU area is known to most of us. The Greek government-debt crisis is part of a now ongoing European debt crisis and a result of a recession. This recession is believed to have been directly caused locally in Greece by a combination of structural weaknesses of the Greek economy sideways with a decade long presence of overly high organizational deficits and debits on public accounts. In late 2009, fear developed among investors regarding Greece's capacity to meet its debt obligations due to a strong increase in government debt levels. This fear along with a continuous existence of high deficits, led to a crisis of confidence<sup>2</sup> (Sfakianakis, 2013).

A nepotism kind of system in the country rewarded supporters of the two biggest political parties with government jobs. This practice of system eventually led Greece to have one out of its five

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/09/the-greek-depression/>



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citizens of working age, a government job. The culture just mentioned created a gap between the leaders of the country, the people living and the Greek nation. The structure of this culture is common in organizations throughout the country, down to even smaller businesses. In Greece, there is quite often a gap between management and the employees who deal with customers directly. The corporate culture of the companies in the nation will differ from one working place to another but many of them will be affected by this gap. If a person is a manager, a politician or a business manager, had already managed and achieved success. The manager do not have to lead his/her subordinates. This type of culture is affecting political structure, inhabitants of Greece, workplaces in the country and last but not least lifestyle of laborer (Sfakianakis, 2013).

## 1.2 Personal Information

We are three students attending the master program “Managing People, Knowledge, and Change” at Lund University which is located in Sweden. Two of us are from south of Sweden; Petréa and Sara, and the third from Greece is Nikos We are 40, 50 and 26 years of age respectively and have different cultural backgrounds. However we each share the European history and knowledge about the economic crisis that has affected the area in general and Greece especially. This is may be essential to mention, since our different sex, age, origins and cultural backgrounds triggered conversations related to our thesis topic, to the data collection and analysis. These conversations provided us with greater insight of how the three of us, who work together for the completion of a thesis, may have different thoughts and experiences for the same topic and data. To recap our point, this exchange of ideas and experiences was of great help while analyzing the data.

## 1.3 Generation of the topic

All three of us share an interest on organizational culture and leadership, and decided to transform our knowledge into partnership for the sake of the thesis. The initial idea of investigating corporate culture in a crisis environment was triggered by one of the authors (Nikos) who was brought up in Greece and has experienced the effects of the crisis. He was facing the outcomes of the financial crisis in EU and Greece, and wished to draw attention upon a subject that has gained immense dimensions globally.

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As all other nations, Greece has many different industries, businesses and workplaces. We have chosen to explore the biggest industry and take one small piece of a huge cake. The biggest industry is tourism and the small piece of cake was to focus on is a five star hotel placed in Thessaloniki, Greece. When Nikos described the organizational structure of this hotel, its employees and their attitudes because he worked there for a year, we found this company representative to our early thoughts of study. Moreover, Sara has a 12 years of experience in tourism business and Nikos also works in this sector as well, so that gave us an advantage of finding hidden aspects that only people who work in this area can identify.

#### 1.4 Earlier Research

The load of material of how crisis has affected Greece has no end, and it is in every media every day of the week. The consequence of crisis in Greece is affecting us all. We wanted to share the picture of how the outcome of the Greek crisis is affecting employees in the country. One possible reason of this crisis could be that the leaders of the Greek nation have not been able to lead the country through the crisis and this lack of proper leadership is somehow succeeded to move from the top to the bottom. This lack of proper leadership in crisis occasions is touching even the small employee in a hotel in Thessaloniki. The literature on leadership styles is pretty broad (Hetland et al 2011, Aasland et al 2014, Skoglund et al 2007). It has though; been difficult to find literature on how a specific model of leadership is not only affecting the employees but how it is affecting them during a crisis like the one Greece is going through right now.

Corporate culture is a topic that scholars have been troubled for many years. We have been interested in corporate culture through the eyes of the employees. How is culture affecting them? How has their corporate culture been formed? What kind of leadership are the employees in a Greek hotel experiencing and in what way is that affecting their work, their future and everyday life?

There are numerous definitions of corporate culture. One view is that culture represents the unspoken code of communication among members of an organization (Guiso et al. 2014). Kreps (1990) stresses that corporate culture is the reputation that a company has developed over time. Consequently, corporate culture does not change the preferences of individuals; it only alters their incentives in a repeated game. By contrast, Hodgson (1996) stresses that a corporate culture may

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modify the preferences of individuals and induce them to internalize some norms. Often, the corporate culture can be seen as a way of social control (Guiso et al 2014). In this thesis we will explore how culture is created by the employees, and less by the management's ambitions to shape and control corporate culture.

### 1.5 Research question

We had an image in our mind created by media that Greek leadership in general connected with the politician leadership as a role model, considered to be corrupted, neglecting things and striving for status, money and power. Some characteristic head titles from a random search online are these<sup>3</sup>:

*"Greece 'most corrupt' EU country, new survey reveals"*

*BBC News*

*"Corruption still alive and well in post-bailout Greece"*

*The Guardian*

*"Euro under Threat: Culture of Corruption Drags Greece Down"*

*Spiegel*

So, we found interesting to investigate if this kind of leadership existed in the specific hotel business and in that case how the employees cope with and respond to this certain form of leadership in the specific context. We picked a hotel business in Greece because tourism is the biggest income of the country and a change can affect its economy and its whole entity. Moreover, it is of common interest for travelers, being one of the most popular tourist destinations in Europe. More specifically, and by bearing in mind our previous discussion, our focus question is:

*To what extent leadership style affects employees' perspectives on corporate culture during economic crisis?*

We are interested to find out to what extent leadership is affecting the corporate culture and how the everyday life of the employees is handled by them. When the management is not the obvious leader, who is? Without corporate training, where do the employees get the knowledge from?

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<sup>3</sup> Quotes taken from a random Google search with words such as: Greece, debt, corruption

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Whom to trust? Where to turn if you need guidance? Is the corporate culture been formed due to lack of a proper leadership and is this what the employees are looking for? The economic crisis in Greece became part of a culture that has been in the nation for many years due to the political lack of leadership. Does the leadership style facilitates to the swelling of this crisis even among the employees working there?

## 1.6 Research Purpose

The purpose of our thesis is to uncover the importance of leadership and how the absence of tangible expressions of leadership affects employees and corporate culture during a financial crisis situation. We aim to gain a greater insight in the way this affects the Greek people. The goal is to shed light on the interplay among the employees especially when they experience a specific style of leadership and how this affects their work and everyday life. We hope that our thesis might lead to suggestions for dealing with the challenge that the specific management in this hotel is facing. How employees are affected, react, complain and hope in this hotel with a specific leadership style from the manager.

Commonly, corporate culture acts as a form of shared norms and expectations learnt by a group of people (employees), to unravel their difficulties related to both external adaption and internal integration (Schein, 2004). Consequently, a cultural change is not the management trying to impose new behaviors, rather a change of the ideas, values and meanings of this group of people (Alvesson, 2002). Therefore, by interviewing employees at a hotel in Thessaloniki, we wanted to explore their observations, understanding of corporate culture, style of leadership throughout the current crisis situation, and hopefully shed light on our research question.

## 1.7 Relevance to Literature

This thesis presents, summarizes and encapsulates some basic parts of the existing literature on crisis and corporate culture, focusing upon the literature that understands corporate crisis and corporate culture from employees' perspective and where leadership is being used. Since the literature relevant to our subject from the employees' perspective was limited, we tried to make the reader understand the basic theoretical concepts from the employee's angle, as we did. The management's perspective literature on the other hand was more representative, so we have tried

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to present a general theory framework for the reader also; derived from books, articles and other studies. We will of course reflect upon these theories we found but also present even more specific theories to back our claims while presenting and analyzing the thesis.

### 1.8 Contributions

Locally, our research could benefit the hotel we worked with. Hopefully, the management will be able to use the findings and maybe change the way of leading this hotel. Maybe, the specific questions addressed to the company employees, and their answers, shed some light regarding organizational culture, lack of leadership and leadership during crisis and even lead to adjustments and insight of the current culture.

On a broad level, the research could contribute in the body of the existing literature about the relation between corporate culture, crisis and leadership from the employees' perspective. Consequently, we may add some insight into the field of leadership during economic crisis because the study is based on Greek culture and this situation has not been studied yet thoroughly, as far as we know. This field primarily corresponds to our Suggestions, presented in the end of the thesis. For instance, a problem that arise from our findings and could lead to further research is *how* the hotel can build up a trustworthy relationship with the employees and which type of leadership could be better suited for the situation.

### 1.9 Generalization Issues

We do not claim that this research of ours has general applicability to the existing literature. As Bryman and Bell (2007) stress, generalization is one of the basic areas of criticism towards qualitative research. Due to limited time we focused on this specific hotel in the specific country of Greece and had a small number of participants. Nevertheless, we believe that even a small piece of pie is still a piece of pie that might be the same as another. By bearing that in mind and because tourism is assumed to be the biggest business of Greece and crisis has a great impact in peoples' working life, we hope that our findings could be used as a base or as a representative study for future researchers. To sum up, we hope that the quality of our conclusions, drawn from the data we worked with, will be the factor to assess generalization (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

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## 1.10 Delimitation

It is of importance to mention that we are not studying the details of corporate culture related to the financial crisis, nor does this thesis intend to judge any actions the management of the hotel has taken. The specific style of leadership identified at the hotel and the corporate culture spotted during the crisis will be mentioned. However, the focus will be on corporate culture as a result of this type of leadership. Further on, we have not intended to review all the types of corporate culture within organizations. We have decided to focus on how leadership is affecting employees and corporate culture in Greece. The findings and analysis are mainly based on the standpoint of the observer; by observer we mean our interpretations of the interviews concerning corporate culture from the perspective of the employees (Schein, 1999).

Since we are doing research on corporate culture, it should be noted that corporate culture is intangible and hard to describe (Alvesson, 2002). Worth mentioning is that the impact of financial crisis upon culture is regarded as non-cultural and “as affecting organizational culture only through reactions to circumstances and conditions that have consequences for operation” (Alvesson, 2002, p.159). As authors of this thesis we will base the discussion on our conclusions on employees’ interpretations of the specific style of leadership.

## 1.11 Structure

Firstly, different theories about corporate culture and leadership will be presented, focusing on the connection of corporate culture with the employees and the effect of leadership style to this relationship. Secondly, it will be illustrated our research approach as far as the different themes relevant to the methodology. Moreover, the process of data collection and analysis will also be explained. Afterwards, a thorough demonstration of the empirical findings will be presented as far as a description of the different aspects during work using the words of the employees. We want for the reader, to be able to understand what is happening in this hotel by the words and thoughts of the employees. These findings will be analyzed based on the methodological approach of this study and the literature review. Finally, the conclusion part will contain limitations of this study and our final thoughts. A clear answer of our research question as far as suggestions that the employees believe are necessary to survive and even take this hotel to the next level.

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## 2 Literature Review

*In this chapter, the terms “culture”, “organizational culture”, “corporate culture” will be discussed in order to provide the reader with a general framework of the basic concepts of this thesis. Then, this chapter will focus on the relation of these terms with the employees and how their commitment is affected. Finally, a relation between environment and culture will be illustrated and a concluding entrance to the practical part of Methodology and Empirics.*

### 2.1 Culture

Culture is a shared set of values, beliefs, and expected behaviors. (Hofstede, 1980) According to Douglas "Culture is a blank space, a highly respected, empty pigeonhole. Economists call it "tastes" and leave it severely alone. Most philosophers ignore it -- to their own loss. Marxists rate it obliquely as ideology or superstructure. Psychologists avoid it, by concentrating on child subjects. Historians bend it any way they like. Most believe it matters." (Douglas, 1982:183). The concept of culture for over a century has been connected to anthropology and sociology. One way to avoid getting lost in the labyrinth of too broad an anthropological concept of culture is to use it in the sense of a corporate culture. Ravasi and Schultz (2006) argued that an organizational culture is a set of shared assumptions that guide what happens in organizations by defining appropriate behavior for various situations. It was not until the 1970's and 80's that scholars such as Turner and Pettigrew (1973), Ouchi (1981) and Sathe (1985) tried to analyze the concept of culture from a management perspective (Hatch, 1993). Schein (1981, 1983, 1984, 1985) however was most influential in his formation of a conceptual framework for analyzing the culture of organizations. This structural model proposed by Schein (1992:9) is adopted as a framework to analyze organizational culture. Even if it received less criticism than other models (Alvesson and Berg, 1992) and it has an ability to combine different perspectives in cultural studies (Kong, 2000), scholars analyzed culture from different perspectives. For example both Feldman (1991) and Meyerson and Martin (1987) argued that the function of culture is not to maintain social structure due to the ambiguity lying within its concepts (Hatch, 1993). Moreover, symbolic-interpretivist researchers such as Smircich and Morgan (1983) or Kreiner (1989) focused on symbolic behavior in organizations and pursued perspectives that Schein ignored (Hatch, 1993). The main arguments against that conceptual model were the oversimplification of complex phenomena such as those that face organizations every day.

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## 2.2 Organizational culture

Organizational culture and corporate culture are very often used interchangeably. Both of them refer to the collective values, viewpoints and attitudes within an organization. (Muscalu, 2014) The term corporate culture focuses on corporations with attention to make a profit, while organizational culture extends to all forms of organizations including small business, privately held companies and nonprofit organizations. The meaning is fundamentally the same. There might be some variation in how cultures manifest in different settings. Organizational culture is a difficult concept to define; in the literature we do not find a universally accepted definition. Edgar Schein (1984) for example stresses that organizational culture is the basic model assumptions that a given group gave, discovered or developed in learning to cooperate with external adjustment problems and internal integration and that can be considered valid and therefore can be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems (Muscalu 2014).

## 2.3 Corporate Culture

### 2.3.1 Corporate culture as part of the organization

Corporate cultures, in difference from some organizational cultures, tend to emphasize ways of operating and functioning that lead to optimum profit. Different businesses and industries embody dissimilar cultural bents to meet strategies that work for that business or that industry. According to some studies, a solid corporate culture reflects the values of the owners, the management team, and the workforce. It also mirrors a company's mission and has a direct impact on company policies and strategies. The corporate culture defines how employees interact with each other and with clients and other stakeholders. Successful firms exhibit strong and vibrant corporate cultures (Simoneaux and Stroud, 2014). Corporate culture might be expressed as the beliefs and behaviors that determine how the members of the company and management interrelate and handle different business transactions. It is indirect, not specifically clear, and grows organically over time from the increasing personalities of the people the company hires. A company's culture will be reflected in, for example, its dress code, business hours, office setup, employee benefits, income, hiring decisions, handling of clients, client satisfaction and other aspect of operations within the company (Simoneaux and Stroud, 2014).



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Corporate culture affects also the way in which people act and perform in a company. It can be seen as the exclusive pattern of values, attitudes, rituals, beliefs, norms, expectations, socialization, and assumptions of employees in the organization. (Armstrong, 2009; Chatman and Caldwell, 1991; Eldridge and Crombie, 1974; Furnham and Gunter, 1993; Schein, 1992 as cited in Nongo and Ikyanyon, 2012) Therefore it's associated with the character of the organization, depicting employee conduct even when they are not instructed on what to do. A durable culture also forms how people work organized and eventually what they are able to achieve different things together. To support the culture, management can encourage employee participation and responsibility at different levels and show consistency in applying company rules (Nongo and Ikyanyon, 2012).

It is presumed that corporate culture reflects employees' sense of engagement, identification and fitting in to the company and that such sentiments might reasonably be expected to affect commitment (Nongo and Ikyanyon, 2012). According to Enofe et al (2012) corporate culture is the system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and values established by company leaders to shape and strengthen employee's perceptions, activities, behaviors and outcomes. These measurements take on a more personal role to the employee when s/he is syncretic with company cultural expectations. When the corporate culture is tactically strong, competitive and affirmed, the company's performance assessments might increase (Enofe et al, 2012). Strong corporate cultures' might lead to joint trust among employees; effective communication and conclusion making; mutual respect and acceptance of individual and shared achievements; competency; and justifiable feedback systems for improving behaviors (Enofe et al, 2012). The highest level of corporate culture comes when the understanding of the culture is adopted at the deepest level, the tacit assumptions. When values and beliefs are observed over an extended period of time, the participants do not have to speak the corporate culture out loud because they are assumed without verbal and the behavior becomes the assumption (Enofe et al, 2012).

### 2.3.2 Corporate Culture as an organization entity

Many concepts mentioned above show that organizational culture could be seen and analyzed as a part of the organization that can be transformed and manipulated. However, it can also be analyzed as the total being of the organization itself (Modaff et al., 2011). Our view is consistent

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with the latter claim and we agree with Smircich (1983, 28(3): 339-358) who categorizes culture as a Root Metaphor for Conceptualizing Organization. Organizations can be seen as “expressive forms and manifestations of human consciousness”. (Smircich, 1983, 28(3))

Culture as a root metaphor is the process of sense-making and represents a shift of the common way of comparing social phenomena. It provides a deep understanding on how the members of an organization make sense of the world around them. Instead of denying or challenging the ambiguity within the culture, it accepts it. According to Meyerson and Martin (1987, 24(6): 624-647) the focus of attention in the research could be the legitimization of this complexity. Different interpretations of the same subject can simultaneously be embraced. Also the awareness of the ambiguity itself is one of the characteristics. From this perspective, the way things are, is the ‘truth’ and not a temporary state of discovering the ‘truth’.

The communication between members are always constructed and reconstructed through social interaction. Lastly, this interaction among with common experiences and personal attributes can create subcultures beside the visible culture. Moreover, differences in meanings, values, norms and attitudes can be identified as incompatible and impossible to measure or compare. In order to portray this way of looking at a culture, different viewpoints and disagreements co-exists with the ignorance of others, making it difficult to create “borders in the map” (Meyerson and Martin, 1987).

## 2.4 Cultural phenomena

Some scholars (cf. Hofstede et al., 1990; Trice and Beyer, 1993) suggest that cultural phenomena are related to history and tradition; have some depth, are difficult to grasp and account for, and must be interpreted. They are collective and shared by members of groups, they are primarily ideational in character, having to do with meanings, understandings, beliefs, knowledge, and other intangibles. They are holistic, intersubjective and emotional rather than strictly rational and analytical.

Some theorists have found aspects of organizational life to study: jokes, coffee breaks, the way people dress, the “rite” of firing people, stories told about present or former authorities within the company and so on (Boje 1991; Dandridge 1986; Martin et.al. 1983; Trice and Beyer 1984 as cited

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in Alvesson, 2002:146). The content and form of these activities and behavior, often seem to be considered of some importance of themselves, viewed as contributing to the forming of organizational life. But, as the relationship between a particular cultural manifestation and broader cultural patterns may be weak and uncertain, we must understand that in order to get at the significant aspects of organizational culture – the meanings, understandings and symbols that are most vital for members of the organization in developing orientations within their communities and work settings – great care must be taken to include those expressive and symbolic forms that are related to everyday life thinking and feeling, i.e. the cultural reality in which people live. Such a focus may be more connected to a group within an organization and not necessarily with the organization as a legal entity. (Alvesson, 2002; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2008).

According to Alvesson (2002:5) culture is a more or less interconnected system of meanings and symbols, where social interaction takes place. Culture is regarded as a “frame of reference of beliefs, expressive symbols and values, by means of which individuals define their environment, express their feelings and make judgments”. Geertz (1973: 145) argues that culture is the making of meaning through which human beings understand their experiences and conduct their actions, whereas social structure is how action appears in the network of social relationships which actually exists. This implies that culture and social structure represent different abstractions of the same phenomenon.

Kunda (1992:8) also explains culture to be understood as a system of common symbols and meanings, which provides “the shared rules governing cognitive and affective aspects of membership in an organization, and the means whereby they are shaped and expressed”. We intend to follow Alvesson’s definition of culture (2002:5), and according to his theory, describe the dimensions that we also will use later in the analysis of the interviews.

## 2.5 Rituals, Meanings, Symbols and Values

As we interpret Alvesson (2002), there is less research in the field that explores meaning and symbolism; scholars tend to study social patterns like structures, behaviors and relations. Culture research focuses on meanings anchored and transmitted in a symbolic form. Cultural meanings

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guide thinking, feeling and acting in the investigated culture. Therefore, it is hard to say that culture is not important, even if it is sometimes argued that culture is described as something too vague to be useful. Cultural analysis is though more delimited and precise due to its direction at specific phenomena; for example how people think strategically, how employees understand and react in relation to their employers, how the customers and different symbols in the company are interpreted and given meaning to. This study will illustrate the important symbolic, meaningful expressions of organizational culture in the hotel as we intend to perceive a better understanding of the organization's "heart" (employees). This categorization is only used for the analysis of the organization and facilitate our methodology process.

### **Rituals**

Rituals are an integral part of an organization's culture and can be described as the systematic and programmed routines that will influence the kind of behavior the employees are expected to have. Rituals are used commonly as contributors to the process of an organization but also used as a reinforcing form to the values of the organization through the active participation of the organization's members (Bell, C., 1992). Through the "ceremonies" the company expresses what the company stands for (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). When members of an organization are brought together through a ritual process they offer their energy and their emotions to embrace the values of the organization. Through the ritual process, non-members become members and grow the organization community culture. Lastly, through this community and meaning process created by rituals, transformation of the organization is achievable (Bell, 1992; Bell, 1997)

### **Meanings**

Meaning refers to the process of making an object relevant and meaningful (Alvesson, 2002). Organizations are socially constructed systems of shared meanings where the "actors" shape the social reality and environment through social interaction (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985 as cited in Heracleous, 2003:26). Moreover, it can be identified as a point that someone can stand for it (Alvesson, 2002).

In a cultural context, an object becomes relevant and meaningful when it is socially shared and not personally attached (Alvesson, 2002:4). Individuals are ambiguous from their nature with many pluralistic sides on their characters. This becomes evident when some rules from the management can be seen as a bureaucratic move to restrain responsibility and judgment or as a move towards

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order and coherence among the employees. Meanings vary within a social group, but it is through culture that different idiosyncrasies become more homogeneous and create a common sense of reality through symbols, values and frameworks (Alvesson, 2002:5).

### **Symbols**

“A symbol can be defined as an object – a word or statement, a kind of action or a material phenomenon – that stands ambiguously for something else and/or something more than the object itself ” (Cohen, 1974 as cited in Alvesson, 2002:4). When we want to understand organizational culture it is the collective symbolism that is of most importance. According to Flamholz and Randle (2011) culture is manifested in the artifacts that are in and on display in the company’s facilities. Everything in an organization— from coffee cups to artwork— contains a cultural message, whether explicitly intended or not. Sometimes though, a company’s culture is subtler and needs to be “read.”, there are few clues about what the culture is: no culture statement, no pictures pertaining to the history of the business, no hint of what line of business the company is in.

### **Values**

Values are the deep grounded ideas and approaches within the company that form the core in the corporate culture; for instance how “success” is defined in the culture. (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). The values are based upon experiences that work in a special kind of business, but the employees have a strong influence on the way of creating norms and attitudes in the company. Schein (2005) asserts that the founding of an organization and the development of its culture is an important period. During the formation process, the founders create the cultural qualities of the organization which reflect their values and beliefs. Through this dynamic ongoing process, the leader creates and is in turn shaped by the organizational culture

## **2.6 Organizational Culture and Employees**

### **2.6.1 Influence of corporate culture on employees**

Employees work in a social environment where the corporate culture defines how they are influenced. This is important to be studied because we believe that the effect of corporate culture on the employees in different stages and forms can shape the way they work. Working in a company means that the employee has to adapt, value and discover the culture not only through

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asking but even just living there. It's what s/he is experiencing during work. Every company and organization has their own culture or better IS a different culture, which can be fragmented and therefore difficult to interpret from the outside. Deal and Kennedy (1982) define a company as a human institution and an organization that is alive.

The culture has a powerful influence on the organization, and as earlier mentioned it affects almost every part of the organization – from promotion and decision-making to the clothes of the employees and their recreational activities. Byrne (2002) indicates that a strong organizational culture will exert more influence on employees than a weak one. Mowday et al (2013:19) suggest that organizations would not work without the commitment of their employees. Correspondingly employees would lose one very basic source of identity and belonging without their employers. Deal and Kennedy (1982) also propose that the corporate culture connects people and give meaning and worth to their lives, as well as the employees contribute to the success of the organization.

### 2.6.2 Managerial perspective of corporate culture and employees

We found literature trying to make typologies of strength and weakness in culture, but as we are primarily studying culture as a lived experience these definitions are of most interest from a managerial perspective. A company that has shaped an identity characterized by values, rituals and understands the importance of a cultural network – formal and informal - has an advantage compared to other companies who have not. Deal and Kennedy (1982) suggest that a strong culture has a system with informal rules, which explains how the employees should act more or less. In a weak culture, the employees spend too much time to find out what one should do and how. Kilmann, et al. (1986) describe strong cultures as those where organization members place pressure on other members to adhere to norms. When the culture is “weak”, employees have difficulty defining, understanding, or explaining it. The culture may not have been defined, or it is not being actively managed. As a result, employees are left to interpret the company's values for themselves according to Flamholz and Randle (2011: 27). It is of great importance to study how managerial strategies relate to everyday life in an organization. The corporate culture will be strengthened if the managers' behavior are in line with the existing values in the organization. All members of the organization make the values “lively” through their awareness of the values and why they are so important. If the values are anchored they will make a difference. Values and

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beliefs influence behavior and action – and is directive when a decision is made. Values can also explain which group of employees is most respected - and regarded as most important- and hence influence the employees' choice of career path within the company. Deal and Kennedy (1982) suggest also that values influence the company's communication with the environment.

### 2.6.3 Employees and Commitment

Organizational commitment broadly means how employees experience their organization; if they are committed to their workplace they usually feel a connection to it, that they fit in and that they understand the goals of the organization. These employees add value to the organization as they tend to be more determined in their work, show comparatively high productivity and are more positive in offering their support. (Meyer and Allen, 2010). It is suggested that there are three distinct kinds of organizational commitment – affective, continuance and normative commitment. If employees are affectively committed to their organization, it is probable that they want to stay there. As already mentioned they feel that they fit into the organization and are satisfied with their work. The employees who are affectively committed often feel appreciated; they act as ambassadors and constitute a great asset for the organization. Continuance commitment implies how much employees feel the need to stay at their organization.

Possible reasons for needing to stay with organizations vary, but the reasons relate to a lack of work alternatives, and payment. One example is when employees feel the need to stay because their salary and fringe benefits won't get better if they change to another organization. This example can be a problem for employers, as employees that are continuance committed may become dissatisfied and disengaged with their work and nevertheless are reluctant to leave the organization. Normative commitment among employees means that they feel they should stay in their organization, due to their own personal norms and values. They feel that leaving the organization would have devastating consequences, and feel a sense of guilt about this possibility. In leaving the organization they would create a vacuum in knowledge or skills, which would consequently increase the pressure on their colleagues. Such feelings can negatively influence the performance of employees working in an organization. Also, Mowday et al (1982) propose that a high degree of employee commitment may reverse employees' job dissatisfaction, and make them choose to remain in the organization.

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#### 2.6.4 How is organizational culture manifested among the employees

Culture is manifested almost everywhere in an organization. It is reflected in the words and language people use in communicating with one another according to Flamholz and Randle (2011). It may also appear in the management strategy which instills favorable definitions of reality in the minds of employees, where domination through symbolism becomes the objective (Knights and Willmott, 1987; Rosen, 1985; Willmott, 1993 as cited in Alvesson, 2002:12).

Formal statements of a company's culture are regarded as the "nominal" or "stated" culture. This is, in brief, what a company wants its culture to be. The real culture, by contrast, consists of the values, beliefs, and norms that actually influence employee behavior. (Flamholz and Randle, 2011:29). Culture cannot be mobilized in terms of thinking, feeling, valuing and behaving according to the will of managers. Instead culture often works as a source of employees' opposition to managerial objectives and control.

Alvesson (2002:40) assumes that culture is "an ongoing creation of social reality and the individuals, through their interactions and communications shape and re-shape their worlds, sometimes habitually so, sometimes in a more conscious and active way". This dimension can be regarded as a kind of determinism where culture creates individuals and individuals create culture. Alvesson (2002:148) also claims that culture refers to the ideational level of ideas, understandings, meanings and symbolism but emphasizes that these cultural phenomena are often affected by and closely related to sociomaterial reality – they are not freely floating around. In particular, the type of work employees are engaged in and the circumstances under which it is carried out interrelate with culture, i.e. there is 'interaction' between behavior, material conditions and cultural meaning. Job content, work organization, level of skills, hierarchical position, differential opportunities, and the demands and patterns of interaction in different groups and strata should all be carefully considered (Mumby, 1988: 108).

What people do is important for cultural orientations due to its effect on interaction patterns. It is essential with physical closeness and cooperation between workers that are involved in a labor process. Shared work experience often leads to the development of shared meanings about work according to Alvesson (2002). He also suggests that in particular at this level of everyday life, where detailed social processes inform relationships between organizational interests, is the content of organizational culture constantly formed and reaffirmed. What appears to be



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commonplace details is in fact the development of norms and values, whereby events and relationships in the organization are given meaning. The ordinary of the everyday is an illusion, for within these details the dynamics of organizational culture take form and start to get used.

#### 2.6.5 How to manage

There has been a trend towards involving employees in different strategic processes within the company, due to changes in values and life-styles among employees and in society. As a result of these developments, including people that do not expect to be bossed, we see anti-authoritarian styles of management and a growing interest in organizational cultures (Alvesson, 2002).

In service management for example, there is a shift from control of behavior and measurement of outputs to control of employees' attitudes and commitment in order to enhance the employee service-mindedness and accordingly the level of customer satisfaction (Alvesson, 1990). If there is less authority from managers, they have to convince the employees instead, about the beliefs, values and ideals to attempt and recognize as guiding principles.

Nelson and Cohen (2010 as cited in Sabri, 2013) indicate that many leaders, unfortunately, do not recognize the influence that organizational culture has on the past, present, and future activities of their organizations. Even more important is their lack of understanding about how they influence the culture.

#### 2.6.6 Employees and organizational culture in times of economic crisis

In organization theory the connection between culture and environment is treated as "weak and indirect" (Alvesson, 2002:160). Our focus is not on a study towards a cultural change situation but rather an impact of an external factor in culture cultivation. Following Kunda and Barley's (2001:78, 79) discussion about culture and environment we concur the statement of "interrelated entities" between the two. Therefore, when organizations have to respond to external pressures and protect themselves so has the culture, since it is also influenced from the environment in a similar way (Dolomati and Liu, 2012).

Sabri (2013) explains that corporate culture itself forms a protection of several financial risk factors and can therefore in times of crisis be of great importance to increase chances of survival. He also suggests that several problems that occurred during the financial crisis can be explained through

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the fact that many CEOs and executives paid too little attention to their corporate culture compared to the company's profits, assets, brands and excellence of products and services.

The fact that organizations are increasingly experiencing external pressures, like the crisis, obliges them to manage the situation and to realize the vital role that culture plays to be successful in this process of change. According to many scholars, the interest in organizational culture stems from the belief that it has an influence on behavior, leadership styles, decision making and organizational strategies and performance. (Schein, 2005; Denison, 1984; Kotter & Heskett, 1992 as cited in Sabri:Vol.(4), 142).

In today's economic crisis, Kitching et al. (2009) believe that some organizations still continue to exceed customer expectations, maintain employee productivity, and innovate to gain a competitive edge despite the reductions in staff, budgets, and incomes. They achieve that by cultivating a positive organizational culture in a negative economic one. Hence, crisis makes culture more important.

## 2.7 Understanding Culture

“One could say that organizations “are” cultures, i.e. organizations literally include values, meanings and symbols. It is however not clear that it makes sense to view organizations as a culture” (Alvesson, 2002: 29). Alvesson (2002) suggests, that culture as social glue is the most common view of culture, where organizations are integrated and controlled through informal, non-structural means – shared values, beliefs, understandings and norms. Martin and Meyerson (1988: 115, 117) argue that due to the fact that there is ambiguity, uncertainty and contradictions in modern societies and organizations it is difficult to draw cultural and subcultural boundaries. According to Dawson (2010) management, employees and outside observers regard an organizational culture in a quite different way. None of these perspectives is “incorrect”, but basically they are always incomplete.

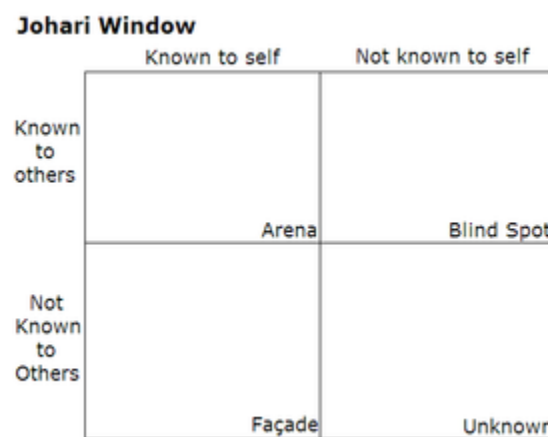
## 2.8 Actual Culture

The Actual Culture is “who we are” – the familiar and everyday practice - and what most people are describing when they refer to “the culture” or “our culture” in an organization. There are almost

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always aspects of “the culture” that are not clearly seen by management. Attempting to understand the Actual Culture from multiple perspectives creates a more complete and precise snapshot of what it really is. Dawson (2010) talks about “Shadow Cultures” and with this approach he borrows the concept of Johari Window. Understanding the Johari Window is key to the understanding of Shadow Cultures.

Johari Window technique is built on the principle that human social interaction – whether individual, group or national – always is influenced by limitations on the degree of awareness as a function of stance or perspective to a referent point.



Figure<sup>4</sup> 1.1

There are four possibilities in the sphere of social interaction, and they are explained as:

- 1) The organization clearly sees some aspects of its culture in the same way that outsiders do.
- 2) The organization sees some aspects of its culture in ways that others do not see.
- 3) The organization is blind, along with outsiders, to some aspects that outsiders see
- 4) The organization is blind, along with outsiders, to some elements of the culture that are unknowable by all observers, inside an outside the organization.

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<sup>4</sup> The Johari window is a technique created in 1955 by two American psychologists, Joseph Luft (1916–2014) and Harrington Ingham (1914–1995), used to help people better understand their relationship with self and others. It is used primarily in self-help groups and corporate settings as a heuristic exercise.

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### 2.8.1 Shadow Cultures<sup>5</sup>

Beside the Actual Culture there are two Shadow Cultures – the “Ideal” Culture and the “Required” Culture. These are not so much typical subcultures as they are imperfect approximations on the way to creating the “to be” or “Vision” Culture.

The reason the Ideal Culture exists is due, in part, to the tendency of individuals and groups to strive and achieve in the future. The reason the Ideal Culture is always out of sync with the Actual Culture is because the organization can never see itself with complete clarity – as an outsider would. There is always some discrepancy between the Actual and Ideal Cultures, but there is a value in the exercise of articulating what “we would like to be”.

Different than the Ideal and Actual Culture is the Required Culture; which is the set of cultural attributes that are most capable of executing the strategy according to the external competitive environment. The Required Culture is what “we must be to succeed or survive”.

### 2.9 Concluding Remark

Due to the absence of the best suited leadership in our investigated organization (see also Chapter 4 and 5), we define the existing culture as shaped by the employees. It is not an informal culture that exists beside a formal culture, but we would regard it as a substitute for a “missing” formal culture. One way of characterizing the hotel’s culture is a combination of Dawson’s (2010) Actual and Shadow Cultures (Ideal and Required). In the hotel there is also no “Required Culture” manifested by the managers but there is a threat from the outside (crisis) that the employees have to confront and deal with every day. We have noticed that employees have created their own culture, built on their experience and their trust in each other’s competence and ability together with a well-functioning teamwork and communication. The underlying values, meanings and symbols of this culture are shaped by the employees, which will also be the glue to hold the culture together even in the times of crisis. In this way the employees try to handle their workplace situation. Further analysis will be conducted in the Analysis part. The critical dimensions that we

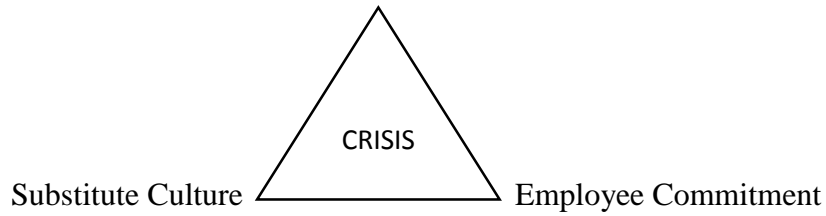
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<sup>5</sup> This subcategory is explained based on Chapter 3 of the book “Leading Culture Change: What Every CEO Needs to Know” by Christopher S. Dawson (2010)

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want to explore through our empirical material and our analysis are interrelated with each other and influence one another. These themes are:

Critical aspects of the specific leadership style in the hotel



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## 3 Methodology

*This chapter describes the approach of our qualitative research and our research reflexivity from the beginning. Moreover, the chapter explains in details how data have been collected and analyzed between Greece and Sweden. Points of credibility, validity and confidentiality will also be illustrated.*

### 3.1 Qualitative Research

Several scholars explored the differences between quantitative and qualitative research and created tables that illustrate the main points of divergence between the two. (Halfpenny 1979; Bryman 1988a; Hammersley 1992b as cited in Bryman & Bell, 2007 p. 425-426).

Some common contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research	
Quantitative	Qualitative
Numbers	Words
Point of view of researcher	Points of view of participants
Researcher distant	Researcher close
Theory Testing	Theory Emergent
Static	Process
Structured	Unstructured
Generalization	Contextual Understanding
Hard, reliable data	Rich, Deep Data
Macro	Micro
Behavior	Meaning
Artificial Settings	Natural Settings

Table 3.1

(Source: Bryman & Bell, 2007 p.426)

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In broad terms, quantitative research method emphasizes on the collection of numbers, data and statistics in a deductive way, having an objectivist conception of social reality and a positivism approach. (Bryman and Bell, 2007 p. 154) On the other hand qualitative research tends to be concerned more about words rather than numbers. It stresses issues of understanding the social world through the interpretation of the participants, having an inductive view between the theory and the research. (Bryman and Bell, 2007 p.402) Of course, criticism in both methods is highly noted in different books and articles and roused many debates. Moreover, a combination of the two methods as one mixed method has been also been proposed, but on this occasion this goes beyond our study. (Bryman and Bell, 2007 p. 645)

We deal this research using a qualitative method because we attempt to make sense of corporate culture phenomena in terms of the meanings employees bring to us. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:3 as cited in Alvesson, 2009 p.7). Defenders of qualitative research claim that is only with that kind of research that “the world can be studied through the eyes of the people who are studied” (Bryan and Bell, 2007 p. 630). Our qualitative research, reflected best by analyzing the thoughts of the participants, in a specific context during a specific time frame (Merriam, 2002). We explored the corporate culture in a specific hotel in Thessaloniki, Greece (social context), based on the subjective experiences of the employees (thoughts and understandings) during economic crisis (historical context) and with no predetermined results in our minds.

### 3.2 Research Approach

Historically and philosophically the concepts of ontology and epistemology (theory of knowledge) refer to different things. There are two main ontological positions “foundationalism/ objectivism/ realism”, which represent an external world that is independent of people’s knowledge of it, and “antifoundationalism/constructivism/ relativism”, which views the world as a socially constructed entity. We prescribe to the latter position. We understand the world as socially constructed and our work towards the interpretivist paradigm; all three of us have a subjective view of the world and recognize the world around us in an inimitable way (Bowers and Todd, 2011). We cannot be objective as observers because we live in a social world and that is affected by social constructions of reality (Palgrave 2010).

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The theoretical paradigm of this research is an interpretive approach with a hermeneutics design. We focused on understanding the meaning construction of the corporate culture of the hotel during crisis by keeping in mind that reality exists in human consciousness itself. (Prasad, 2005) Using the hermeneutics circle design during the interpretation of the interviews, we understood the text as a “whole” that give meaning to the parts and vice versa. For example, when a phrase such as “Greek businessmen are dishonest like 24 carats is 99% pure gold” was mentioned, we did not jump to conclusions but tried to understand these thoughts in the totality of the interview.

We developed strong connections with the text to avoid unproductive prejudices. Using the hermeneutics method we fostered a “dialogue” between the text and us (the interpreters) to achieve a textual and self-understanding (Gadamer, 1960 as cited in Prasad, 2005 p.37). We were able to “listen to the text”, allow it to “speak to us” and create more meaningful questions for the next interviewees as the interpretation and the conduction of the interviews were happening simultaneously (Francis, 1994 as cited in Prasad, 2005 p.37). Using both the “hermeneutics circle” and the “dialogue” we engaged into a theoretical endless repetitive process of the data back and forth until a satisfactory level of understanding was achieved.

### 3.3 Research Reflexivity<sup>1</sup>

Being reflexive in our research<sup>6</sup> means that during our object construction we simultaneously constructed ourselves. (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) In order to create this construction, three things were needed. First, the researchers (us), second an object that can be constructed (hotel’s corporate culture in crisis period) and last a social context that we will construct ourselves in. (Local Greek people, the way they talk about their job and the society, the examples that they provide) (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) Reflexivity will be our effort of keeping these three aspects in a balance. For example if we got carried away of people talking about their situation we will possibly lose track of our original goal. We must had been really aware of our assumptions and biases due to the short amount of time that we had to conduct this research. The risk of taking for granted facts and feel as objective researchers, while we were not, was really high. Being aware of our assumptions meant basically that during the analysis there must had been an interpretation

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<sup>6</sup> This subchapter was also part of the exam of Research Methods at Lund University, Spring Semester 2015



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of our interpretations (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) a critical reflection is always important because the researcher is difficult to distinguish the taken-for-granted assumptions and blind spots of his/her own culture and language.

### 3.4 Data Collection

Our aim with this phenomenological study was to understand the ways in which individuals observe the world around them and make sense of their perceived experiences. Interpretive phenomenological analysis offered a substitute to quantitative research, has its backgrounds in psychology, and recognizes ‘the central role for the analyst’ in making sense of the personal experiences of research participants (Williams 2008). During our master’s thesis we tried to examine and explore knowledge as meaning. We tried to see behind the data and symbols, to the processes that regulate or form the meaning attached to them. The interviews were informal, non-directed, semi-structured phenomenological interviews with employees who faced or still face challenges in their working life. The language we used was the native Greek.

After we carefully designed a question form, (Appendix 1) we decided to use secondary data beforehand, even though one of the authors had already worked there for a year. The use of the existing data such as website or articles about the hotel was a preferred start according to Christensen and Chater (2001) as it gave a good overview of the hotel’s services. The primary data was gathered through the method of interviewing, field notes and observations of the researcher. The question form was used only as a guide to the researcher to check that the main topics are discussed. We decided to interview employees that have direct connection with the customers. We believe that these kind of employees are the most relevant for our research as they face two forms of direct pressure in their work. Management and Customers. We started with broad questions about their past experience. These stories were helpful at the beginning for employees to relax and speak their minds. The question form was divided into five topics with allowance to change the order according to the thoughts and stories of the participants. The five topics are illustrated as follows (see Appendix 1):

- broad questions about position, tasks, years of past experience
- personal questions about their perspectives of the hotel and their choice
- meanings and values questions about the work situation and relationships

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- ritual and beliefs questions about training, promotion or rewarding
  - expectations and assumptions questions about their goals and the future

All the interviews can be characterized as “fika-conversations” (coffee time talks). Due to the familiarity of the researcher with the interviewees it was rather easy to speak their minds freely. Due to Easter period, we didn’t want to disturb the flow of the hotel during the day and we found it more useful to conduct the interviews at night when traffic is less and employees have more time to talk. Even though most of the interviewees are from the Front office department, the researcher achieved to interview people from other departments during work also.

In total twelve interviews were conducted, transcribed and translated and all of them were voice-recorded. Ten out of twelve interviews were conducted during the night shift from 22:00-05:00. The interview length vary from 45 minutes to 3 hours. All interviewees were picked freely from the researcher and appointments were also scheduled between the researcher and the potential interviewee. Seven of the interviews were conducted at the lobby of the hotel and the reception (it was depended on the work at that time). Another three were conducted at the guard’s room, one at the bar and one outside of the hotel in a coffee place.

For confidentiality reasons which will be explained later we decided not to reveal the sex of the employees but only express that the interviewees were from both sexes of Greek nationality. Their age difference vary from 25-50 years old, with experience in that particular hotel from one to eighteen years.

### 3.5 Validity, Credibility and Pre-assumptions

Intercoder reliability refers to the degree to which coders agree with each other about how themes are to be applied to qualitative data. Reliability is important in that it indicates that coders are measuring the same thing. Strong intercoder agreement also suggests that the concept is not just a figment of the investigator’s imagination and adds to the likelihood that at theme is also valid (Sandelowski, 1995). Agreement across techniques gives us further confidence that we have identified appropriate themes in the same way. Bernard (1994:43) argued that valid measurements makes valid data, but validity itself depends on the collective opinion of researchers.

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Our thesis project has a modern-day topic, therefore we were already familiar with the possible concepts of organizational culture. However, economic crisis is something that one of the authors had experienced the last 7 years as he was part of this community-country (Greece) and consequently, even if he couldn't realize it then, he faced elements or ways of people's behaviors that came across the research goals (Ortlipp, 2008). As he lived in Greece and interacted with locals for so many years, he had adopted many of the same ways of thinking and felt them as natural. The benefit of reflexivity helped us, not to let these behaviors affect the process and the interpretations of the interviews. Specifically, in order to judge his interpretations he engaged the other two authors through Skype meetings and fostered more understandings and meanings of the data. Furthermore, together we provided hidden perspectives and values that he couldn't notice them alone (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, we provided another angle of the transcribed data, possible arguments of our results and much more interpretations.

An important consideration in a reflective research is to create transparency (Ortlipp, 2008). The researcher created reflective journals and engaged with them at key moments in writing the thesis. That helped him observe and remember the thoughts, concerns and experiences he had during the interviews. Reflective journals helped him use the research as "craft" and create a story. (Daft, 1983) Righting down observations of human behavior and processes in organizations helped us address the important "why" to our results (Weick, 1974).

Regarding the assumptions we had already in our minds about this project, was the questioning we had since our first conversation. The first assumption regarding the topic was that we were keen to believe that financial crisis plays a role in corporate culture. We had already convinced ourselves of this and it would be a trap if we tried to prove ourselves right. A way for the interview researcher to manage that assumption was by keeping the line of communication open with the interviewees. Hearing their stories more than thinking what the next question will be, was the most suitable way. Another bias that is linked with the previous issue was the investigation of the damage that crisis had probably done to corporate culture. Seeking for tangible results in intangible context was a wrong way to do a qualitative research. Even when we found evidence of that kind, there were multiple roles and influences that led to that result. Alvesson and Sköldböck (2009:7) are also skeptical of "the universal adoption of quantitative research methods in social sciences". However, a way to manage that bias was by carefully design the questions, in a way that it was a guideline

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to manage the conversation in an open way rather than asking questions about measurements. (Check Appendix 1)

### 3.6 Overview and Confidentiality

The hotel is part of a family 5\* hotel chain in Thessaloniki, Greece and has 70 employees this period. The hotel opened in 1997 and being at the center of the city, it became quickly one of the nicest places for accommodation. It is known for the exceptional service and the classy style it radiates.

In order to have access to the hotel, we contacted through e-mail with the General Manager and provide him with the research proposal and the relevant question form. With an instant response due to familiarity relationship with one of the researchers, he gave the permission to conduct this research and provide him with the results after we finish.

In our message we made clear that we will give pseudonyms to the employees because we didn't want to put anyone in a bad position and he didn't have any problem with that. However, we decided not to give any pseudonyms at all when we will present the quotes. Taking a decision of excluding employees with indirect connection to the customers we limited the sample to 35 people. Moreover, the majority of the sample was from the Front Office. The reason behind this action, was illustrated earlier. Therefore, with a sample of 12 interviewees and a description of them later in the thesis, it would be unethical to put pseudonyms or sexes because anyone could identify who these people are and what they said.

### 3.7 Data Analysis

The data analysis put an extra pressure on the researcher who conducted the interviews as he was transcribing and translating at the same time in order to provide as better as he could, the issues of each interview. As Ryan and Bernard (2003:73) claimed "Researchers who are not fluent in the language should rely on cutting and sorting and on the search for repetitions, transitions, similarities and differences". This approach was done simultaneously with the data collection due to time limits but also helped all of us come up with new themes and used as questions at the next interviews. Moreover, we discovered a lot of unseen results after careful read of the transcripts

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back and forth many times as far as key words they used to describe their situation. That helped us decode the interviews. However, in order to avoid influence each other, we analyzed the transcriptions on our own and categorize them into 4+1 categories of corporate culture according to Alvesson (2002, pp.4-5). Using the Skype service we compared and discussed about our individual “cut and sort” and tried to create a clear view of how employees understand the work and the world around them.

Being “in” the project basically means that we were inseparable from the context and the text. We checked our assumptions all the time and anything we produced in our data analysis had our marks. We were the sense makers and coming from different backgrounds (Swedish and Greek), we interpreted things in our way and make sense of the things from our perspective often with a lot of disagreements. Having one of the researchers “in” and come “from” the culture of the respondents (sample) is our add value in this research.

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## 4 Empirical Findings

*This chapter illustrates the findings of the interviews. First, we will present a background of the employees for the reader, in order to get familiar with the sample. Then we will present field notes and observations of the hotel from the outside to help the reader create an image of the hotel and its people. Then we divided the sample into the 4 categories (Rituals, Values, Meanings/Beliefs and Symbols) according to Alvesson's division of corporate culture. Moreover, we put an extra category called Crisis to help us understand the impact that economic crisis may have caused to different phases of the hotel's corporate culture. Our initial thought was to put a big part of this chapter in the Appendix section but we need to stress that our choice of putting a lot of quotes on this part facilitate our purpose of letting the reader understand how employees think and feel, using their words. We hope to achieve that by providing the most characteristic quotes that shape this corporate culture as this will help the reader with the next chapter of Analysis.*

### 4.1 Background information of the interviewees

The employees we interviewed work in four different departments of the hotel. Reception, Doormen/Groom/Guard, Bar/Room-Service, Kitchen.

#### **Profiles of the employees:**

##### Receptionist's Responsibilities

- Process guest arrivals and departures, including all necessary payments
- Handle & coordinate room assignments and pre-arrivals
- Handle guests' concerns
- Offer referral for services and handle requests for information
- Assist with the check-in and check-out of groups and tours
- Assist other departments as required
- Handle payments
- Responsible for all the operations of the hotel after the management leaves

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Receptionist 1: Working 1 year in the hotel, around 30 years old. 10 years of working experience in different summer resorts in Greece. No tourism education. No children.

Receptionist 2: Working 6 years in the hotel, around 30 years old. 3 years of working experience in different summer resorts in Greece and abroad. Graduate of Tourism School. No children.

Receptionist 3: Working 17 years in the hotel, around 40 years old. No prior hotel working experience. Graduate of Tourism School in Germany. 1 child.

Receptionist 4: Working 16 years in the hotel, around 40 years old. 2 years working experience in a summer resort in Greece. Graduate of Tourism School. No children.

#### Doormen/Groom/Guard's Responsibilities

- Welcome the customers
- Responsible for the parking
- Carrying the luggage if necessary
- Provide information
- Make an extra bed when the housekeeping has finished the day job
- Throw the garbage of the day
- Guard the hotel and entrances at night
- Assist other departments as required

Groom 1: Working 18 years in the hotel (from day 1), around 40 years old. No prior hotel working experience. No information about the education. No children.

Groom 2: Working 11 years in the hotel, around 50 years old. 2 months working experience in a city hotel as a guard. Seminar educated and knowledge of 4 languages. 5 children.

Groom 3: Working 14 years in the hotel, around 40 years old. No prior hotel working experience. Tourism School Graduate after his employ. 2 children.

Groom 4: Working 19 years in the hotel (when it was only a parking), around 60 years old. No prior hotel working experience. No information about the education. 2 children and grandchildren.

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Groom 5: Working 8 years in the hotel, around 50 years old. No prior hotel working experience. No information about the education. No children.

Groom 6: Working 18 years in the hotel (from day1) with a gap of 2 years (2009-2011), around 40 years old. Tourism School Graduate. No children.

### Bar Responsibilities

- Service the customers
- Responsible for the room service orders
- Handle the payments of the bar/restaurant
- Responsible for the service of the food and beverages during events
- Assist the restaurant in breakfast, lunch or dinner and whenever a group has a scheduled meal.

Barista 1: Working 18 years in the hotel (from day 1), around 40 years old. 8 years of working experience in resort hotels in Greece. Tourism School Graduate. No children.

### Kitchen Responsibilities

- Prepare the scheduled meals of the menu
- Prepare the fixed menus of groups
- Prepare the food of the events
- Prepare the food for room service
- Assist one cook the other in case of heavy workload
- Prepare the food of the employees

Cook 1: Working 3 years in the hotel, around 25 years old. 2 years of working experience in resort hotels in Greece. Bake and Cook School Graduate. No children.



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## 4.2 Field Notes

We believe it is necessary to provide you with information about some observations and artifacts that one of the co-authors found, while wandering around the hotel. He has worked there 3 years ago and he was the one who made the interviews. Therefore the findings will be presented using language in the first person. We think also that it's important to create a picture of the hotel while we can't present images due to confidentiality.

Starting from the moment when I first went to the hotel, I came across flags that indicate the multinational customers that the hotel has. The moment I stopped the car in front of the hotel I saw a smiley guy come towards me, even though it was 1 o'clock in the morning and he hadn't recognized me yet (promotion of hospitality value no matter who the customer is).

While I entered the hotel I realized how everything seemed the same since I left. The hotel of only 18 years of life seeming quite old, with a British style of decoration and furniture of the previous century. The vintage style was quite obvious from the chandelier to the paintings in the walls. A big china-cabinet next to the bar got my attention. When I came closer I observed different objects of the owner's ancestors such as an old knife and a watch, some pictures and a cigar cutter (symbol of family). A big touchscreen with information of the city was the only thing that broke this old-style feeling and brought me back to the new-age.

The departments seem to be at the same place as I left them. Reception on the left when you enter the hotel while on the right some big old-style couches. The bar and the restaurant on the background and the offices hidden on the mezzanine.

As for the people who work there, when someone looks them from the outside, they seem classy and elegant. Receptionists with suits and Doormen with their costumes. The same with the Bartenders, the Waiters and even the cleaning ladies. Everyone had nametags with their small names and their department (Familiarity Reasons).

I came across with a lot of symbols that present a more classy life that everyone would want some day. Due to the family symbols also, this make it more achievable to the minds of the customers, feeling like it's their own or among relatives.

An observation worth mentioning is the frustration I saw in a lot of the employees' faces during the interviews. Some of them also told me that they have issues and they want somebody to talk

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to. I suppose I was the right person at the right time since they knew me. The hotel employees have gone through different phases of wage cuts, layoffs and furloughs and merge of the departments the past 8 years.

The artifacts mentioned above are visible to everyone from the outside and of course we discovered more through the analysis of the interviews which will be presented next. This part is useful for the reader to have a basic idea of what this hotel and its employees look like during work. A brief abstract follows, describing the overall situation of the hotel.

### 4.3 Division of the sample

As mentioned above we divided the sample into 5 categories that can provide a big view of what is happening in the culture of this hotel and make the reader understand the hotel's strengths and weaknesses, working conditions, communication and working relationships. We have to mention again that these are the perspectives, thoughts and words only of the employees and how they make sense the work situation around them. It is a targeted move to make the reader understand the corporate culture of this hotel by the own words of the employees. We believe it is essential for the reader to perceive an understanding from the employee's perspective and the only way to achieve that is by providing him/her with enough quotes to shape an image of the culture in his/her mind. The importance of this image will be understandable during the read of the analysis. Having a clear mind of what is happening in the hotel, it will be easier to understand their world and their struggles.

#### 4.3.1 Rituals:

##### HR rituals and absence of them:

*The following quotations will illustrate the efforts of the management towards an establishment of HR rituals. However, the failure of them will also feature a totally lack of strategy towards that direction. The absence or invisibility of routines and procedures for hiring, training and rewarding staff is something also mentioned by the employees as an indication of leadership style and workplace relations.*

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- Recruiting

“I came here because my sister in law was working here and she suggested me to the management”

“A colleague of mine recommended me for this job to the management and after an interview I got hired... I didn't have any experience in hotels”

“I found out about this job from a relative... I didn't have any experience in working at hotels before”

“There are some young talented people who come to work in the hotel but they are paid and sponsored by the European Union or The Manpower Employment Organization. They bond with us and have dreams that they will stay. This is not happening and it's a pity.”

- Training at the beginning and during the years

“There wasn't a training from the hotel... All these years there were some funded seminars but not something continuous. I don't think they give much attention or see it important.”

“We had training... but the thing is that these last seminars, and maybe the previous ones too, were sponsored and when the funding stopped, the seminars stopped too. It wasn't something targeted.”

“Here, most of the people didn't have any experience in this business and learned from each other.”

“I don't think the management is willing to pay for a targeted circle of seminars for the employees.”

- Evaluation / Promotion

“They have tried some years ago to evaluate the employees... it was not meritocratic evaluation, it was personal and it was wrong. A few days later some of us were fired and no evaluation again ever. I guess it was an excuse to give an alibi for some layoffs.”

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“Here you can reach a ceiling on your way up.... if people who have a lot to offer, stay underutilized and move up or down the ladder of hierarchy with no meritocratic criteria is bad.”

“I don’t see a promotion in the future. It’s where you are now and this is as high as you can get.”

“Promotion here is a rare phenomenon even if you work for 15 years.”

- Rewarding/Appreciation

“We had a few years back the employee of the month/year.... It’s not something worth mentioned at all. It was something fixed and not meritocratic. Worthless act without plan.”

“Some time ago there was a rewarding of some stickers every month just like babies. Just ridiculous”

“No sign of appreciation and it really bothers me a lot. Only hostility and scheme”

“0 out of 0 from the management. I take everything I need from the customers and their comments about my work”

“I feel the vibes of appreciation when I need them, I guess they exist”

### Hierarchy Rituals:

*Despite the absence of HR rituals mentioned above, it seems that the hierarchy rituals of this hotel are strong. The power of hierarchy between the management, supervisors and employees is clearly obvious. It seems that it became part of their work to perform in a hierarchical way.*

“A remarkable thing here (good thing) is that if the management observes something bad in your work, they don’t go in front of everyone and criticize you. It goes hierarchical, to the supervisor and then to you personally. This is me most right thing we have here.”

“I know that the management’s door will be always open. I am though a typical employee, if I have a problem I will go the supervisor. Regardless the result, hierarchy first.”

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“I feel that the manager should have a close relationship with the supervisors and trust their judgment, which is what the current manager does.”

#### 4.3.2 Symbols

##### Family / Unity:

*One of the most important symbols that this hotel obtain. The family feeling is not only among the employees but it is vibrated to the customers as well. (see also 4.3.4)*

“What I recall is how the employees united when the reduction of the salaries was announced. We had the same line and it was an unwilling test to check our homogeneity.”

“The hotel instills a family feeling in me. Both between the employees and the management. The employees feel like family.”

“My feelings don’t let me leave here... I love my colleagues. I literally grew up here and I am very emotionally bonded with some of them.”

“The customers feel this family feeling we have here...some people come to this hotel only because of that.”

##### Management:

*The first image that is created in the employees’ minds towards the management is the word “apathy”. It seems that the management is neither present nor active in a way the employees would appreciate.*

“This manager is like a ghost, we don’t know when he is coming and when he is leaving.”

“It’s rare to have a decent manager and we have that here. It’s a drop in the ocean”

“The stance of the management became more strict and more careless I would say. They don’t listen to what we have to say and what it really needs to be done. Either they don’t have time or mood.”

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Management deoprtment towards employees:

*This is a different section than the previous one as these quotations illustrate the opinions of the employees in “what the management think of them?” These quotes will show employees’ opinions towards the importance they think they have as employees from the management.*

“I feel that we are not getting any attention as employees and nobody is irreplaceable. I guess we are only numbers for them.”

“I know that for them I am just a “number”. As long as I offer they will keep me. I know for fact that someday I will be fired. Nobody is irreplaceable”

“Some employees who worked here, from the start created close relationships with the management and this backfired when the layoffs started. They thought they were friends but the management made clear who the boss was and who was not.”

#### 4.3.3 Meanings and Beliefs

Work Situation:

*The quotation presented in this section will show the variety of perspectives towards the work meaning on employees. Others are driven from need and others from their professionalism. A salient theme in the interviews was the almost existential aspects of having work in Greece of today and how that shaped identity and perceptions of workplace relations:*

“I think my work is helping me to overcome my problems...because I have to deal with people but I have reached my limits with all that is happening around me.”

“The choice of working here is created by the need. When you have a family with three kids you don’t have many options”

“Now, with the percentage of unemployment so high, you are just trying to survive...This is not a life now. I don’t like it”

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“In every job complaints exist. Some people here give more to this job than others. It gets in my nerves. I just want some professional mindedness in this kind of things.”

“After the merge and the layoffs we have more responsibilities and more pressure from the management.”

#### Attachment Bonds:

*This section could be linked with the family symbol mentioned earlier (4.3.2). Having a second family and a second home seems to be one of the important aspects in those employee's lives. The total effect on working performance is also evident in the following quotes.*

“It happened a lot in my life and the hotel management stood by me in my hard times of health problems. I have been bonded with this hotel so I see things more emotionally sometimes.”

“The hotel embraced me and I give my 100% at work. I'm thankful and I show it.”

“This is my home! That's why I get crazy about things many times. I feel that the hotel is mine... I care about everything in here.”

“As years pass by you want to stay in the same place because you know your steps. You have adjusted the pace of the work and you like it.”

“I feel this hotel as my home and I am trying to support this hotel as an ‘idea’.”

#### Relation to management:

*In the interviews, a recurrent theme was the formality of the relationship between employees and management, and that management seemed distant from the experience of employees in their mindsets. Despite the quotes claiming that the right to speak is probably free, these quotes shows rather a fear of speaking their mind openly.*

“Once upon a time, like the fairy tales, we were talking with our boss and we were saying what we thought. Now we can't do that due to the fear of firing.”

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“My colleagues here don’t know that our voice is our power for our rights.”

“Whatever we ask to do our work better it’s up to them. We can’t be in their heads to know what they are thinking”

#### 4.3.4 Values

##### Hospitality:

*The category Meaning/Belief of Service Mindedness turned out to create a Value of Hospitality due to the mentality the employees infused in the culture. The following quotations show how people tend to cherish their work and how much attention they pay to the customers.*

“I have not seen a better personnel service than ours anywhere else” (the same quote from 7 employees)

“Serve the customers with our best selves...clean, decent, smiley and serving the client whenever and whatever he wants.”

“We have love in what we do and it’s obvious to the customers”

“The customers feel when you are struggling but it is bad not to offer him/her the best service s/he can get.”

##### Teamwork:

*This category also turned into a Value of Teamwork from the meanings/beliefs of the employees. The quotes indicate that from years of working together, the familiarity between the employees turned to affect their way of working. Their teamwork seems to matter a lot to them.*

“We talk and laugh during work and we solve problems, we don’t create new ones”

“The longer the crisis exists the stronger the bond between us.”

“When you are stressed, more tension and arguing happens but even if you hear us arguing sometimes, you understand that we love each other and work for the best result.”



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Hierarchy:

*We became witnesses of an informal hierarchy existing in this hotel and affecting the working processes. It seems that the hierarchy “in papers” is totally different than the hierarchy during working processes.*

“There are some frictions especially between departments that have direct connection to the customers (reception, bar, restaurant) and indirect (reservations, sales, accounting, PR). There is a mentality that the reception must check EVERYTHING because it is the last stop before the customer leaves. For example there might be a problem from the start but we pay the price because nobody goes to the start. When you have easier access to the management, it’s easier to put your word over another.”

“I have witnessed that some of my colleagues are not performing at their full potential just because they work here a lot of years. It’s probably because they feel they are “above” others.”

“Some departments seem to be more privileged when they ask for something... I don’t like when my word is having lower value than specific colleagues of mine.”

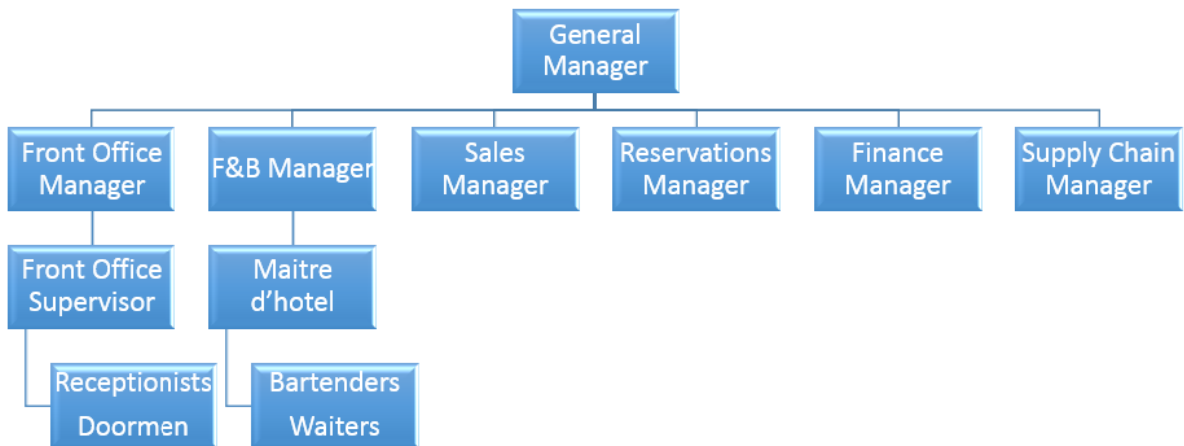


Figure 4.1 Hierarchy on paper

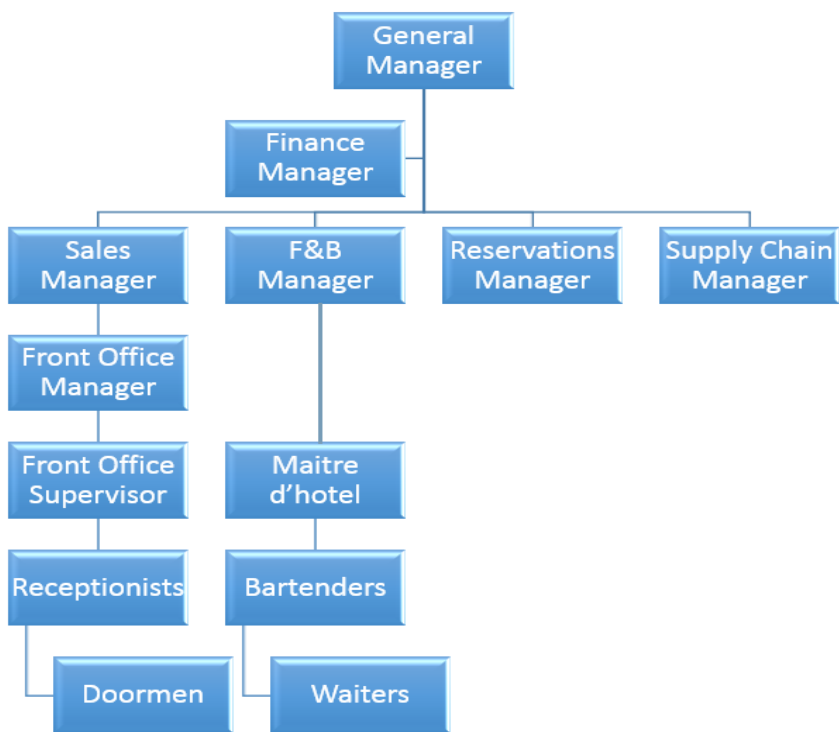


Figure 4.2 Informal Hierarchy

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### Hotel Business Mentality:

*These quotes illustrate the opinions that Greek employees have about the people in charge of the hotel industry. We witnessed a rather negative feeling towards them and an understanding of the power dynamics between an employee and an employer.*

“The employer wants to make the best profit out of each employee. Fixed profit is not a profit that’s the philosophy”

“The businessmen consider the employees as unworthy people”

“There is a mentality of a clique in the hotel business. This can affect an employee in his job search. That’s happening because the relationships and the connections of the hotel owners and managers are very close and matter more than any CV or reference letter you might have.”

“There is a quite popular recipe here in Greece. Culture and location. Every benighted person opens a hotel without any experience at all. They own some grounds in a place next to the sea and they decide to become hoteliers. Our hotel started from a person with no experience in Tourism also.”

### 4.3.5 Crisis

*In this category we will present the quotes that show effects of crisis from employees’ perspective to the corporate culture of the business.*

### Management Actions:

*Crisis could be characterized as a Trojan horse of the management to violate the rights of the employees. Moreover, structure changes between departments due to the crisis cover, affects the employees’ work balance.*

“With the crisis as an excuse now they start to ignore the law and affect our rights.”

“I can accept wage cuts supported by the government’s changes in laws. Layoffs also in order to keep the business alive. But forced furloughs NO, when it’s obvious that we have customers.”

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“The duties of each department were clear cut. A few years ago some of the departments were merged without an official training to equalize the knowledge level of the different employees.

### Security:

*We discovered that crisis has created a change in values of the employees. Being “paid on time” seemed to be the number one extraordinary example of security in the hotel while a few years back that was something natural.*

“If I take into consideration what’s happening in the country, I think here is nice. It’s one of the good jobs in the private sector... Every month payment on time, we have free food on our breaks and our costumes.”

“Sometimes I feel I’m treated unfairly but then comes the outside environment and balances that frustration. What I mean is, when I watch others around me, I understand that I’m getting paid really well compared to them and especially on time.”

“The work pace of the hotel procedures in general terms wasn’t affected because the management was paying everything on time. That is something good for us based on the current circumstances.”

“The workers nowadays cannot claim anything from the employer anymore. The collective labor agreements were negated and I believe this crisis has ruined every right the workers fought for the past years. Nobody can do anything alone. We live under the fear of being fired”

“We have customers but if this changes, what do you expect the manager to do? Keep us here for what? I am old now, I will survive; I’m afraid of my kids’ future.”

“Nothing is secure and I have witnessed it so many times with people who thought they had something “more” with the management but they couldn’t avoid being fired.”

### Employees’ performance:

*An important discovery according to these quotes is the effort of the employees to perform at their best. However, the external environment pressure seems to “gain ground”.*

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“We take less money, we have the same level of customers and due to the layoffs we have less manpower which affect our work. Before the crisis we were three people in every shift and now it’s only one.”

“We are trying to offer as many as we can but as long as the reduction of personnel continues, it will be rather difficult to keep up with the expectations. Others handle the pressure, others not.”

“You live with the uncertainty of what will happen tomorrow and this affects your work.”

Lack of ambition:

*The crisis among with the lack of promotion we illustrated earlier, shows a rather negative sentiment towards goal setting.*

“Unfortunately in this hotel and with these conditions you don’t have you much opportunities to even set a goal to achieve”

“The future will set my goals. I don’t have any goals right now. It depends on the economy and the stability of the country.”

“I don’t have any goals at all. When you are saying about goals is when you chase after something. I’m not chasing anything now or in the future and I don’t think anyone is having goals here.”

We hope that we achieved to give the reader an overall view of the hotel’s culture from the employees’ esoteric environment. Taking into consideration all these quotes we will focus on three categories during the following chapter. Leadership, culture and commitment.

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## 5 Analysis

*This chapter will illustrate an analysis of our empirical findings, based on our methodological approach. The chapter contains three themes. The first one is about the leadership style used in the hotel and how this style affect the normal procedures of the business. The second is about the substitute culture which was created instead of a formal corporate culture and the third illustrates the different effects on employee commitment by the crisis among with the specific leadership style. With this analysis we give a broad answer to our research question and a collective answer will be exemplified in our conclusion chapter. Our choice is to analyze these themes with support of a combination between theory and quotes from the employees. The reason behind that move is to provide the reader with as many as possible information to understand a complex topic as it is culture in a business during a crisis period.*

It is significant to mention that during our analysis of the interviews and after we have read the different aspects of corporate culture and management, we discovered a leadership style that was totally representative for our case and it is called Laissez-faire leadership.

### 5.1 Leadership style

Laissez-faire leadership (also called passive-avoidant leadership) is the absence of strong leadership, the avoidance of interference, or both. With that form of leadership, there are generally neither transactions nor agreements with the organizational members. Laissez faire leadership describes inactive leaders who are reluctant to inspire subordinates or give direction or guidance needed in their work situation (Deluga 1990). The management's choice of generally refraining from participating in group or individual decision making, abdicate its leadership role. Laissez-faire leadership , which is also referred to as avoidant or passive leadership represents a leadership style in which the leader has been chosen to and physically occupies the leadership situation, but in practice has abdicated the tasks and duties assigned to him or her. As Aasland et al (2015) noticed, such leaders as the manager of this hotel may avoid decision making, show little concern for goal achievement and rarely involve themselves with their subordinates, even when this is necessary. This is shown very obvious at the hotel. When talking about support and guidance one employee expresses the following:

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*“There are sometimes that I feel that no one is watching anything, but I believe that they do. If not directly the manager, I think that there are people who are watching the way we work. This is because he may want to leave the work processes flow and when there is a problem he can intervene or he actually doesn’t see anything. This manager is like a ghost, we don’t know when he is coming and when he is leaving”*

The words laissez-faire and leadership are opposites. Laissez-faire is a French term originally used relative to mercantilism, and is used in economics and politics as an economic system that works best when there is no interference by government. It is known as a natural economic directive that procures the maximum wellbeing for the individual and encompasses to the community (Goodnight, 2004). The employees are given extensive freedom of action and, so, seem likely to make the most of their power and encouragement. But due to lack of management, decisions are frequently delayed; feedback, rewards, and involvement are absent; and there is no attempt to motivate followers or to recognize and satisfy their needs.

#### 5.1.1 Laissez-faire leadership and its aspects

During crisis the employees seem to experience the need for leadership but seems that the manager is being inactive and escaping the situations. Moreover there is no involvement and no actual relationship between the two.

*“I don’t really have a relation to the general management. It didn’t occur for me to meet with the general manager. Only one time when I got hired and after that I was communicating with the front office manager”*

*“I am disappointed in many occasions but we have only a formal relationship: “good morning” and “good evening” which was always like that. Though I am not a person who will go and bother them with every problem that I might have”*

Reduced job satisfaction, dissatisfaction with management may reduce organizational obligation and job and task performance (see also Hetland et al 2011). Burnout reactions and turnover intentions is not rarely the result. A question to ask is whether perceived laissez-faire leadership, representing perceived active avoidance of leader behaviors. The leader in this occasion is expected to provide his employees with everything needed in a difficult situation such as guidance

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and orders. With that mentality he could create a structure providing knowledge of what needs to be done, however this passivity ruins that plan.

Unhelpful forms of leadership as Laissez-faire, is strongly related to how followers feel about their leader. This may result in negative behavioral outcomes such as counterproductive work behavior. On the question if the employee ever have met any help or any apparition during stress the employee answered:

*“As a matter of fact I remember that one time, the hotel was going to be on fire and I with some other colleagues stopped that from happening. No sign of appreciation though and it really bothers me a lot. When someone is showing that appreciates my efforts, my performance is affected positively and makes me happy. It may sound a little childish but that’s how I feel.”*

It is obvious that a positive move from the leader towards that direction can provide positive chain effects to other dimensions of workplace such as work effectiveness or performance.

#### 5.1.2 Passivity and absence of leadership

The concept of poor leadership, which pinpoint that destructive leadership behavior come in an active as well as a passive form. In its most extreme form passive leadership may be equated with the silent treatment which potentially is establishing a highly destructive form of social exclusion and rejection of subordinates or their work activity. The “invisible” manager of this hotel seems to lose the confidence of its employees:

*“The management doesn’t really mix with the employees during work. If I expected something different, it should be from some people who have been in my shoes and know my work from the inside”*

By its passive component laissez-faire leadership has regularly been associated with non-leadership but we can characterize it as avoidance or absence of leadership and as noted by Skigstad et al in their research (2014), is the most inactive as well as the most ineffective.

This leadership style of the manager may be understood as an opposite of functional leadership (team leadership that is focused on helping groups to solve the difficulties they meet on a day-to-day basis). The employees of this hotel are in critical need of help, are not receiving suitable help and will probably represent a type of stress. Furthermore, it is realistic to believe that the critical



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component, which is more or less a situational characteristic of laissez-faire leadership, will strengthen the negative impact of this leadership style. Additionally, it is easy to argue that the manager's laissez-faire style may be foreseeable and in a situation where subordinates are lacking the individual resources necessary, to cope with difficult situations, can result in durable stressors. A situation like the mentioned above, might make the employees defenseless for job dissatisfaction as well as anxiety. This is showing that features of criticality, urgency, and duration are expressively related to disruptions.

### 5.1.3 Laissez-faire leadership and ambiguity

Laissez-faire leadership is an important analyst of subsequent role ambiguity even when directing for constructive leadership and has also been shown to support the relationship between role conflicts (Deluga 1990). The manager is not making leading decisions, and not following up on employees. The employees understand such behavior as a type of social exclusion, especially because it is not a consistent leadership style among them. Laissez-faire leadership may be a stress-making as well as discouraging type of leadership which may accumulate over relatively longer time-frames, resulting in more reduced job satisfaction as noted by Deluga (1990) in his research about leadership. The manager is not letting the subordinates have any influence and that can create a painful organizational atmosphere.

Scholars stress that the key feature of a creative work environment is often a leader you can trust, who shares tactic knowledge, and who encourages and supports employees (Hetland et al, 2011). Unfortunately, the specific leader has not such capabilities. A strong and active leadership has been contrasted with his passive-avoidant leadership of avoiding to accept responsibilities, and in many cases even showing a complete absence of constructive leader behavior. We can characterize this hotel as a workplace where the organizational members teach and learn from each other without clear goals and directions but this kind of workplace has shown to give negative results even more than half a century ago (Hetland et al, 2011). A recent study in community clinics by Asland et al (2015), specifically focusing on differences in leadership styles and organizational learning showed that laissez-faire leadership was negatively related to organizational learning. Even though we are talking for two different areas the main concepts of leadership are the same.

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#### 5.1.4 Laissez-faire leadership and clarity

A Swedish study on laissez-faire leadership reveals that the lack of interpersonal relationships embedded in leadership is damaging for learning (Hetland et al 2011). The manager seems to create a climate of uncertainty, confusion, and frustration, in which learning and creativity is difficult. Moreover, there is absence of proper training so learning is even more difficult. Concerning clear guidelines and knowledge about sufficient time to perform, we can argue that the manager most likely lack the skills to establish such conditions in a work setting. There is a clear difference between an empowering leader, providing support and direction, and a leader with a passive attitude and this difference is distinguishable by followers. On the question what kind of leader the employee thinks the manager is, s/he answers:

*“It’s the kind of a leader that leaves things to flow. I believe that he has his reasons but I can’t say I like this approach.”*

Additional research from Aasland et al (2015) has documented strong negative associations between laissez faire leadership, satisfaction and motivation of subordinates. According to Hetland et al (2011), a sense of autonomy and self-government may emerge when confronted with leader passivity. We believe that the lack of clear leadership at the hotel might have made the sense of teambuilding at least a little bit stronger.

#### 5.2 Substitute Culture

The employees have shaped a culture of their own due to the absence of proper leadership. This type of culture substitutes a “missing” formal culture and can be characterized as a combination of Actual and Shadow Cultures mentioned in the literature.

Corporate culture influences how people behave in an organization and as mentioned numerous times in this search can be regarded as the distinctive pattern of shared values, attitudes, rituals, beliefs, norms, expectations, socialization, and assumptions of employees in the organization. Corporate culture is therefore equal with the personality of the organization, describing employee behavior even when they are not informed what they should do (Hellriegel et al., 2004).

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### 5.2.1 Leadership and insecurity

The hotel leader allows employees to have complete freedom to make decisions concerning the completion of their work with some minor directions. We think that this is an effective style to use when employees have pride in their work, driven to do it successfully on their own and when they are trustworthy and experienced as well. There are several examples where meanings and beliefs among the employees indicate a confidence in their own ideas or when they get inspired from their colleagues.

*“I will not wait for the employer to motivate me and make me more creative...If you want to be in this business you need to be creative on your own”*

This highlights that the “laissez-faire” leadership will contribute to a feeling of insecurity among employees, and that the environmental change in form of economic crisis will reinforce this sensation. This is in line with the argument of Skogstad et al, (2014) who claim that laissez-faire leadership is a root source of subordinate role ambiguity which underlines the importance of superiors perceiving situations and circumstances where subordinates experience a need for leadership. Accordingly, approaching this need instead of avoiding it, it is reasonable to believe that the evasion of leadership actions will be closely related to subordinates experiencing stressful work situations distinguished by a lack of clarity regarding duties and responsibilities within the organization. (see also Bass and Avolio 1994, 2004) Furthermore, this leadership style should not be used when followers feel insecure at the unavailability of the leader, or when the leader cannot or will not provide regular feedback to their followers. (compare Malos, 2012) To overcome or to mitigate this feeling of insecurity the employees turn to each other in different ways.

### 5.2.2 The need for autonomy in a changing culture

We have no indication from the employees that organizational goals or plans set by the management exist. We align with Malos (2012) and stress that some people are not good at setting their own deadlines, organizing their own projects and solving problems on their own. In such situations, projects can go off-track and deadlines can be missed when team members do not get enough guidance or feedback from leaders.

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The employees have different ways to cope with new situations that arise for example in the beginning of their employment or in connection with mergers or otherwise when they have to add new skills in their positions. Even though they have to cope with a lot of situations on their own, they manage to succeed through team-effort.

*“I can see how a colleague working in a professional way that I admire and automatically I start working like him without any directions”*

*“Now every new person that comes is instructed by us. Not because someone told us to because some of us want to”*

Another sign of autonomy is a try for goal setting and striving for more perfection, which is another sign of their autonomy. We have witnessed employees with no ambition at all but we believe that they are still some employees with a dream in their minds.

*“I want to have more demands in my work and I want to be more professional”*

This quotation indicates that individuals of the organization have a self-motivation often stronger than the job-motivation which the organization tries to impose on the employee. A manager to be convincing and also trustworthy should therefore try to link the goal of the individual with the goal of the organization, something that was noted by Bruzelius and Skärvad (2004: 373) in their study of organizational leadership.

As the crisis affects the employees in many different ways and the need for a strong leader in this situation is even more important, the laissez-faire leadership of this manager contributes to the creation of a culture of self-leadership combined with a well-functioning teamwork. Zain et al. (2009) proved that teamwork and communication are important determinants on organizational commitment.

*“In this hotel the work seems more team-oriented”*

*“My principle is to give my best effort in order to be able to demonstrate that good performance, in case anything happens. I have learned to answer with my work”*

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### 5.2.3 A substitute culture built on values

We believe in a substitute (actual and shadow<sup>7</sup>) corporate culture for this hotel, that has been developed towards a strong service-minded and autonomous culture, where the employees have a lot of freedom but a great responsibility for taking care of the customers in a professional way. Corporate culture has both visible and invisible levels. The visible level of culture includes mottoes, dress codes and physical settings. The invisible level includes underlying values, beliefs and attitudes. It is easy to ignore the invisible level of culture, but this level has an important impact on organizational change efforts. It seems like the shared-effort value of the employees can be described in the following way:

*“When I go home after work, the strong feeling is satisfaction”*

The invisible culture can be obvious when there is an environmental threat like the crisis situation. The reaction among the employees seems to be of a uniting character. As it was mentioned on the literature (check 2.6.6), this cultivation of corporate culture can be a shield against an external threat.

*“I noticed how the employees united when the reduction of the salaries was announced. It was an unwilling test to check our homogeneity”*

Moreover, the symbol and feeling of familiarity is transferred to the customers through the employees' acting with honesty and unity in their daily work. We have already mentioned the importance of familiarity that we think is one of the pillars of this culture. When this pillar is visible to the customers, it created in our opinion stronger bonds between them.

*“I think the service needs to be direct and honest. Host someone with your best self and he will appreciate it.”*

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<sup>7</sup> See also subchapter 2.8

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As the hotel is not offering any training for new hired people, the employees have to learn from each other. During the crisis, the hotel did mergers between departments to save money, and the employees had to learn new skills from each other to be able to work in two or more positions. This requires a good communication and teamwork between the employees, to be able to deliver a top-notch service to the customers.

### 5.3 Crisis and Commitment

Researchers have investigated the relationship between organizational culture and organizational commitment. We discovered that teamwork and trust are important variables of commitment. A research from Kwon and Banks (2004) shows that strong relationships between organizational commitment and job meaningfulness.

#### 5.3.1 Symbol to achieve commitment

The informal corporate culture of this hotel is partially built upon the employees' attachment on the hotel. It is symbolized through the expression of belonging to a family and a home. The family/home symbol is considered to be an action that stands for something more than the action itself. A distinctive quote that proves our sayings could be the following:

*“This is my home! That’s why I get crazy about things many times. I feel that the hotel is mine. I care about everything in here”*

Moreover, the symbolic interactionist perspective view the exchange of symbols as the basis for the shared meaning for a group of social actors. Some of the employees build in their religious beliefs in their bonding to the organization, but also to be able to cope with their work- routines. The symbol of family also has an emotional dimension. Many of the interviewees are expressing positive emotions and even love to the hotel and the people working there, especially the ones that have a long period of employment or are more acquainted with the founder of the hotel. Some of the employees are so strongly bonded with the organization, that they would not change their workplace even if they were offered a higher salary. Deal and Kennedy (1982) argue that corporate culture affects the commitment of employees within the organization and the strength of organizational commitment is correlated with the strength of corporate culture. Additionally, shared values that are an aspect of corporate culture improve employees' identification and

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attachment to the organization (Sathe, 1983). These perspectives fit perfectly to our sample because we became witnesses of employees who choose to be committed to organizations whose values they share.

*“If the salary difference was way more, I would have thought about it but 90% I would have rejected even that good offer”*

We have learned from the interviewees that the founder, at least in the beginning, selected people from his own family or friends of him when hiring new staff, which also contributes to a culture characterized by a feeling of family. Through this dynamic ongoing process, the leader created and was shaped by the organizational culture.

*“This came from the mentality of the first hotel owner. The father. He said that first I will pay the insurance and then my employees. And after I will pay all the other stuff. It was his culture and I think the same mentality passed on to his kids”*

But we can also point at a certain ambiguity among the interviewees, where we find one more positive group of employees, regarding the owner as a “symbol of God”, due to their long-lasting relationship with the owner and because they are happy to have a job in the turbulent times of the crisis. Their feeling of security and their willingness to be creative seems to be induced by the crisis.

### 5.3.2 Influence of the crisis

An ambiguity between the employees is created when it comes to the topic “pay on time”. We argue that this ambiguity was created by the influence of the crisis. Aspects considered as natural, they became rare and noticeable. The fact that the employees are getting paid on time – which is not the case in many other hotels and businesses in Greece – contributes to their opinion that the hotel is an honest organization. The other group of employees has a more cynical view and perceives the owner as more interested in earning a profit. They see through the system of continuous wage-cuts, and are suspicious about the fact that they have to regard their monthly wages as something unique in this period of economic crisis.

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*“They are paying everything on time. That is something really good for us”*

*“Crisis created that impression – in other countries they cut heads for money, what should be our measurement? We come to praise the normal as something unique”*

During the period of crisis we discovered that many layoffs happened and the employees expressed their discontent to the fact that less people have to manage more tasks in the organization after the dismissals due to the crisis. That move along with the wage cuts, lead the employees to keep a distance from the management. Hence, the management lost even more of the communication with its employees. The employees witnessed colleagues close to the management being fired in this period of crisis, which of course contributed to the insecurity about the future.

*“They thought they were friends but the management made clear who the boss was”*

Regarding the problems we just discovered, we are convinced that crisis was not the cause of the problems but rather an excuse for certain actions from the management. In times of economic crisis, the performance of the employees seems to remain on a high level characterized by hospitality and familiarity. Some of the employees believe that the reason why customers are coming back to the hotel is because they expect the service they are used to. We think that these values have occurred from the meanings and beliefs within the group of employees and these in turn contribute to the employee’s will to maintain the high service level.

*“The difference that makes a hotel from good to great is the attention and the hospitality that the employees in all departments show to the customers”*

Deal and Kennedy (1982) argue that values characterize an organization and make it different from other organizations, and they also contribute to the employees feeling of “a shared effort”. The values are based upon experiences that work in a special kind of business, but the employees have a strong influence on the way of creating norms and attitudes in the company.



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Still, the employees admit that the crisis affects them in their daily life and work-situation, which sometimes is difficult to hide. Moreover we discovered, employees that feel insecure of losing their jobs during crisis, which impose a pressure on them. Even though we are certain now that the crisis is not the cause of the problems, the employees seem to put the blame on crisis for all of their difficulties.

*“Crisis is everywhere and we are not robots to keep our personal problems outside of work. That’s when many people’s and colleagues’ performance drop”*

However, a quote that needs to be mentioned and we believe it’s the key for the employees to understand their situation is the following:

***“Crisis didn’t create the problems. Crisis just uncovered the problems we already had”***

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## 6 Conclusion

### 6.1 Answer to the Research Question

*Research Question: To what extent leadership style affects employee's perspectives on corporate culture during economic crisis?*

Due to the locality of this hotel, the problems that occur during crisis are getting faster noticed. Moreover, the leadership style in many occasions prevents these kinds of external threats from affecting the business. However, in this specific hotel, the leadership style (Laissez fair leadership) is not facilitating this effort of prevention. Laissez-faire leadership style normally can affect the workplace by giving a positive guidance to the employees due to the freedom, autonomy and self-leadership it creates. In periods of crisis however, this kind of leadership can be devastating in the long run for the business and the employees. The reason behind that statement occurs in the connection between laissez faire leadership and crisis.

Having a leadership where you give this kind of autonomy to your employees during a period of crisis can be parallel with the image of a parent giving autonomy to his/her teenage child during puberty. Without having at least guidance, fixed rules and monitoring, the chance of a negative outcome is high. Crisis cannot be seen as the creator of all the negative outcomes that occur in the workplace but instead it is the one that uncovers all the hidden problems in the organization. The fact that many employees cannot detect the difference makes this insight more important. In order to understand that the problems existed before the financial crisis, you need to have observed the threats behind the curtains.

Our opinion is that employees' commitment is the only glue that keeps this structure together during these circumstances. The familiar atmosphere this hotel instills through its employees is the last pillar that crisis can destroy. Even if they can't make sense of the power that this symbolic family value gives, it is clear that unconsciously they are fighting with that weapon.

### 6.2 Suggestions for further research

The findings of this study suggest connections between corporate culture, laissez faire leadership and crisis that could trigger further research in the field of organization and employees during

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crisis or in another national environment. The findings of the corporate culture of this hotel could contribute in the existing literature of Actual and Shadow Cultures. (see also 2.8)

First, a possible area to be studied could deal with suggestions for actions that should be taken to prevent the culture from becoming weaker and vulnerable; how a company could react in the internal and external environmental pressures more specifically. Moreover, we did not study how the Greek national culture has affected the organizational culture during a financial crisis incident, since the Greek nation is at the center of the economic changes in the Eurozone. Furthermore, additional research could be done in different hotels and be compared. A good idea is to elaborate more using different cultures in different countries. It could also be interesting to find out how the corporate culture would be affected if the management was more engaged during a period of time or observe how the corporate culture would differ if there would be organizational rituals such as training, evaluation and promotion. Finally, we studied corporate culture during a financial crisis, but by considering the crisis as a non-cultural element; studying the same subject with another view of culture could bring new insight to this new study.

### 6.3 Suggestions for the hotel business

There are many suggestions that employees expressed unconsciously during the interviews but are of great importance for the current management. The three central elements that this suggestion section will elaborate are: Strategic Decisions, Rewarding System and Training.

#### Strategic Decisions:

What we have observed from the interviews is the lack of “right people” in the “right positions”. This management should either create a new leadership style or improving the current by combining many of the aspects that will be mentioned later. Another solution would be to hire “key” people that will take the business to the next level. Even though hiring new staff is not one of the priorities of this hotel, the indirect benefits will justify this move on the long-term. Specifically, a proposition for a strategic change would be a management by “walking around”<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> The origin of the term has been traced to executives at the company Hewlett-Packard, for management practices in the 1970s.

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*“There must be a person who should observe and just walking around the hotel. It’s negative for the hotel that it doesn’t have one”*

*“I would like the employer to check the departments and be present so people can see him. For himself also to be able to see other problems that the departments face every day and nobody pays attention”*

*“Also, I would want the management to be closer to the customers. Come down to the lobby and talk to the customers, ask for their opinion. It means a lot. Here, it’s faceless, in a piece of paper feedback”*

A manager wandering around in an unstructured manner, checking the procedures and be present in random incidents will benefit from the understanding of the improvements that need to be done and will also affect the employee morale and focus. Moreover, the connection that the manager needs to have with the customers is of great importance according to the employees.

Another strategic decision is to find the “key” person to organize the events department (Banquet).

*“I have seen in other hotels that there is a banquet department and this is something that it would help all the departments structure better their work duties.”*

We realized that this department is essential for the long-term profits of the hotel. By creating this department, automatically duties from three different departments are reassigned. That means less workload and more focus on the quality for the three departments and. For focus on the events and profit of them for the new one.

#### Rewarding system:

Efforts of a rewarding system were evident during the past years. The failure however shows the lack of designing an innovative system. Rewarding doesn’t mean necessarily tangible results but also intangible as well. Sometimes the latter seems more important.

*“I think being appreciated for your work makes your emotions filled. I believe however that at some point you might need a tangible reward or a promotion”*

In order to achieve that, you need first a targeted meritocratic evaluation system and then a bonus system that give motives to the employees.

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*“If the system was formed differently as a form of a bonus I would be really interested in that.”*

*“There is nothing right now. If it existed I would positively welcome it”*

One proposal that we are certain and can combine different goals is to reward an employee by offering him training and experience. A possible trip once a year in a first class hotel where the employee can learn from the best and experience something different is one idea that we really believe in.

### Training:

As mentioned above, training is one of the important issues we focused on this section. The employees seem to understand the importance of training in different forms and are ready to embrace changes in that area.

*“I know a lot of free seminars in every different kind of topic that we as employees can participate and also I know other hotels who constantly train their stuff.”*

*“What I witnessed and it was obvious that made a difference in my work was the funded seminar we had a few months ago. Our performance increased based on the results.”*

We believe that the management needs to focus on these areas, create a targeted plan and complete it the best possible way. We witnessed efforts for good practices all these years but during this period, changes towards a more employee-focus oriented plan seems more logic.

## 6.4 Reflection upon the study and Limitations

Working for this thesis was a real challenge for us, for a couple reasons; the time needed for the completion of this study was more than we expected and the topic was particularly broad to work with. However, we managed to create a solid critical and analytical analysis with a meaningful outcome and suggestions to the organization. Corporate culture is an extensive topic with a rich literature base. In addition there are many perspectives and approaches of this topic. It was challenging but interesting to investigate an unknown organization from the inside and simultaneously reflect our findings with the literature. Moreover, discover the most problematic

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issues among the employees' working conditions and understand their inside world. We feel now familiar with the interviewees even though only one of us know them. The story-telling the past 2 months, gave us a real impression of the everyday life of a hotel employee in Greece. The knowledge we gained from this study is the ability to acknowledge that different perspectives on the same matter exist.

The limitations we express are basically regarding the interviews with the hotel employees and the analysis of them via Skype. Whereas all the employees were very open and conversational, we believe that the most of the night-shift interviewees were tired during the interviews. We feel that the employees might be more talkative if the interviews were conducted during morning and not working hours. Another limitation could be the simultaneously translation and transcription from Greek recording to English, to facilitate the understanding and interpretation for the Swedish researchers. Last, there were the "never-ending" conversations via Skype that needed to be done because of the deadline pressure. These conversations lasted from 1 to 4 hours every two days for a month. Nevertheless, we tried to use this service to our advantage to provide the best possible outcome for this study.

### 6.5 Concluding Remark

In the beginning of the thesis we refer to a poem inspired from a woman who fought for the freedom of speech, expression and rights of the African-American people in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Maya Angelou. Since a poem can express feelings, thoughts, emotions and meanings we encourage the reader to create his/her own interpretations and reflect it to this study. There is no wrong opinion in poetry after all, everything is AMBIGUOUS!

However, we will not miss the chance to express ourselves drawing upon the words of this poem. The main point of this poem is the phrase "I Rise". Even though this poem was written to express the feelings of racism during that period we feel that it gives a direct reflection to Greece as well during the past 6 years. Being targeted as a country, "crippled" by the economic crisis, trapped in a continuous war with the media and facing a racism attitude towards its people makes this poem important to share a meaning to everyone. As beautifully Angelou wrote: "Out of the huts of history's shame, I rise. Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of

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the slave. I rise.” The relation with our topic would be more direct if we studied the economic crisis as a national problem but we chose this poem because the sacrifices of the Greek people during the last 6 years are memorable and people should realize that the “coin” has two sides. We became part of this crisis only by reading the inner world of the interviewees and that is what we hope to have provided to the reader. Thus, this poem is a tribute to the sacrifices that some people do to survive in this cruel society.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview Guide

#### Interview Structure

##### Broad Question-Step 1

- Interviewees background (position, tasks, years of working in the field etc.)
- What are your thoughts about the culture (in general what does it mean to you?)

##### Personal Questions-Step 2:

- How did you start working in that industry? How do you feel of that choice?
- How do you see yourself in the company? How do you contribute to the company?
- How has your work situation changed since the crisis did begin?
- How has the management's way of directing changed towards you since the crisis?

##### Meaning and Values (Network) Questions-Step 3:

- What effect in your feelings and working performance does the crisis have on you as an employee during your working hours?
- How has your relation to your colleagues changed during the crisis? And how has the relation to the management changed?
- Tell me some work situations (incidents) that occurred during the latest years. Positive and negative if any.

##### Ritual-Beliefs Questions-Step 4:

- What do you think about the service to the customers?
- What kind of instructions do you take from the service management regarding the customers?
- What rewards or types of appreciation have you experienced or seen regarding your work?
- Tell me about your experiences of visiting other hotels in Greece if any.
- If you have offered a better salary would you stay in the same company?

##### Expectations / Assumptions Questions-Step 5:

- What goals do you want to achieve in the future within the company?
- How do you think the travel industry in Greece may alter in the future?