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# ORCHIDS

A New Perspective on Understanding  
Organizational Core Values

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## Abstract

**Title:**

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**Keywords:**

Organizational core values, culture, ambiguous, tensions, project groups, understand.

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to comprehend how members of project groups understand organizational core values in their work.

**Theoretical Perspective:**

The origin of our theoretical perspective is based on two rather contrasting and extreme perspectives of core values, which are narrowed down by the individual and group level of understanding them.

**Methodology:**

By originating from an interpretive paradigm, a double hermeneutics approach was employed in order to interpret meanings and understandings, with the assumption of social constructivism.

**Empirical Foundation:**

Our empirical foundation builds on twelve semi-structured interviews and a total of four, supplementary observations.

**Summary of Findings:**

Our empirical material illustrates that there is somewhat clarity when comprehending the core values in relation to one's work. However, based on the tensions that we discovered, we are leaning towards the more ambiguous side of understanding the core values. This led us to develop a new metaphor, namely *orchids*, that portrays these values in a different and critical light.

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20<sup>th</sup> May, 2016

Lund

*Lena Lindström & Taniya Senanayake*

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## 1. Introduction

Core values are an important aspect of life and there are different levels of core values: personal, organizational, societal and cultural (Posner, 2010, Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). For the purpose of our thesis, we focus on core values at an organizational level. Organizational core values have become increasingly important in companies over the last decade (Lencioni, 2002; Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014). Due to this peak in interest, Phal, a knowledge-intensive firm that promotes its core values was chosen as an exemplary company. We were quite astonished at how important and strong the culture and core values are at Phal. The core values seem to permeate everything the employees do in their work; starting from the recruitment process to various meetings and daily conversations between the employees (Sandberg & Targama, 2007).

There are also an array of literature and theories through academic research that appear to view organizational core values as straightforward and unambiguous. Core values, according to literature, can be defined as a set of collective beliefs that an organization stands for and takes pride in (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014), as well as deeply ingrained principles that guide all internal organizational actions (Rowe & Cadzow, 2014). They are said to be the most defining characteristics of a company and have become the essence of the organizational philosophy (Deal & Kennedy, 1983). Furthermore, core values are shared by, have intrinsic meaning to and influence attitudes, behavior and beliefs of the employees (Ferguson & Milliman, 2008). Moreover, they can potentially be understood on an individual level through interpretation and the recruitment process as well as on a group level through different types of meetings, humor and comparisons to other firms (O'Reilly, 1989).

Through both lectures and academic research, we have also been exposed to Alvesson (2002) who has a more critical view on culture and core values. He argues that core values are ambiguous and hard to grasp and, hence, not as straightforward as most other literature and theories on core values argue, as presented above. Furthermore, he states that core values are as complex and essential as they are difficult to understand and use in a thoughtful manner. They are not monolithic sets of ideas but rather include ambiguities, paradoxes, contradictions and confusion (Trice & Beyer 1993 cited in Jaakson, Reino & Vadi, 2008). Thus, having core values does not necessarily imply that these values are an expression of harmony or consensus (Alvesson, 2002).

These contradicting perspectives – one extreme arguing that core values are unambiguous and the opposite extreme arguing that they are ambiguous – triggered the interest to an in-depth look at core values and how employees understand them in their work. In order to research these perspectives further and possibly find a position in-between these two viewpoints, we chose to study a company, Phal, that claims to have a strong culture that is centered around its core values. As core values can be seen to be ambiguous, at least to a certain extent, we aim to take on a hands-on approach to understand how organizational members comprehend the core values. As we take on this approach, we attempt to introduce a new metaphor for comprehending how employees understand the core values of Phal in association to their work.

The only metaphor describing the core values that we could find was that these values can be metaphorically seen as the *heartbeat* of the company (Lencioni, 2002). This metaphor can be interpreted to describe the core values in a positive and straightforward light, which also seems to favor one of the extreme perspectives in how core values can be interpreted and, thus, neglect the other. We find that it is important to acknowledge that one can stand between these two standpoints. The reason for why we have chosen to represent this through a metaphor is because metaphors provide a way for individuals to grasp the complexity and attempt to capture the multiple possible understandings associated with the concept (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Therefore, to understand this concept in a different and more critical light we suggest that core values can be metaphorically described as *orchids*.

Based on this, the aim of our research project is to comprehend how members of project groups understand organizational core values in their work, which has led us to formulate the following research question:

*How do members of project groups understand the organizational core values of Phal in their work?*

The benefit of our research question is that it may have practical relevance for organizations and its members, where they can get the opportunity to realize how differently their understandings vary even within the project groups. From a theoretical lens, the results of our research question may benefit the existing theory in the form of providing a position between

two extremes, and could, therefore, subside existing literature. A fresh perspective on core values and how they can be understood seems to be timely from a research and practical perspective, which we attempt to provide by introducing our metaphor; core values as *orchids*.

In order to address our research question, the outline of the thesis is presented in the following section.

## 1.2 Thesis outline

The thesis is divided into six chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, empirical findings, discussion and finally conclusion. The second chapter discusses the existing literature and theories on understanding core values on both the individual and group level as well as on the ambiguity and contradictions of core values. Chapter three provides an overview of the methodological approach which acts as a base for our research project, and the method approach used for the analysis and the gathering of the empirical material. Subsequently, the fourth chapter begins with a brief description of the company, Phal, which is followed by our findings from the interviews and observations. The research findings are divided into three main categories, namely *Different Interpretations of Core Values*, *Understanding 'Always Open' and 'Act as One'* and *Understanding 'Think Big'*. Chapter five discusses the empirical findings in relation to theory and the most prominent contradictions that arose throughout the analysis. Further, based on our findings we suggest the metaphor of *orchids* in order to comprehend core values better in theoretical terms. The final chapter concludes the thesis by presenting our main findings, theoretical contribution as well as practical implications and recommendations for further research on understanding core values.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter presents an overview on the existing literature and theories on core values, and in what ways organizational members understand these values. We have chosen to highlight some specific aspects, namely personality and interpretation, meetings, humor, and comparisons, on both an individual and group level as these were the most apparent aspects within the literature. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with an overview and context for our empirical findings, which can also be used to highlight possible themes that can be considered in our discussion chapter. However, in order to understand the literature and theories on core values, we first need to address the definitions and ambiguities around the concept.

Core values are part of the organizational culture, which, according to Schein (1996), distincts itself on three different levels. Initially, there are hidden, implied assumptions that are the core values of the culture, followed by the reflection of a group's desires, and lastly, everyday behavior that exhibits a complex compromise among the core values, the deeper assumptions and the actual requirements of the situation. Hence, core values serve as cultural cornerstones (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014; Lencioni, 2002) and form both the bedrock and foundation of the corporate culture (Rowe & Cadzow, 2014). They are closely related to and play an important role in shaping the culture (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014; Manohar & Pandit, 2013).

### 2.2 Definitions & Ambiguity

There is a lack of a consistent definition of core values (Lee, 2015). Organizational core values can be defined as collective beliefs about what an organization stands for and takes pride in (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014; Urde, 2001; Ferguson & Milliman, 2008; Schein, 1985; Rokeach, 1979). They are timelessly guiding (Collins & Porras, 1996) and deeply intrinsic principles that advise all internal organizational actions (Rowe & Cadzow, 2014) and do not need any external justification (Collins & Porras, 1996). Hence, core values are traits and characteristics organizational members choose to follow (Rowe & Cadzow, 2014). They have intrinsic meaning and importance (van Rekom, van Riel & Wierenga, 2006), and influence the attitudes, behaviors, aspirations, norms and beliefs of the employees (Ferguson & Milliman, 2008; Manohar & Pandit, 2013). Core values enable employees to know what to do and what not to do (Ferguson & Milliman, 2008). As Barchiesi and La Bella (2014) point out,



core values should be the criteria and principles at the basis of both individual and group behavior.

Based on these definitions, we define organizational core values in this thesis as:

*Collective beliefs about what the company stands for and takes pride in and deeply ingrained principles that guide internal organizational actions and influence the employees' attitudes, behaviors and beliefs.*

Core values are seen that the most exhibiting characteristics of an organization (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014; Deal & Kennedy, 1983) and become the core of the company's philosophy (Deal & Kennedy, 1983). Hence, employees should recognize these values as the dominating ideology of the company (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014), as core values provide rules for decision-making, as well as guidance for interpreting and understanding a complex environment (O'Reilly, 1989). They are shared by and affect everyone across all levels of the organization and at all times (Urde, 2001; Rowe & Cadzow, 2014) and should, therefore, reveal how employees explain, rationalize, justify and communicate both what they say and do as a community (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014). Core values serve as a bonding mechanism between the organizational members (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998) and glue together the company as it grows, expands, decentralizes and diversifies (van Rekom et al. 2006). Moreover, core values must be lived by (Deal & Kennedy, 1983; Urde, 2001) in order to be able to incorporate them in the employees' ways of thinking, working and behaving (Urde, 2001) and are, hence, nothing people buy into (Rowe & Cadzow, 2014; Collins & Porras, 1996). Core values have to be consumed and confirmed continuously, and can, therefore, not be invented and must never be jeopardized (Urde, 2001). They must be strongly held and widely shared, which means that employees must acknowledge and communicate when core values are not being followed or carried out to their full potential (O'Reilly, 1989). However, repeating core values like a mantra might result in losing both their value and meaning (Urde, 2001). As Lencioni (2002) argues, it is difficult to live by organizational core values.

All the aspects of an organization may be infused with ambiguity and paradoxes (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993) and can, consequently, be related to organizational core values. When environments are complex, contradictions, incongruence and incoherence can be experienced and paradox and ambiguity can be recognized within companies (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993).

Culture and, therefore, core values are both compelling and complex, which makes them difficult to understand and employ in a thoughtful manner (Alvesson, 2002). Core values include ambiguities, paradoxes, contradictions and confusions (Trice & Beyer 1993 cited in Jaakson et al. 2008), which might be due to conflicting objectives and interests that organizations face. (Jaakson et al. 2008). As a consequence, they may not be easily ranked and cultural ideas may be incoherent and unsystematic (Alvesson, 2002). Moreover, having core values does not necessarily imply that these values are an expression of consensus or harmony. Therefore, it is essential to explore whether the employees' commitment to core values is genuine or an aspect of compliance and conformism (Alvesson, 2002). During a certain point in time it is almost inevitable not to diverge from the core values, when they are seemingly defined and several preferences for proper actions are obtained (Jaakson et al. 2008). However, reflection, questioning and dialogue seem to be reduced due to the core values (Alvesson, 2002). Similarly, routinization can restrict the participants' reflection and possibility to understand certain aspects from a different kind of light (Porter, 2015). Core values can be shaped and understood through various interpretations throughout time, storytelling, the use of expressive language, and spending time on both the individual and group level (O'Reilly, 1989).

### 2.3 Understanding Core Values on an Individual Level

According to Sandberg and Targama (2007), the understanding of people's specific work can lay the base for their actions and, hence, every individual develops and creates their own understandings. The members of project groups are constantly involved in a sense-making process of their work, particularly what their work is about and what it means to them. In other words, it is a continuous negotiation of meaning on an individual level, within the context of the project groups. Further, they state that by understanding various codes and messages, the consciousness of core values is shared amongst individuals. It is essential that business practices are founded on a few but important and strongly held core values in order to comprehend them (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014; Ferguson & Milliman, 2008; O'Reilly, 1989). The understanding of the organizational core values on the individual level can be seen through interpretation, recruitment and personality (Sandberg & Targama, 2007).

Implementing core values can be challenging because they can be interpreted and understood in different ways (Urde, 2001). In modern organizations, employees apply a common language yet often miscommunicate by perhaps using the same words, names of core values,

but employing inconsistent interpretations (Dahlgaard, Dahlgaard & Edgeman, 1998). Due to the difference in people's interpretations of the same core values, the translations of these values into actions and priorities also differs (Anderson, 1997) and, therefore, there seems to be rarely too much direct communication about these core values (Jaakson et al. 2008). This is supported by Sandberg and Targama (2007) who argues that the understanding of the same task amongst people differs. There appears to be a generic term to organizational core values and, hence, there is a significant room for interpretation (Ferguson & Milliman, 2008). Consequently, there is a need for guideline statements to help employees to enhance their understanding and implementation of the core values in their daily work and decision-making (Ferguson & Milliman, 2008). However, the need for guideline statements to clarify the core values or inconsistent interpretation is often a symptom of ambiguous or unacceptable core values (Dahlgaard et al. 1998). As Trethewey (1999) states, when there is a lack of clear interpretation of a phenomenon there transpires a certain amount of ambiguity, which suggests that this concept suggests that there can be multiple interpretations or meanings of core values at work simultaneously. In other words, there is not one organizational truth, but many. Aside from understanding core values through interpretations, it is also important to consider the recruitment process (Lencioni, 2002).

Seeing as the core values should be absorbed by the organizational members, they need to be incorporated into every employee-related process in the organization, such as hiring and firing methods (Lencioni, 2002; Simoneaux & Stroud, 2014; Fitzgerald & Desjardine, 2004). The understanding of reality is a concept that individuals can be socialized into (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). When conducting interviews with potential employees, not only the person's technical skills should be considered, but also whether the person is a good cultural fit and portrays values that are consistent with the firm's corporate values (Simoneaux & Stroud, 2014; Lencioni, 2002). According to Sandberg and Targama (2007), companies recruit people with a personality that fit well in the existing culture of the organization. Different people should be recruited as long as they share and understand the company's core values (Lencioni, 2002). People who share the same core values do not necessarily all think or look the same (Collins & Porras, 1996). Clear and well-articulated core values attract people to the company, who hold the same or similar values to the organization (Collins & Porras, 1996; Sullivan et al. 2001; O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991). Further, neither is it possible to impose new core values on people nor can people buy into them and, therefore, it is essential to find people who are predisposed to share the organizational core values (Collins & Porras,

1996). Consequently, these employees identify with the company since it stands for something they value (O'Reilly, 1989). Hence, if an organization has a clear values-based culture that employees can identify with, they are allowed to feel connected and be part of the organization's decision-making (Sullivan et al. 2001; Finegan, 2000) which causes the employees to both think and act in ways that consider the organizational core values (Gunning, 2001). Nevertheless, inevitably there is to be a level of compromise to an individual's 'true' identity when fitting into a certain organizational culture (Goffee & Jones, 1998).

Throughout the experience of an organization, from the very first day to the last, organizational members should continuously be reminded that the core values stand as the base for every decision that the organization makes, since the employees will neither believe nor understand a message until they have heard it repeated multiple times (Lencioni, 2002). As the core values exhibit the profound identity of an organization, there should only be a few (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014), in order to achieve a strong corporate culture. They should be at the heart of each member of the organization (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014). On an individual level, there is a significant influence consisting of aspects like impressions and experiences, in regards to the creation of a comprehension; however, the main influence originates from our interactions with other organizational members (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). Therefore, understanding the core values has not only been a focus of attention at the individual level, it has also been linked to the study on the group level (O'Reilly, 1989).

#### 2.4 Understanding Core Values on a Group Level

Core values represent the daily practices that we utilize, or should utilize (Rowe & Cadzow, 2014), such as criteria for promotions, performance targets, as well as dismissal policies (Lencioni, 2002). The ways in which the core values are implemented and practiced on an everyday basis reflect the company's commitment to its values (Manohar & Pandit, 2013). As soon as the core values are expressed, they remain under a constant scrutiny tested by practicalities and indifferent circumstances that every organization is subjected to. As a consequence, procedures, such as hiring and performance management, have to establish that the intended core values are enforced systematically (Jaakson et al. 2008). If they are poorly implemented and understood, they can poison the organizational culture (Lencioni, 2002). In order to interact and, thus, implement and practice the core values, members of project groups must have some form of shared understanding of their work (Sandberg & Targama, 2007).

Despite of individuals' similarities, they still perceive and understand core values differently; however, inter-subjectivity allows individuals to arrive at a common comprehension (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In the context of a project group, there can be an intense sharing of interpretations and opinions, and by communicating with each other a shared understanding is created (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). The core values' meaning should be communicated in order to reassure that they are not reduced to insignificant words and that all the employees understand and agree on what the company's core values are and what each core value means (Urde, 2001). The understanding of the organizational core values on the group level can be seen through meetings, humor and comparisons (Sandberg & Targama, 2007).

Meetings constitute one of the few workplace environments where employees pursue cultural activities and objectives (Rogelberg, Allen, Shanock, Scott & Shuffler, 2010) and, thus, they play an essential part in culture shaping as well as cooperation and socialization amongst the employees (Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2014). In meetings, groups both challenge and celebrate institutionally important values (Rogelberg et al. 2010), where they are allowed to solve and create problems, exchange information, develop and adapt to policies, and adjust their decision-making process. While doing these activities, people interact with each other and, in this way, build or fracture a sense of community amongst them (Rogelberg et al. 2010; Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2014). Hence, knowledge is created and exchanged in meetings, where the secure and trustworthy settings allow for explicit and tacit knowledge to be shared, and collaboration along with group cohesion to be enhanced (Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2014). In addition, core values can be taught and learnt through workshops, education and training programs (Fitzgerald & Desjardine, 2004; Dahlgaard et al. 1998; Sandberg & Targama, 2007), where training material includes exercises and cases with a focus towards core values (Dahlgaard et al. 1998). Core values are understood through both modeling and explanation (Fitzgerald & Desjardine, 2004). According to Sandberg and Targama (2007), a certain aspect of dialogue, in meetings and workshops, has the potential to enable people to self-reflect over their own understandings regarding a certain issue by being exposed to others understanding of the same issue, as core values. This allows the individual to evaluate over their understanding of the core values, and its appropriateness, in a collective light. The result of a successful dialogue in meetings and workshops is characterized by an achievement of a common Comprehension of the issue, like core values, and subsequently allow the individual to alter their original understanding. A shared understanding of the core values is not only

created by attending different kinds of meetings, but also through humor (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006).

Humor is difficult to define and is much easier demonstrated than described (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993). In general, humor is acknowledged as an artifact of an organization's culture (Schein, 1992; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006) and, hence, is a valuable tool to communicate aspects like core values (Gunning, 2001; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). As Romero and Cruthirds (2006) put it, by employing amusing communications that result in positive emotions and cognitions on an individual, group or organizational level, humor is applied. It manifests as jokes, inside jokes, good-natured practical jokes, funny stories, laughter and teasing (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006; Lang & Lee, 2010). However, another side of humor consists of elements like sarcasm, ironic remarks, satire and ridicules (Lang & Lee, 2010). The concept supports attempts to build group cohesion and enhances communication (Meyer, 1997), as it allows for an open atmosphere to be generated by stimulating positive emotions that enhance listening to, understanding, and accepting messages (Greatbatch & Clark, 2002). As such, an interaction injected with humor, may produce much valuable insight about the character and beliefs of the individuals involved (Lang & Lee, 2010). The use of humor by individuals within groups serves to both mirror and transmit the core values as well as shared norms, beliefs, and attitudes of employees (Lang & Lee, 2010; Gunning, 2001). As Linstead (1985, cited in Gunning, 2001) states, humor can represent the core values of an organization, since it represents a form of symbolic activity that strengthens the social structure along with the subculture of a group.

An essential aspect of humorous narratives and comments is that core values and norms are shaped, without a negative effect for the audience (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). As Hatch and Ehrlich (1993) argue, humor is an element for recognizing inconsistencies in meaning and is accompanied by laughter and smile. The juxtaposition of incongruities and the recognition of tensions and incoherence is what makes humor funny. They also claim that elements like inconsistencies, incongruities and incoherence are elements of ambiguity and paradox. Further, humor and laughter are usually generated unequivocally from these elements, which may serve as a way to understand the paradoxes and ambiguities of organizational life (Hatch & Erlich, 1993). In addition, the use of liberating humor can lead to viewing the organizational culture and, thus, the core values in a different light, as it has the potential to provide new perspectives and alternative social meanings that may also allow for new

understandings to be generated (Lang & Lee, 2010). A reason for pursuing humor is that it adds depth to understanding the participants' experience of paradoxes and ambiguity, as for example core values (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993). Moreover, humor enables organizational members to learn and understand the culture of an organization through a never-ending socialization process (Vinton, 1989). Especially, newly recruited employees who participate in humor practices may yield a greater knowledge and understanding of the inner workings of an organization (Vinton, 1989). Nevertheless, humor is commonly distinguished, experienced and understood differently by employees who operate on different levels of the organization (Gunning, 2001). Another way of understanding the core values on a group level is through comparison (Sandberg & Targama, 2007).

By being able to contrast a phenomenon as core values, in aspects like communication, it can also allow a comprehension of a message to be shaped. In other words, through means of comparison the concept of understanding can be developed and comprehended (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). Core values can represent an organization's identity and serve as a rally point for employees, which subsequently can distinguish the organization from its competitors (Lencioni, 2002). Nevertheless, many organizations make an effort to define their core values without matching them with the everyday business practices (Collins & Porras, 1996) and, hence, there are many companies with a hollow set of core values (Lencioni, 2002). There is a difference between a company's slogan (Deal & Kennedy, 1983) and intentionally working with distinctly defined core values that are the guiding principles (Urde, 2001; O'Reilly, 1989; Dahlgard et al. 1998) and deep beliefs of the employees (Deal & Kennedy, 1983). Organizational members tend to understand a certain concept in a specific way when they communicate the concept; however, this concept differs when translated into actions. This is the most common case in organizations (Sandberg & Targama, 2007) and in line with Solomon (1999, cited in Jaakson et al. 2008) who argues that there is a significant value in the actions of people, in comparison to what they say. Nevertheless, it is common to find sophisticated statements of corporate values framed on a wall, whereas the organizational members have a different and cynical interpretation of these values. For the reason that these organizational members have been around long enough to recognize what is really important (O'Reilly, 1989). Hence, core values should neither be viewed as a payoff nor as a slogan. (Urde, 2001; Fitzgerald & Desjardine, 2004). The creation and development of core values cannot be imported, copied or artificial (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014).

Furthermore, employees understand core values through hearing stories from other organizational members (Lencioni, 2002), namely storytelling. Organizational stories are usually shared, developed and changed through communication amongst group members. Stories can be used to present a more vivid image of key points (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). Hence, through storytelling, people create a shared understanding of a previously incomprehensive situation. They also state that interpretations can become both shared and sanctioned through ongoing ‘small talk’. Elements like joking and storytelling, which consist and are formed by activities and behaviors, can be considered of importance for the organization, as they contribute to the shaping of organizational life by their sense-making capabilities (Alvesson, 2002).

As we have discussed the literature, we found that core values can be understood on an individual level through interpretation and the recruitment process, as well as on a group level through meetings, humor and comparisons (Sandberg & Targama, 2007; O’Reilly, 1989). These different dimensions of understanding core values will henceforth be used to illuminate our empirical findings further and as an inspiration for our analysis. In other words, we draw on these ways of understanding the core values that the literature presents. We discovered that there seem to be two rather extreme perspectives in the literature, where one side considers that core values are simple and straightforward as the different dimensions above appear to imply, whilst the other argues that they are ambiguous (e.g. Alvesson, 2002). It can be problematic to comprehend core values from only one of these viewpoints, since this can cloud people’s understanding of them. Therefore, both of these perspectives will help us to take on a critical standpoint when analyzing and discussing our empirical findings.

The following methodology section explains, in more detail, how and why we do this.



## 3. Methodology

In order to comprehend how employees understand organizational core values in their work, we need to regard the meta-theoretical starting point for our research project. As we embark on our research project we need to look at the preconceptions we have going into our research and be aware of them when developing an understanding between our empirical data and its interpretation. This chapter outlines what scientific approaches we employed during our research project, along with a plan for the methodology. Further, the process of empirical findings is discussed in detail along with a methodology for analysis. This is followed by a small section discussing the quality assessment of the thesis, along with the potential limitations that arose during our research process.

### 3.1 Scientific Approaches

#### 3.1.1 Ontology

During our research project we operated from an interpretive paradigm consisting of social constructionism. In order to comprehend how project group members understand organizational core values in relation to their work, we acknowledged that the social world is relative, rather than objective. This means that the reality that the project group members are working in remains complex and socially constructed by individuals and their actions (Merriam, 2002). We rejected the notion of one truth and accepted that there were several ways of understanding, which implies that our empirical material was continuously influenced by preconceptions and understandings of people. In other words, the actions and perceptions of the project group members allowed for them to generate social constructions in their context (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The context in which we have conducted our study consists of project groups within a specific department, namely New Growth, where the social actors within this context consisted of the project group members.

#### 3.1.2 Epistemology

From an epistemological sense, we approach our research study with the objective to understand the reality that our participants are operating within and open up the possibility for several truths of how to comprehend core values, which are operating simultaneously. In other words, we aim to understand the phenomenon from the participants' perspective (Prasad, 2005) and comprehend the processes of subjective reality construction in social life, along with the reasoning of the project group members (Weber, 1984; cited in Prasad, 2005). Hence, we reject the notion of one truth (Sullivan, 2016) and build upon the assumption that

the organizational understanding and reality at Phal are a projection of the human minds of the project group members (Daft, 1983). As our objective is to comprehend the participants' understanding of organizational core values in relation to their work, we also need to regard what approach to employ during this research study.

### 3.2 Plan for Methodology

As we operated from an interpretive paradigm, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how core values are perceived and employed in the work of project group members at Phal. Thus, we approached our research study with a double hermeneutics approach, where parts of our empirical work are understood through exploring their relationship to their wider context. We looked upon how certain statements made by the interviewees of how to understand core values, were visible in the wider context as observations. By employing this approach continuously like a spiral, we were allowed to move between understandings and pre-understandings amongst ourselves as well as the participants. This provided us with a deeper comprehension of our work as we continuously defined and refined our empirical material (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). This multi-layered reality enabled us to understand how the participants comprehended the core values from their perspective, which allowed us, as researchers, to constantly engage in rich, descriptive data and built upon the connections in relation to our theoretical underpinnings. Particularly, it allowed us to employ a qualitative, abductive approach.

### 3.3 Abductive Approaches

The possibility to employ an abductive approach provided us with the chance to fluctuate and explore between our own understandings and the participants' that is associated within their working context. The themes, namely interpretations, recruitment, meetings and humor, that we discovered did not only stem from our gathered empirical findings, but also from our prior theoretical understandings. This allowed us to connect the discovered themes to the purpose of comprehending how project groups member understand organizational core values in relation to their work (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

The empirical material that we gathered for this research project was in the form of interviews and observations of the project groups' daily morning meetings. The main reason for why we chose to observe the mornings meetings in particular was due to that these are a moment when every project group member was gathered and shared their knowledge and concerns. As

we lacked the internal and specific knowledge about each member's specific work, we would not have been able to see the traces of the core values as easily compared to their morning meetings where the members interacted and discussed various concerns.

Our empirical material allowed us to build an empirical foundation, where the basis for our theoretical underpinnings was developed. Further, we kept in contact with the studied organization continuously throughout the process of our analysis and the development of our theoretical underpinnings, in order to ensure that these were provided the necessary support for the analysis of the empirical material which we gathered. By continuously employing this process, of seeking complementary material both empirically and theoretically, it allowed us to align coherently with an abductive approach (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Lastly, we entered our research project with two different perspectives; one of the authors has prior knowledge and experience at Phal. Whereas the other author has no knowledge about the organization and can, therefore, provide a more critical view, as she has an outsider's perspective.

### 3.4 Qualitative Methodology

Considering that our research study is based on a qualitative methodology, it seeks to discover the subjective image of a dilemma and includes careful research of a certain limited area (Bryman & Bell, 2011), which in our case consists of project groups and the members' understanding of the organizational core values in their work. As the objective of our thesis is to *understand* and *interpret* our empirical findings, it correlates with a qualitative methodology. The following table below summarizes the scientific approaches employed during our research project.

SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES	THE APPROACHES OF OUR RESEARCH STUDY
Ontological approach	Social constructionism
Epistemological approach	Interpretative approach
Empirical & theoretical generation	Abductive & double hermeneutics

Table 1. Summary of scientific approaches.

### 3.5 The Process of Gathering Empirical Material

Due to the importance of selecting a sample from which the most can be learnt (Merriam, 2002), we have chosen to study a knowledge-intensive firm that supposedly has a strong

corporate culture centered around its three core values. These values carry a significant focus throughout the organization, particularly for the organizational members and their experience at the organization, which, therefore, provides us with a suitable setting for obtaining the purpose of our research study. The reason for why we have chosen to limit our study to this particular organization is to enable potential depth in the research area and to fulfill the objective to generate an image of a limited research area within a specific department, namely New Growth. The studied organization has been chosen through convenience selection, for the reason that one of the authors has been in contact with the organization previously and, hence, has already established contacts and the potential to gain access once again (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Subsequently, the range of this research study is classed as a non-profitability sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2011), which makes it difficult to generalize the findings from our study.

The previous experience one of the authors has with the organization could possibly lead to an increased ability in trust and collaboration, and could, therefore, result in more elaborate empirical material. Nevertheless, it could also result in the opposite, where the participants assume that we as researchers have prior knowledge about the organization and its operations and, thus, the participants might not answer as detailed. Assumptions like these have been taken into consideration when designing the methodology of how the empirical material is gathered, which is further explained and discussed in the sections below *3.5.2 Interviews* and *3.5.3. Observations*. However, before that, we feel it is of importance to present the studied organization, which will be done in the next section.

### 3.5.1 The Studied Organization

The chosen organization for the purpose of our research project is a knowledge-intensive firm within the technology industry, where its current competitive edges lie within the camera side and its developments. The organization claims to have a strong corporate culture, which is centered around its three core values, and, therefore, the organization provides a suitable setting in order for us to obtain our purpose. The interviews and observations carried out by us were limited to a specific department, namely New Growth. This department works alongside the camera side of the organization, but has its focus towards innovation and new product ideas that are outside the camera side. Currently, this division is not the strongest at the organization; however, it is expanding rapidly and increasing in size as well as people. The main reason for why we chose New Growth was because this particular department

represents the living form of the core values. The focus and purpose of New Growth is to be able to think outside the box and together as a team innovate to new solutions that provides them with a competitive edge in a new market. New Growth operates through project groups, which were the context of our research study.

The organization and the specific department have requested to be kept anonymous throughout the research study and will, therefore, be mentioned as Phal and New Growth. Further, the interviewees will also be kept anonymous and for that reason all the participants will be regarded as females with pseudonyms. The process of the interviews will be further discussed in the upcoming section.

### 3.5.2 Interviews

We have chosen to use two of the most coherent research methods, in regards to qualitative methodology, namely interviews and observations. The reason for why chose interviews is because they have the potential to provide rich, comprehensive data, which is sought after in research methodology, and it provides an appropriate way of collecting empirical data (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

We have conducted twelve interviews with different participants, where the duration varied between fifteen to forty-five minutes, in the context of project groups. The reason for why we chose to conduct twelve interviews was partly due to the limited time-frame we were working within, along with the reason that we felt that the elaborate, rich descriptions given by the interviewees were sufficient enough to approach the research question. The length of the interviews varied due to elaborate answers given from the employees as well as the length of experience at Phal. The number of interviews conducted provided us with an understanding of the varying ways in which the core values can be understood and employed within the context of the project groups at New Growth. Furthermore, follow-up interviews were conducted; however, these were via email and only to specific interviewees where we felt that something was missing. By asking additional questions we felt as if we were provided with richer descriptions and, thus, could build a stronger empirical ground.

By approaching personal contacts at the organization, access to this particular department, and hence the interviewees were gained. Our primary source of empirical material consisted of semi-structured interviews where we had open-ended questions with the project group

members within the considered department at Phal. The focus towards the particular project groups within the organization provided us with a limited context that allowed us to gain a deeper comprehension of their and our understandings of organizational core values in relation to their work activities. By conducting semi-structured interviews, with an interpretive paradigm, it also allowed the interviewees the freedom to elaborate their answers, instead of us as researchers guiding them in a certain direction that is based on our pre-conceptualizations. We found that our empirical findings did not differ depending on the position of the interviewees within the project groups, which is why we have chosen not to differentiate them between their positions. Further, the interviews were conducted in Swedish, as that was what the participants felt the most comfortable with. Whereupon the recorded interviews were transcribed and the quotes translated into English. The anonymity of the participants may have resulted in more elaborate and liberate answers during the interviews. In order to complement our interviews, we also observed the organization at two different occasions.

### 3.5.3 Observations

Seeing as the objective is to comprehend how members of project groups understand organizational core values in their work, it is also important to get an insight that will complement our interview methods, namely through observations.

The target of our observations consisted of two daily morning meetings, also known as daily scrums. The scrums are led by a scrum master, who is a person of the team that is responsible for holding the meeting, and monitored for the project managers. We remained in the background of the organizational context and observed the setting during the scrums of the project groups, whereupon we were able to build an association to the participants by carefully listening to their views (Dutton & Dukerich, 2006). The reason for why we have chosen observations to complement the empirical material in our study is because the scrums are in a way deviant (Wolfinger, 2002). In other words, during the scrums almost every project group member is gathered and there is various information exchanged regarding the process and progress of projects, whereas during the rest of the day the project group members are working more individually and independently. Additionally, the scrums also provided us with another perspective, compared to the perspective given by the participants in the interviews, where we could compare and analyze accordingly.

The daily scrums were held in a relaxed setting, where the participants were oriented around a board that illustrates the progress of ongoing projects. The meetings were held short, approximately fifteen minutes, where the participants were standing up together in a half circle. The participants of the daily scrums had no knowledge about our purpose for being present at the meetings; although, they still acknowledged our presence, which could have potentially led them to adapt their actions and behavior and, therefore, affected the trustworthiness of our results. The scrums are open for any organizational member to join and listen to. We observed two of these daily scrums at two different occasions, two prior to the interviews and two after the interviews. The number of observations was dependent on two aspects; the availability of the meetings during the time period of gathering empirical material, and the considered suitability for the purpose of our study.

### 3.6 Methodology for Analysis

In order to make our empirical data more valid and reliable, and, thus, make adjustments as we progressed, our objective was to analyze the gathered empirical material continuously and simultaneously, whilst conducting interviews and observations (Merriam, 2002). As we employed this approach, we were able to enter a conversation with the data analysis. The approach that we used in order to analyze the empirical material in the following chapters is referred to as qualitative thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The purpose of this analytical approach is to identify and sort the empirical material into different categories and themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Bryman & Bell, 2011). Initially, we read the transcribed interviews, which allowed us as researchers to get familiarized and intimate with the empirical material. Subsequently, we concentrated on finding patterns and nuances in the form of repetitions, transitions, metaphors, and similarities and differences through our interviews and observations, but also continuously throughout the process of our analysis. Furthermore, a thematic analysis has the potential to allow different interviews to highlight the same themes but from different standpoints (Jacobsen, 2007, translated). This was considered to be of value to us in order to reinforce the purpose of our study, seeing as the different members in the project groups have different experiences at the Phal. This means that they are individuals with personal preferences and, therefore, have different understandings.

The empirical material was processed a number of times, in order to select and eliminate different patterns and categories (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The empirical findings of this

research project are divided into three main categories; 4.2 *Different Interpretations of Core Values*, 4.3 *Understanding 'Always Open' and 'Act as One'* and 4.4 *Understanding 'Think Big'*. The first section of the empirical findings illustrates that the core values are different, whereas the remaining sections attempt to answer the question of *how* members of project groups understand organizational core values in their work, with alignment of theoretical underpinnings.

### 3.7 Research Limitations

It is essential that we acknowledge the limitations of our research study. We are aware that by studying one specific organization the results that we present cannot be generalized, which is a limitation when attempting to generate conclusions that have the ability to be applicable to other organizations. Further, since the organization is established in Sweden, it may even be harder to apply our data to organizations operating in different cultures than Sweden, as for example the Middle East. However, Phal has a significant focus on its core values, which we found was a justified reason for approaching this particular organization.

As the interviews were conducted in Swedish, there is a possibility that during the translation process some underlying points and implications might have been foreseen, which could have potentially affected our data. Although, the participants felt most comfortable with conducting the interviews in Swedish, as they knew we were Swedish as well. Further, the follow-up interviews were conducted via email, which could have potentially impacted our data since the participants may not provide as explicit answers as in a face-to-face interview. However, due to the narrow time frame this was the most convenient way for both us and the participants.

Considering that the concept of culture and core values is quite extensive and ambiguous to an extent, we also acknowledge that we cannot cover all aspects within our study, which is why we chose to restrict ourselves to specific areas. However, we do not claim that the areas we chose to exclude are not of importance, these are just aspects that we did not have enough time and resources to explore further into. We are aware that there are different ways to understand core values in association to one's work, aside from the one we have highlighted throughout this research project. Similarly, there are additional themes to the one we have discovered as well.



### 3.8 Quality Assessment

The terms trustworthiness and authenticity are employed within qualitative methodology, in order to ensure the quality of a study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). A certain amount of trustworthiness has been achieved due to the previous contact with the organization; however, a way of reinforcing this trustworthiness can be through a validity check. This means that the participants were given access and took part of the results of the project. Furthermore, we provided a detailed presentation of the progress of the research process, which is also a way of maintaining and fulfilling the trustworthiness of the research project. Lastly, an important aspect that was considered from a reliability perspective was that we as researchers tried to maintain and be aware of our preconceptions and subjective interpretations when exhibiting the results of our research study.

In order to assure that the fulfillment of the trustworthiness is achieved a methods chapter has been developed, where the reader is provided with a detailed description of the approach to our research study and how the empirical material was processed. Additionally, the interview guides are submitted in the appendix of the thesis<sup>1</sup>. Both authors read through the empirical material individually to find themes, which were thereafter discussed with each other, in order to prevent leading each other into one direction based on our subjective interpretations and preconceptions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Lastly, both authors have taken a part in developing and depicting the analysis chapter, with the purpose to ensure that subjective opinions and values are reduced.

The second aspect of quality assessment refers to authenticity, which regards the reflection of a realistic image of the explored phenomenon and the extent to which all perspectives of the subject are expressed (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In order to fulfill this, the interviews were held within the working context of the interviewees, which may have allowed the interviewees to feel more relaxed and comfortable during the interview process. Further, by gathering empirical material from different members within the project groups, the project attempted to enclose different understandings of the subject for the research study.

By providing the reader with a detailed explanation of our method and methodology, we will now proceed to the chapter with the empirical findings.

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to Appendix II.

## 4. Analysis: Empirical Findings

This chapter presents our empirical findings. We start by briefly introducing Phal and the three core values. Thereafter, the chapter is divided into three main categories that stemmed from both our literature review and empirical material. These main categories were: *Different Interpretations about Core Values*, *Understanding ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’*, and *Understanding ‘Think Big’*. Through presenting our empirical findings, this chapter will illustrate how the employees at Phal understand the core values in their work.

### 4.1 The Exemplary Organization: Phal

Phal is a knowledge-intensive firm that operates in the technology industry, with its current success being towards developing cameras and camera systems. New Growth has its focus main towards innovating products that are outside the camera side of the organization. The organization, and this department, claims to have a strong culture that is centered around its three core values, namely ‘Always Open’, ‘Act as One’ and ‘Think Big’.

According to Phal, ‘Always Open’ entails being open-minded and innovative, honest and transparent, along with always being available to our customers, as well as listening and responding, embracing change and thinking outside the box. The second core value, ‘Act as One’, has its focus towards being helpful and acting with team spirit, having fun together, committing to decisions made, showing respect for others, and cooperating for the benefit of the customers, as well as being dedicated and taking responsibility. Lastly, the final core value, ‘Think Big’, consists of seeing the big picture, acting today, challenging themselves and others, pushing boundaries and setting ambitious goals, achieving big change step by step, as well as making decisions and prioritizing<sup>2</sup>.

These core values can be seen to permeate everything the employees do, from the recruitment process to different meetings and conversations between the organizational members. Further, regarding the history of Phal’s core values, ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ have been at the organization from the beginning and were established in Sweden, whereas ‘Think Big’, was established later on due to the expansion of the company within the American market.

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<sup>2</sup> Please refer to Appendix I.

When the respondents were asked about ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ elements, such as various types of meetings, humor and comparisons were highlighted, whereas the innovation days were emphasized when talking about ‘Think Big’. Therefore, it seems as if the employees understand ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ in one way and ‘Think Big’ in another way. Also the project group members seem to be able to relate to ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’, whilst they appeared to have a harder time relating to ‘Think Big’. For these reasons, we divided them into two separate sections throughout the chapter of Empirical Findings.

#### 4.2 Different Interpretations of the Core Values

When the project group members were asked if the core values can be interpreted in different ways, they told us the following:

“Even though clearly stated on the homepage what they [core values] mean in bullet points, there’s still room for different interpretations. Everyone is different in regards to their flexibility and helpfulness; everyone is different.” (Marie)

The core values appeared to be formulated on the company’s internal website; however, their subheadings seemed to leave room for various interpretations and understandings. She also said that due to everyone being different, the project group members comprehend the core values differently. Being flexible and helpful seemed to mean one thing for one person and another for someone else. Hence, it appeared to be essential that the employees understand the underlying message of the core values, which is supported by one of her colleagues:

“There might be a possibility to formulate it differently, but the underlying character of the core values, that’s what’s important, that people understand the underlying message.” (Rebecca)

It did not seem to quite matter if the three core values are called ‘Always Open’, ‘Act as One’ and ‘Think Big’; instead, what appeared to be important is that the employees understand what these core values mean. Other project members also emphasized this by saying that due to the recruitment process focusing on finding a certain type of person who reflects the core values, there should be a general understanding amongst the employees of what the core values mean. However, when the respondents were asked to define the three core values and

what these mean for them in their work, they can be interpreted to not always understand the underlying meaning in the same way. ‘Always open’ was explained as:

“If you think about in an everyday practice, all the office doors are open and that is the practice that most people run with.” (Ida)

“Making the product pretty open if you want to tackle it from a technical perspective. That’s also an important part.” (Tessa)

“If you read about it on the company’s website there’s stuff about being open towards customers. But it’s also about being open for new ideas and thoughts.” (Isabel)

A few respondents can be interpreted to create an understanding of ‘Always Open’ by reading about the core values on the company’s internal website, whereas others gave examples about what they and their colleagues do in order to act accordingly to this core value. There appeared to be different understandings of ‘Always Open’, as some participants referred to internal practices like employee relations, whereas other talked about both the internal and external environment, namely Phal’s products and customers. Other interviewees were seen to highlight the general transparency at Phal, both internally and externally, which is supported by Nicole, who said that ‘Always Open’ is:

“Something that we try to reflect both internally and externally, we are always willing to help our co-workers and clients, so we’re trying to take care of them in the best way possible, and be honest and open with them too.” (Nicole)

While most of the interviewees talked about ‘Always Open’, they appeared to confuse the meaning of it with ‘Act as One’, seeing that they emphasize that there are always people who want to help and that they are willing to help their colleagues and clients<sup>3</sup>. The project group members told us that ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ go together for them and, in fact, most respondents could not separate the meanings of these two core values. However, all the interviewees seemed to have a general understanding of ‘Act as One’, as Ida said:

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<sup>3</sup> Please refer to Appendix I.

“We’re not supposed to have a ‘we’ versus ‘them’ feeling within the company, but it’s about the company in its whole.” (Ida)

‘Act as One’, appeared to glue together the entire company, since it seemed to be about the company as a whole. However, this core value also seemed to be applied within smaller contexts, like New Growth, as Ida also says:

“We have morning meetings each morning and if there’s anyone that needs help and I feel like “yeah, I have a little work to do so I can help” or if it’s a really boring thing, you kind of have to be there because it’s ‘Act as One’.” (Ida)

This was something that we also found when we observed the participants’ daily scrums. Some of the project members asked their colleagues several times if they needed any support. However, our observations also showed that while some employees were offering their help, others did not say anything. As a few respondents told us, even though they try to help out as much as possible, sometimes they have too much to do themselves or feel like other members of the project group would be more suitable to help out and, therefore, they did not say anything. Furthermore, the third core value, ‘Think Big’, was explained as:

“If the target is that we’re supposed to sell this product, then we’re not just supposed to have that as a target, but also have as an aim to be the best in the world in order to drive it even further than our competitors.” (Isabel)

“If we have an opportunity to change the way we work to the better, then we should do it. We’re not supposed to be afraid to throw out old stuff and try new things.” (Kate)

“We should be able to think completely outside what we’re doing now and be ambitious, and go for it.” (Rebecca)

It appeared as if ‘Think Big’ is more difficult for the participants to understand, since it seemed as if they do not relate to this core value in relation to their work and used words such as ‘supposed to’ and ‘should’ when talking about ‘Think Big’. The members of project groups seemed to struggle to provide us with any examples of ‘Think Big’; instead, they chose to

define the concept in general terms. When the interviewees talked about ‘Think Big’, they seemed to mix in definitions of ‘Always Open’, such as being innovative and thinking outside the box, as Sarah stated that ‘Think Big’ means:

“Be as innovative as possible, preferably so that you’re thinking outside the box.”  
(Sarah)

In conclusion, it seemed as if the core values were understood differently. ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ appeared to be easier to understand than ‘Think Big’ for most interviewees. Therefore, we asked the project group members more in detail on *how* they understand the core values.

#### 4.3 Understanding ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’

During the interviews, the participants highlighted the natural aspects of ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ and pointed out that they have them in the back of their minds. The interviewees also said that the core values are part of their personality, as Ida said:

“‘Always Open’ is how I am as a person. If someone comes in and knocks on the door and has a question, then, of course, if I can help them. If I cannot do this, I point further where this person can go to and get help. This is probably my personality (...) I myself am very open, I try to be very open and I have always, during my entire childhood, cared just as much or sometimes more about them around me than myself. (...) Then this core value works very well.” (Ida)

‘Always Open’ appeared to be something that she always had with her during her childhood and, thus, it seemed to work very well for her. Marie said the following about her personality in relation to ‘Act as one’:

“We help each other, as soon there is someone in the team who has the knowledge, then you are there. I usually drop my things ‘okay now I will help my colleagues’ and then back. This is easy for me.” (Marie)

It can be interpreted that her personal values were aligned with ‘Act as One’. A few other respondents similarly talked about how both ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ were part of

their upbringing and, hence, their personal values seemed to be aligned with these two organizational core values. Therefore, it can be interpreted that even before these employees started to work at Phal, they perhaps already had a good understanding of these two values. The fact that ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ were portrayed to be so natural and seemed to be part of the project group members’ personality can be linked to the recruitment process. Phal seemed to match the job candidate’s personality with the core values:

“It can be so simple that these values are employed very strongly by the people that in charge of the recruitment process and therefore find the right personalities and that is why it just falls naturally, that this is how we work.” (Ida)

As the interviewees emphasized that the core values lie naturally and are part of their personality due to the recruitment process, it can be interpreted that understanding ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ should be quite easy and straightforward for them. At the same time, when we asked the project group members in the beginning of the interviews to tell us about their core values, they could not remember their names, even though the participants argued that they are well-matched with these values:

“What the hell, I’m drawing a blank... which one? (...) I can barely remember them right now, but I’m certain that I’m a pretty good match to them [core values].” (Rebecca)

A few other respondents similarly expressed that they could not remember, or usually forgot, the names of either one of the core values or even both, whilst they all seemed to remember the last core value, ‘Think Big’. Apart from this, the project group members were seen to highlight different types of meetings, humor and comparisons to other firms when talking about ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’. Therefore, it appeared as if they understand these two core values through these elements.

#### 4.3.1 Meetings

Some of the respondents pointed out that the core values come up in different types of meetings, such as performance targets, workshops and department meetings. As Marie said:

“They [core values] appear quite clearly when we are working with our performance targets, it’s more like lengthy projects that we do on the side of our products. It can be about anything between heaven and earth like processes or developing something. Then indirectly they’re [core values] here, ‘Think Big’, now we’re one and we’re all going in that way.” (Marie)

‘Act as One’ and ‘Always Open’ seemed to be mentioned more indirectly by saying their indirect meanings that were shared amongst the project group members; such as we are one and we are going in that way. She also argued that the core values seemed to appear quite clearly, which could demonstrate that they are easy to understand. On the other hand, in department meetings the core values appeared to be brought up more directly, as Isabel told:

“It can be in a meeting and you’ll be discussing something and you can juggle with “should we do this or this?” “Oh, but ‘Act as One’, we should do the same as the rest of Phal, so we should collaborate.” It’s more like in those situations that core values have come in handy for me at least.” (Isabel)

Isabel can be seen to perceive the core values as a tool for decision-making in meetings. It appeared as if she both thinks and talks about the name of the core values and, hence, it can be interpreted that the employees understand these two values by talking about them and actually using their correct terms. Whilst some respondents seemed to find it easier to comprehend ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ when talking about them, others appeared to need to see them, as in presentations. The company can also be seen to have workshops and kick-offs, where the employees get challenged with difficult questions about the core values, in order for them to reflect about and understand them. During these events, they faced both direct and indirect questions about the core values, as Tessa stated:

“We, the entire company, had a half day workshop where you sat in groups mixed from different departments in order to share interesting ideas and people would contribute with their experiences, and it was like “how would you do this in order to achieve this core value?” or “how would you act in this situation?” (Tessa)

These different kinds of meetings appeared to give the project group members the opportunity to listen to different colleagues within New Growth and/or other departments, and discuss the



core values with them. The effects of this kind of interaction with other people can possibly allow the employees to understand the core values in a different light, since various people have different experiences and understandings. Nevertheless, an implication of these interactions was that some project group members experienced the core values to become too much:

“It was like monopoly, where you’re supposed to take Chance and Community Chest card, but everything was related to Phal and you were supposed to take a stand in relation to the three core values. At that point you almost puked on it and they expected you to sit there and play this game for an hour with people you didn’t know from different departments. There was a mingle value of it, but the exercise in itself ... for a person like me, that’s been at Phal for a long time, it became too much.” (Kate)

Workshops did not necessarily seem to help everyone to understand ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ in relation to their work. As some respondents have been working at Phal for a long time, they can be seen to comprehend the core values without doing various exercises based on them. At the same time, she argued that these kinds of workshops can be good for new employees in order for them to understand the ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’. The project group members seemed to get reminded about the core values in different meetings, as Sarah argued:

“It has often been that one names them when we have meetings, department meetings and then one gets reminded about them (...) so you cannot avoid them.” (Sarah)

It appeared as if the employees get reminded about the core values both in meetings and in their daily work in order to comprehend them better, but also to possibly enlighten the employee’s understanding of these values with organization’s understanding as a reminder. Reminders can be seen to be either in form of little eye-catchers hinting to the core values or by simply naming them every now and then. When we made our second observations of the project groups’ daily scrums, the chart with Phal’s official definitions of the core values was put up on the board, perhaps to remind everyone about them. This was, in fact, the only visual reminder that we could detect at New Growth during our process of conducting interviews and doing observations. Some employees appeared to appreciate getting reminded about the core values every now and then, and they are not just introduced once when being recruited.

Nevertheless, some employees seemed to disagree with this and argued instead that they should not get reminded about the core values, as Rebecca said:

“If a reminder of any kind is needed in order to have these values, then that is a problem itself, that they do not lie as naturally for people and then I think that one has failed with the recruitment process.” (Rebecca)

That people needed to be reminded about the core values can be a sign that the recruitment process had not been successful since these values did not seem to lie as naturally for these people. At the same time, the same respondent also said the following:

“Honestly, I think that there’s a few people that need to think about it, whilst for others it’s more like ‘this is me’.” (Rebecca)

Hence, since everyone is different, it seemed as if some employees need meetings and reminders about the core values in order to understand them in their work, whilst others do not. Aside from meetings, another way in which the participants expressed their understandings was through humor.

#### 4.3.2 Humor

Some project group members said that they either joke about the core values themselves or have heard jokes from colleagues at some point. They seemed to joke about ‘Always Open’ as Ida pointed out:

“‘Always closed’ I might have heard it before, we work with Physical Access Control System [passer system] and one’s task is to open and close doors and if one then finds a bug, so it probably happened that one says “ha ‘Always closed’, it should be Always Open” since it did not close how it was supposed to.” (Ida)

The project group members appeared to make jokes that are directly related to their work. In order to understand ‘Always Open’ they joked about opposite phenomenon, namely ‘Always Closed’. One member described it as a door being closed and indicated that it should be ‘Always Open’. Another example of this was provided by Ida, where the employees received an Easter egg that some kept closed. Others then insinuated that the egg should be ‘Always

Open'. When Ida talked about the Easter egg, she pointed out that these kinds of jokes are funny, possibly implying that it is something positive and people can laugh about it. In both examples, the core value can be understood by stating it as a norm - how something should be. Nicole joked about 'Act as One':

"I do that but not with these terms, but we maybe say like 'but it is not Act as one' to take coffee and not putting on new coffee'. This also says a lot that one jokes about one's core values. This means after all that one thinks about them." (Nicole)

The project group members seemed to even joke about aspects that are only indirectly related to work. They can be seen to put the word *not* in front of 'Act as one' in order to understand the opposite phenomena; that they do not follow this core value. Nicole also pointed out that applying humor says a lot and means that one thinks about them, which can be interpreted to be both in a positive and negative way. Positively, in the sense that the respondents might joke about them because they constantly have them in the back of their mind; however, negatively in the sense that they possibly think that they are not good enough.

As everyone is different, it can be interpreted that it is easier for some to understand the core values when connecting them to their actual work whereas others comprehend them when joking about more indirectly work-related aspects, such as joking about coffee. Even though humor can be expressed differently, the assumption is that the underlying meaning is the same. Since the interviewees seemed to emphasize that they joked about the core values with others, they can be seen to create a shared understanding of the values through humor. However, while some might understand the core values by joking about 'Always Open' and 'Act as One', others appeared to believe that this was an indication that the core values are not that important. As Tessa pointed out:

"I have not heard so many jokes. No, they usually do not occur. It is probably more common among people who do not think that they are important, but no not so many." (Tessa)

People perhaps understand the core values but appeared to joke about them because they do not think they are that important and, thus, do not seem to take them serious. However, another side of using humor as a means of expression could also indicate that the interviewees

do not comprehend the core values. Everyone understands these values through humor in different ways; some think that joking about the ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ is a bad sign, whereas others use humor in order to understand these values in their work. The participants also described another way of comprehending core values, by comparing them.

#### 4.3.3 Comparison

Some of the respondents also said that they compared Phal’s core values to the one of other companies. They appeared to compare them to the core values of their previous workplaces, as Natalie said:

“I have been at places where they’ve been a lot more complicated. There’s values like this at every organization and they always have a more or less complicated definition, and at certain places it’s like making an exam; trying to understand these values and it’s so boring that you’ve forgotten everything after five minutes. That’s what I’ve felt, not here, but I have felt like that at previous workplaces.” (Natalie)

Compared to ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’, understanding the core values at other companies appeared to be both difficult and boring, like making an exam. Hence, these core values were only understood to a certain degree and for a short time. At the same time, comparing these values to other organizations the respondents seemed to have an easier time to comprehend them in their work. The employees, who have worked at other companies, can be interpreted to create an individual understanding of the core values based on their experiences. However, they also appeared to tell their colleagues and friends about their experiences with the core values at other firms and, thus, create a shared understanding through dialogue. Consequently, the project group members who have not worked at other companies seemed to compare Phal’s core by listening to the stories from friends’ experiences, as Tessa pointed out:

“I can honestly say that I experience the core values of Phal differently than how I think that the most of my friends do it at their workplaces.” (Tessa)

As well as stories from colleagues’ experiences, as Ida said:

“I’ve spoken to colleagues who’ve worked in a lot of different companies, where they say that they experience that these core values are used more here and that Phal then has a pretty special culture. There’s a certain way you are, you’re an Phalean.” (Ida)

By listening to stories of others, the project group members can be interpreted to understand ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ in their work. Phal’s core values seemed to be both experienced differently and used more compared to other companies, as a few interviewees pointed out ‘if you work at Phal, you are an Phalean’. Since most of the project group members did not have experience from previous workplaces, they had to rely on the understanding they created based on the stories of others and the dialogue they had with them. Some employees said that they take the core values for granted to a certain extent, since they have only worked at Phal. However, it can be interpreted that they can understand the core values in a different light by listening to comparisons to other companies. Some respondents can even be seen to compare ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ to other companies and stated that they sit on their knowledge and do not want to help, which is not the case of Phal. Even though other firms might not have the same core values, it still seemed to be a way to understand and possibly appreciate Phal’s core values to a larger extent.

It can be interpreted that the way in which the project group members understand ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ in their work differs; some seemed to need meetings, humor and/or comparisons, whereas others did not. Further, most respondents appeared to have difficulties understanding ‘Think Big’.

#### 4.4 Understanding ‘Think Big’

‘Think Big’ was harder for most members in project groups to understand in relation to their work. Therefore, it can be interpreted to influence them the least, one member said:

“If you take those three core values [Always Open, Act as One, Think Big] and compare them to my personality, then ‘Think Big’ is probably the one that’s the least like me as a person, compared to the other two.” (Ida)

Ida described that she understands the core values in relation to her personality, which seemed to be a crucial part of her work and influenced the way she goes about it. Ida and other project group members compared ‘Think Big’ to the other two core values, and, thus, attempted to

comprehend its implication through this. When we asked about the meaning of ‘Think Big’ most of the respondents seemed to be able to understand the general aspects behind the core value. Although, the participants’ awareness regarding the subheadings of ‘Think Big’ differed, some were completely unaware of them, whilst the ones that were aware about them described the situation as:

“There are some underlying points about what it means and these are quite difficult to adjust to, I think.” (Natalie)

Despite of the subheadings and their intentions to clarify the ambiguity around ‘Think Big’, it appeared as if the subheadings do the opposite. The members found themselves in a position where they seemed to find it hard to adapt to the core value and Phal’s intention of how it is supposed to be understood by the respondents. There appeared to be a gap between the practicality around their work and the ambiguity around ‘Think Big’, and adjusting to one or the other seemed to be difficult for the members. As another interviewee described:

“I think it’s [Think Big] harder to apply in the daily work. You know, when you’re in the middle of your work and you know the process of it. The daily work is very directed towards what you’re doing in the project.” (Nicole)

Whilst another project group member said:

“Sure, you’re supposed to be innovative and that stuff, but we still have a plan to follow. We’re supposed to deliver, we’re supposed to do these three things and that means that I can’t just run away and do my own thing.” (Natalie)

Both Nicole and Natalie stressed that they have a certain routine and schedule to follow in their daily work, where the ability to be innovative appeared to fall behind aspects of time sensitivity and the demands of the projects. Due to the fact that the members in project groups operate in a certain way during their daily routines, it can also be implied that this can frame the members into a box or a path that limits them and their understanding. Therefore, it can be seen as if the employees are on a path that remains enclosed in a tunnel; hence, they cannot see the width of the open road and its possibilities.

#### 4.4.1 Innovation Days

When the project members were asked how they relate to ‘Think Big’ and whether it is employed in their work, most of them instantly mentioned the innovation days. This concept of the innovation days occurs four times a year, and according to the participants the innovation days are where they practice ‘Think Big’, whereas in their daily work the value seemed not be reflected upon. Ida said:

“Yeah, during innovation days and kick-offs, and sometimes during a meeting, so the terms [core values] pop up a couple of times a year, and on the internal website. But during every day work life it’s pretty quiet.” (Ida)

It appeared as if the participants even acknowledged that they did not actively reflect over ‘Think Big’ in their daily work, but found that the innovation days provided them with room and enough time to develop an understanding for the concept. Her colleague, Tessa, agreed on that matter by saying:

“During innovation days there is a possibility that you’re ‘Thinking Big’, [but] during every day work life I don’t really think about them [core values].” (Tessa)

Due to the fact that there are certain times set aside, during a year, where the organizational members get the opportunity to focus on central concepts like ‘Think Big’, it can be interpreted that they do not need to reflect over this core value during their daily work. Although, during our observations we discovered that there seemed to be several indications of ‘Think Big’. However, these indications appeared to be of the incremental aspect. In their daily scrums they can be seen to attempt to push themselves and challenge each other, by repeatedly asking whether they have tried this solution or looked at the effects of a certain software implication. Subsequently, it seemed as if they are attempting to prioritize and make decisions accordingly. The project group members appeared to be unaware that these incremental features in their daily work life are essential aspects of ‘Think Big’. Despite the fact that they feel as if they do not reflect over ‘Think Big’, and that is not expressed through means of comparison and humor, the core value seemed to be operating on a subconscious level; seeing as we were able to make distinction of the value during our observations. There appeared to be different levels of how to understand ‘Think Big’, where most participants seem to regard ‘Think Big’ as a radical, ground-breaking core value, that gets practiced

during the innovation days. The members' understanding of 'Think Big' became clear to them during the innovation days and it appeared as if they find that the difficulties of adapting and relating to the core value in their work perishes thanks to the innovation days. These innovation days are an event that is expected by every organizational member to attend and be a part of. During these days, the employees are provided with the opportunity to be innovative and set aside any current work project that they are working on. One project group member described the innovation days as:

“You're allowed to do whatever you want during those days, basically. That's when we get the chance to actually 'Think Big'. (...) Innovation days is an opportunity to 'Think Big' whereas in your daily work there's really not enough room for that.”  
(Marie)

Most of them can be seen to regard the innovation days as a possibility for them to gain a closer relationship with 'Think Big', and possibly even strengthen the other two core values. When asked about the innovation days one participant described it as:

“We have specific days set aside every annual quarter, innovation days, that are there to let you do whatever you want to. (...) So you can do those things that you've dreamed about and innovate, or think outside box, or whatever it can be”. (Kate)

Natalie and several other participants appeared to regard the innovation days as a moment where the organizational members get the chance to do potentially ground-breaking stuff, in their work.

“It's really good with innovation days, it's like 'Stop! You're not allowed to do any work now.' You're given the opportunity to think about big things or small things, that's where they [innovation days] give the space to do it.” (Nicole)

It seemed as if the innovation days provide an outlet for the employees, a moment that breaks off from their daily organizational lives and routines, and provides them with the chance to possibly develop an understanding of 'Think Big' that differs from their current understanding. Due to the innovation days, it also appeared as if they do not feel obliged to actively regard 'Think Big' during their daily routines. The project group members' general



understanding of ‘Think Big’, which is radical and innovative, seemed to stand in the way of the subtle ways of comprehending this core value. It looks as if this general understanding is partly established through the social interaction that takes place during these innovation days. As described by the participants, a social mix of organizational employees come together and are subjected to social dynamics. The dialogue that takes place during the innovation days can be interpreted to allow for different understandings and opinions to be discussed and exchanged, in fact, Tessa stated:

“It’s always been interesting talking to people that have completely different roles than yourself and how they view the core values. That’s probably what I think is most interesting, since you look at it so differently.” (Tessa)

Whilst Ida regarded the effects of the innovation days as:

“It helps me in a way, afterwards, to identify why we did certain things a certain way. Since it’s brought up, you don’t really forget about them, but it’s more like they’re brought back to life again. We already have them incorporated in the way we work, but it’s maybe because we keep getting that little push.” (Ida)

The social interaction that takes place during the innovation days seemed to allow for the participants in the project groups to comprehend how differently ‘Think Big’ can be understood and practiced. This appeared to provide them with an understanding for why their work is practiced in a certain way. Another interviewee also believed that the effects of the innovation days helps them to get the feeling and incentive to dare to try new solutions, which may be the reason for why the participants need that push in order to ensure that the values are brought back to life again. Subsequently, this could potentially allow for a work environment to develop that is forgiving and understanding, where the participants feel as if the culture allows them to comprehend ‘Think Big’ differently. Most participants also described that the innovation days provide a sense of liberty and bring back their expectations of thinking that anything is possible, as this is the way in which they understand ‘Think Big’.

During the process of our interviews with the participants, we discovered that some of the members mentioned that the core values are experienced throughout their work. Several of the project groups members described the core values to be baked into their job profile, and can,

therefore, perhaps not be avoided. The workload seemed to be divided into certain segments, as one member described:

“I have to give people a chance to innovate. I can’t ask them to give me 100 percent and expect them at the same time to get their own free time to do what they want to do and think about. This is, therefore, why we [Phal] plan for about 70 percent, where the remaining 20 percent will be occupied for meetings and other things. Then there is the last 10 percent where they [employees] feel that they have a little room to breathe and do what they want to do.” (Kate)

Apart from the innovation days, the employees should use ten percent of their time to innovative and in this way comprehend ‘Think Big’. However, they appeared to fail to acknowledge this as they understand ‘Think Big’ to be something outrageous and out of the box. This could lead to why they feel as if they cannot relate to ‘Think Big’ in their daily surroundings but are in need of the innovation days as a way of understanding the concept better. In other words, ‘Think Big’ can also entail aspects like seeing the bigger picture and taking small steps towards it. This is something that the employees are attempting to incorporate in their work. One of the project members described this as:

“There are circumstances, where ‘Think Big’ and stuff like that might be neglected a little bit since you have to have something released, then you have to remove certain things and wait with certain things. So sometimes it [Think Big] doesn’t really work.” (Hannah)

Whereas another member stated:

“Sometimes it feels like there’s always a kind of conflict with ‘Think Big, since there’s a feature that for instance comes from the client-side, product owners. (...) So there’s a strict time limit to accomplish what they want, there’s a deadline where you can feel as if there’s not enough time for ‘Think Big’.” (Tessa)

It appeared as if the employees try to incorporate ‘Think Big’ into their work. The pressures and demands of the projects seemed to limit the members’ understanding of ‘Think Big’ from a certain aspect, which results in them believing that they are prioritizing away this core

value. As a consequence, the respondents can be interpreted to end up feeling as if they have to let ‘Think Big’ go in order to fulfill the remaining demands of the project. Nevertheless, they fail to recognize that they are actually utilizing several aspects of ‘Think Big’ by taking the decision to let it fall behind. Several of the subheadings of ‘Think Big’ entail making decisions, prioritizing and setting ambitious goals. This may have been demonstrated by the actions of Hannah and Tessa as seen above, however, despite of their understanding of ‘Think Big’ and its applicability in their work, they still feel as if they failed to live up to the aspiration of the core value. This could potentially imply that there is a misalignment of the understanding of ‘Think Big’ between some of the project group member’s general interpretation of the value and the unfamiliarity to understand the smaller, incremental aspects of ‘Think Big’ in their work.

The participants were asked about the legitimacy regarding the core values, whereupon most of the respondents said that they feel genuine due to Phal’s efforts put into the core values. Aspects such as; the careful selection during the recruitment process, the continuous innovation days, along with the strong corporate culture, seemed to be understood by the members to be genuine. Several of the members said that they could relate to all three core values; however, some participants with a longer work experience seemed to feel that the efforts of ‘Think Big’ could come across as shallow at times. Natalie stated the following when asked if she felt as if ‘Think Big’ was an image aspect:

“Yes, sometimes it feels a little bit like that, if you’re a manager you have to work with these values. So you have a little workshop and think ‘Oh that’s great, now I’ve done that’. And then check on that, and then another year passes and it’s time again ‘Oh, the values!’. But the point is that you’re supposed to act on these actions that you establish during the year, but it’s often that it just comes to nothing.” (Natalie)

A few other interviewees agreed with her by stressing their concern about ‘Think Big’ appearing to be something additional, and a concept that seemed to have been developed through a financial perspective. This could also explain why some of the participants seem to regard the core values as shallow at times, and harder to apply practically in their specific work. Some respondents mentioned that they would prefer ‘Think Big’ to be tailored to their needs. This led to us asking the members of project groups if they would like to exchange or alter ‘Think Big’, in order to make it more understandable in relation to their work,

whereupon most participants expressed their satisfaction with the core values, including ‘Think Big’. In fact, Ida’s response to that question was as follows:

“They balance your day or the corporate culture. (...) For instance if you would miss ‘Think Big’ then you’re just helping each other all the time. (...) What I mean is that you’ll miss the drive and innovation... The company would die, eventually the competition will eat us alive.” (Ida)

Ida understood the core values to work in a synergy and, hence, for her it is difficult to alter ‘Think Big’ since it seemed to complement the ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’. It appeared as if she did not reflect critically upon the core values, especially ‘Think Big’, but she seemed to believe that by removing or altering a core value it would result in the other two taking over. In regards to ‘Think Big’, her belief was that there would be no drive forward if this core value were to be altered or replaced. Another member stated:

“I haven’t thought about the core values at all. I think that they are suitable for this organization. But then again, I don’t know what it looks like out there but I haven’t thought about anything I would want there instead, I’m thankful that someone else has thought it through.” (Marie)

The participants can be interpreted to not reflect over the core values, and, therefore, do not question them. It can be questioned why most participants would want to keep ‘Think Big’, even though the struggle to properly understand the value in their work. Thus, it appeared as if the interviewees take ‘Think Big’ for granted and, therefore, neglect the potential the value carries. At the same time, one member even stated that the need for innovation days should not be necessary to comprehend ‘Think Big’, even if they regard the core value as an innovative aspect then they should be innovative at all times in all aspects of the organization. In conclusion, there appears to be a rather distinctive difference in understanding how to ‘Think Big’ in relation to the participants’ work.

The following chapter will thoroughly discuss and analyze these findings, along with their implications, and lastly present our metaphor about core values as orchids.

## 5. Analysis: Discussion

In this section we discuss the contradictions and tensions that arose from our empirical findings on an increased level of theoretical abstraction (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). We start by comparing the project group members' interpretations of all three core values to Phal's official definitions. Following this, we discuss the ambiguous nature of 'Always Open', 'Act as One' and 'Think Big' and the various ways these core values can be understood. We also highlight the most interesting contradictions and tensions that arose from our empirical material. We conclude by proposing a new metaphor in order to gain a better understanding of the core values in a new light.

### 5.1 Interpretations of Core Values and its Ambiguity

As 'Always Open', 'Act as One' and 'Think Big' can be seen to be stated in general terms, they seem to leave plenty of room for interpretation, which is in line with Ferguson and Milliman (2008). Therefore, the project group members appear to understand the three core values differently. It was interesting to compare how the respondents understood the core values in contrast to Phal's official definitions<sup>4</sup>. 'Always Open' appears to be interpreted in various ways since four out of six subheadings were mentioned, which is supported by Sandberg and Targama (2007) who argue that core values can be understood differently by different people. This can also justify the reason for why employees tend to miscommunicate by using the same word but applying inconsistent interpretation (Dahlgaard et al. 1998). A few project group members seemed to have confused some of the subheadings of 'Act as One' with 'Always Open', which might be due to the ambiguous nature of this core value (Dahlgaard et al. 1998). On the other hand, 'Act as One' appears to be understood in the same way by the respondents, as being helpful and acting with team spirit. However, due to this, only one out of six subheadings seems to be acknowledged and, therefore, it can be questioned if the project group members understand all the dimensions to 'Act as One'. In regards to the last core value, 'Think Big', there appears to be a consensus on the general understanding of 'Think Big', which entails aspects of challenging themselves and others as well as pushing boundaries. However, the participants acknowledged that they struggled with 'Think Big' and appear to have interpreted some of the subheadings of 'Always Open' to belong to 'Think Big'. Again, this inconsistent interpretation can also be a sign of the core values being ambiguous (Dahlgaard et al. 1998). Therefore, the core values do not seem as

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<sup>4</sup> Please refer to Appendix I

straightforward as most literature argues, which will be further discussed in the following sections.

## 5.2 Natural, Unnatural or too Natural?

When analyzing our empirical material, we were conflicted about how project group members really understand ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ in their work, since we have found some interesting tensions. The project group members said that these core values felt natural and were part of their personality, which can be said to originate at the recruitment process of Phal that focuses on finding potential employees who fit into the culture. As our literature review shows, more emphasis is put on finding people who fit into the company’s culture and, therefore, match with the core values (Simoneaux & Stroud, 2014). It is essential to find people who understand and are predisposed to share the company’s values, as it is not possible to impose new core values on employees (Collins & Porras, 1996). Interestingly, even though literature states that it is difficult to live by and implement core values (Lencioni, 2002), everyone seemed to live according to ‘Always Open’, ‘Act as One’ and ‘Think Big’ and have them in the back of their minds. This is probably the case since their personal values seemed to be in agreement with Phal’s core values. Therefore, it can perhaps be interpreted that it should be relatively easy for the project group members to understand the core values in relation to their work on an individual level.

Some of the project group members seem to comprehend ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ through various kinds of meetings in which these values appear. The majority of the interviewees told us that they have attended workshops and kick-offs, where they tried to solve challenging questions about the core values together with colleagues from other departments. This seemed to be consistent with other research that claims through education and training, in both meetings and workshops the participants can learn about and understand the core values, which can be done through cases and group exercises (Fitzgerald & Desjardine, 2004; Rogelberg et al. 2010). These cultural activities can lead to shaping Phal’s culture as well as sharing knowledge and, in this way, creating a shared understanding of the core values (Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2014). This is also in accordance with Sandberg and Tamara (2007) who argue that if the dialogue between the members of project groups is successful, they will arrive at a shared understanding of the core values. Furthermore, some of the respondents said that they need reminders about ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ in order to comprehend them in their work, which is supported by Lencioni (2002). However, it can be

questioned why some employees need these meetings and reminders to understand the core values if these values are part of their personality and feel as natural as the employees have implied. Interestingly, some of the respondents thought that meetings, especially workshops, focusing on core values and reminders can be too much<sup>5</sup> and, hence, these employees perhaps do not need meetings and reminders to understand them. This is in line with Urde (2001) who argues that a core value that is repeated like a mantra runs the risk of losing both its meaning and value.

Some of the respondents appeared to apply both inside and good-natured jokes about the core values in order to understand ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ in relation to their work. They can be seen to joke about these values by stating the opposite phenomenon (Sandberg & Targama, 2007), by for example saying ‘Always Closed’ or that something is *not* ‘Always Open’. A possible reason for why the project group members appeared to apply humor is that it adds depth to understanding their experiences of paradoxes and ambiguity (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993), as with the core values in our case. Moreover, as Greatbatch and Clark (2002) argue, humor creates an open atmosphere that enhances listening to and comprehending messages. This is something that our respondents also pointed out; by making jokes they appeared to create a group understanding of ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’. However, we are conflicted with why some of the project group members joked about the core values if these values, as mentioned above, felt so natural and were in the back of the employees’ minds. Nevertheless, it should be noted that most humor is perceived and experienced differently by different employees (Gunning, 2001) and, thus, a few respondents said that joking about the core values can be a sign of these values not being as important.

Some members of project groups also seemed to compare ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ to the core values of other companies in order to gain an understanding of their core values in relation to their work. This is supported by Sandberg and Targama (2007), who point out that contrasting a concept, such as core values, can be used in communication to shape an comprehension of the phenomenon by comparing it to similar phenomena, core values of other companies. Further, the project group members appeared to tell each other stories about their experiences with core values at other companies and, thus, the understanding of core values can become shared amongst these employees (Sandberg & Targama, 2007; Lencioni,

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<sup>5</sup> Please refer to section 4.2.1 in Empirical Findings.

2002). However, it can be questioned why the project group members needed to compare 'Always Open' and 'Act as One' to the core values of other companies in order to understand them if they live by their values and have them in the back of their mind, as they have implied.

These tensions might imply that the core values are not as natural as the employees stated, as well as that their recruitment process might not be as effective in finding people who fully fit into Phal's culture and, hence, its core values<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, it might be due to every person creating and developing his or her own understandings (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). Consequently, some project group members did not need various meetings, humor and comparisons to comprehend 'Always Open' and 'Act as One'; they were satisfied understanding them on an individual level through their own interpretations. However, some respondents seemed to need to create a shared understanding of core values through dialogue, joking, small talk and storytelling, in order to comprehend 'Always Open' and 'Act as One'. It can also be interpreted that some project group members simply like to joke and chat to others, naturally, whereas others do not, as everyone is different (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). One project group member told us that they usually joke about everything, even when they face small problems, in order to create a fun and relaxed workplace; however, it might still depend on the circumstances and the person, hence, meaning that jokes are only applied when appropriate. Thus, it does not necessarily mean that the core values are not natural for those people who do not joke and compare them to other companies. In addition, it can be seen that most employees who have not been at Phal for that long need reminders, meetings, humor and comparisons to understand 'Always Open' and 'Act as One'. This can perhaps imply that they are not as natural and easy to comprehend for newly recruits compared to most employees who have been working at Phal for a long time. This can possibly be linked back to the perhaps ineffective recruitment process, as the aim is to find employees who match the core values and, hence, even for new recruits the core values should be natural and easy to understand.

Moreover, when the project group members were asked to define the core values, some of them could neither remember the names of 'Always Open' and 'Act as One', nor separate their meanings. Consequently, it can be questioned why some of the participants failed to

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<sup>6</sup> Please refer to section 4.3 in Empirical Findings.



remember their names and had difficulties distinguishing them, despite the members claimed that the core values are so natural. Some of these respondents have been working at Phal for a long time, which can suggest that it might not be as important to remember the names and separate their meanings as long as everyone lives by the core values. On the other hand, it can perhaps imply that the project group members do not critically reflect upon 'Always Open' and 'Act as One' and, thus, take them for granted to a certain extent. This can potentially imply that the core values are almost too natural and, therefore, not fully understood. We found ourselves conflicted regarding the project group members' inability to separate or list the core values, despite of the various ways, namely meetings, jokes or comparisons, in which the members get reminded of them. These tensions can show that understanding 'Always Open' and 'Act as One' is not as straightforward, due to the values being quite ambiguous (Alvesson, 2002), which is something that we also found about 'Think Big'.

### 5.3 Incremental or Radical?

Based on our empirical findings, there appears to be a difference in how to understand 'Think Big'. The participants said that they comprehend the general idea and intention of what the organization intends with 'Think Big'. Nevertheless, they still seemed to struggle to acknowledge the different ways they can understand and incorporate 'Think Big' into their work, whereas they felt as if 'Always Open' and 'Act as One' fall more naturally, as discussed above. This could be in line with the fact that different individuals create different interpretations of how to comprehend 'Think Big' (Sandberg & Targama, 2007), which translates this understanding into actions and priorities in relation to employee's work (Dahlgaard et al. 1998). Hence, people's individuality allows for various understandings to develop that continuously fluctuates in regards to aspects like content and meaning of work (Dahlgaard et al. 1998). Due to the members comprehending the general idea behind 'Think Big', which they explain to be something radical and ground-breaking, they also found themselves struggling to comprehend to this core value in their specific work. It could be said that there is a tension between how the project group members understand 'Think Big' in contrast to how it can be understood.

By having organizational activities like innovation days the participants are exposed to learn how to interact and practice the core values of the organization (Dahlgaard et al. 1998). They are given the opportunity to devote their time and attention towards 'Think Big' and get the chance to work with 'Think Big' as they understand the concept; in an innovative way. The

project group members found that the innovation days provided them with enough room to develop and understand ‘Think Big’ (Sandberg & Targama, 2007), whereas in their usual work routines they felt that ‘Think Big’ was neglected or taken for granted. Despite of this, a couple of members described that 10 percent of their workload was supposed to be dedicated to ‘Think Big’, where the members are given the chance to push themselves outside their boundaries. The 10 percent of their time was aimed towards more incremental aspects of ‘Think Big’, as described by these participants<sup>7</sup>. Intriguingly, there appears to be a difference in understanding the various ways in which ‘Think Big’ operates and can be employed (Urde, 2001). A reason for some of the participants being able to acknowledge the incremental aspects of ‘Think Big’ could depend on their experience at Phal, since their understanding of the core value seemed to have become apparent in their daily routines (O’Reilly, 1989). Another reason for this could be the essential aspect of comprehending ‘Think Big’ through social interaction and being subjected to social dynamics, in addition to different kinds of impressions and experiences (O’Reilly, 1998), which most of the participants seemed to do. If the project group members’ common understanding of ‘Think Big’ is that it is set aside for the innovation days to be understood and employed, then it is reasonable to assume that the implication of this understanding might be that they fail to acknowledge the incremental, smaller aspects of ‘Think Big’. This can be supported by the fact that the project group can appeared to share the same core values (Sandberg & Targama, 2007), although that does not necessarily imply that there is a general consensus around them, which is why is it important to have innovation days in order to investigate whether the core values are committed to and understood (Alvesson, 2002).

The subheadings<sup>8</sup> of ‘Think Big’ might have the intention to make the core value clearer; however, in the case of the members it seemed as if they felt confused or unaware of the subheadings when we asked them about this. It is essential for an organization to operate with a few, important and strong core values in order for the organizational members to understand them (Ferguson & Milliman, 2008); although, each core value has a number of subheadings, this can still cause confusion, as in the case for the members of Phal. This could be the reason for why the participants seemed to struggle to relate to ‘Think Big’ in relation to their specific work. The subheadings of ‘Think Big’ demonstrate what can be understood as guidance for organizational members of how to achieve ‘Think Big’ (O’Reilly, 1989, Dahlgaard et al.,

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<sup>7</sup> Please refer to section 4.4 in Empirical Findings.

<sup>8</sup> Please refer to Appendix I.

1998), in the form of small steps. However, it can be questioned whether the interviewees' unawareness about the details regarding the subheadings or the incapability to understand, it in relation to their work, is the root to why the subheadings appear to confuse them (Tretheway, 1999).

Even though most members felt as if they did not get the time to practice or develop 'Think Big', we observed that small aspects of the core value were visible during their daily routines; namely their daily scrums<sup>9</sup>. Abilities like being able to prioritize and make decisions were executed during these meetings, and all these aspects assemble together the subheadings of 'Think Big'. Interestingly, the members felt as if these aspects, prioritizing and making decisions, were more connected to the other two core values, rather than 'Think Big' (Salomon, 1999, cited in Jaakson et al. 2008). This can be due to the confusions regarding the subheadings (Tretheway, 1999). During time-sensitive projects the project group members felt as if they had to let 'Think Big' go. The implication of understanding the core value in a particular way can also cloud and limit their minds of realizing the different ways to understand 'Think Big' in their work (Alvesson, 2002). The participants also stressed their concern that there is a certain way to go about their work, which can imply that routinization can also limit the participants' reflection and possibility to see certain aspects from a different kind of light (Porter, 2015). Conversely, during the innovation days the members were provided with the ability to self-reflect over their own understandings in the collective light of the group (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). Although, interestingly, most of the members seemed to have arrived at a common understanding that 'Think Big' mainly is expressed and exercised during the innovation days (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) and, hence, the subtle aspects of 'Think Big' appeared to be neglected and unacknowledged.

Another aspect that was fascinating, is that the project groups members comprehend 'Think Big' by comparing it to the other two, 'Always Open' and 'Act as One' (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). In fact, a few members mentioned that they understood 'Think Big' to be something additional. Interestingly, 'Think Big' was not established and developed during the same time as 'Always Open' and 'Act as One'. As the organization expanded and became more globalized, they emerged into the North American market, where the American side felt the importance to establish a core value like 'Think Big' in order to provide visionary

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<sup>9</sup> Please refer to section 4.4.1 in Empirical Findings.

thinking and new ideas. This could stand as a reason for why the members in the project group that we researched had difficulties relating to and understanding ‘Think Big’ in relation to their work. There are differences in culture as well as in personalities between individuals from North America and Sweden (Hatch & Erlich, 1993). These differences may impact on the different ways in which organizational members understand certain aspects, and, hence, possibly add to a complex environment where conditions can become contradicting and ambiguous (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993, Anderson, 1997). Aspects like innovation and self-development may fall more naturally in a Swedish culture in comparison to an American, as some participants also implied.

Interestingly, the participants also demonstrated that they were happy with all three core values, despite being unable to relate to ‘Think Big’, and they stated they would not prefer to have any other. Perhaps this could have been due to the trustworthy environment that had developed at Phal, where the possibility to exchange these values could have endangered the security of the environment and, hence, the group cohesion (Lopez-Fresno & Savolainen, 2014). The implication of sticking to what is safe if that the idea of core values can be seen as reducing reflection and questioning (Alvesson, 2002).

In conclusion, as seen above, we have discussed the various contradictions and tensions that arose during our empirical findings, which illustrates that core values are not easy and straightforward to understand, as most literature argues (e.g. Ferguson & Milliman, 2008; Rowe & Cadzow, 2014). However, it is possible for the employees to understand these values in relation to their work at least to a certain extent and, thus, the core values are not completely ambiguous. This has led us to develop a metaphor that highlights the above-discussed tensions and the more ambiguous nature of core values.

#### 5.4 Theoretical Contribution: Development of the New Metaphor, *Orchids*

The reason for why we have chosen to answer our research question by a metaphor is because we wanted to have a more hands-on approach, where we can provide a contribution that can potentially be applicable for other empirical findings as well. Further, on a personal level it is more relatable and simpler for individuals to understand things through metaphors (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011). Whereupon, based on our empirical findings and discussion, we suggest that core values can be metaphorically described and understood as *orchids*. This metaphor highlights our main findings and is thoroughly explained below.

Orchids have been around for centuries and become widespread and diverse. They consist of 25,000 various species (Kramer, 2013), and could, therefore, in a way be resembled with core values, which exist on various levels; personal, organizational, societal and cultural (Posner, 2010, Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). Through time, orchids have become one of the most well-known flowers and their popularity can be associated with core values as these too have become increasingly important (Lencioni, 2002). Orchids are distinguished by their beauty and, visually, they exude elegance and perfection, which is similar to what the core values are attempting to represent; they are said to be the image of the organization (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014). We have also chosen to represent our metaphor through orchids since they portray the image of simplicity, yet they remain complex. Similarly, core values may transmit simplicity, yet the ambiguity of these values correlates with complexity. An orchid's bilateral symmetry and simplicity allows for individuals to understand its complex nature differently. Every individual creates and develops their own personal associations to the flower, based on their impressions and experiences (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). Equivalently, individuals establish their own understanding with core values in a similar way, through interpretation and experiences (Anderson, 1997). Lastly, during the process of gathering our empirical material we discovered that 'Always Open', 'Act as One' and 'Think Big' were associated with the term natural, which led us to develop a metaphor that portrays this natural aspect, like an orchid.

Aside from the various species of orchids, the blossoms of orchids have various colors and patterns, where these different aspects can represent the different core values that exist. We also found that the soil of an orchid can represent the culture within an organization. As the culture needs to be nourished and cared for, so does the soil of an orchid; if the soil is not taken care of it can become malnourished and diseased at worst. Similarly, the culture at an organization needs to be cultivated and cherished in order for the core values to flourish. The correlation between the core values and the culture can be illustrated by the stem and roots of the orchids. The increasing popularity of orchids allows the price range to differ from expensive to cheaper ones. Some may assume that this could imply that the expensive orchids are of better quality, whereas the cheaper ones may blossom for a while and then perish. Furthermore, even though the core values at organizations may appear to look the same, their

understanding is still dependent on the care the organization invests in the values. As can be seen with Phal and the innovation days<sup>10</sup>.

Orchids are very sensitive and difficult to maintain. If they get too much water or sunlight they die, whilst if they get too little water and sunlight they also tend to die. Similarly, if the employees get reminded too much or too little some of them do not seem to really understand ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ in their work. There also needs to be a balance of departmental meetings and workshops, humor and comparisons in regards to the core values in order for the employees to understand them. As ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ can be seen to be of a quite ambiguous nature, these above-mentioned dimensions are needed but too much can affect the core values negatively. Hence, these dimensions can be either illustrated by the water or sunlight that are, to some extent, needed for the orchids to survive. At the same time, this implies that core values are still somewhat clear and straightforward since it is possible to find this balance and, thus, project group members are able to understand them in relation to work, at least to a certain extent. In addition, ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ appear to be almost too natural as employees can neither remember their names nor separate their meanings<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, watering the orchids once a week seems quite easy, nevertheless, it is easy to take them for granted and forget to water them. Moreover, once the orchids die it takes a long time for them to blossom again, which is the same with core values; if they are taken for granted, it is hard to implement and incorporate them again (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014).

As can be seen from our empirical findings, there are different kinds of meetings, especially workshops based on core values, that the employees attend in order to create both an individual and shared understanding of the core values through various exercises, cases and discussions. Equivalently, since some people have difficulty to understand how orchids work, there are tutorials and other information about the orchids on the Internet in order to learn more about them and comprehend them better (American Orchid Society, 2016). Further, some project group members appear to joke about ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ and, in this way, create an understanding of these core values in their work. Similarly, people who have trouble understanding orchids can be found to joke about them by, for example, saying that they are money makers as they are quite expensive if one has to keep on buying new ones

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<sup>10</sup> Please refer to section 4.4.1 in Empirical Findings.

<sup>11</sup> Please refer to section 4.4 in Empirical Findings.

since they are so sensitive and die easily (Phillipps, 2008). Moreover, the respondents seem to compare Phal's core values to the ones of previous workplaces or to the experiences that friends and colleagues have made with core values at other companies. In this way, they gain a better understanding of 'Always Open' and 'Act as One' through dialogue and storytelling. Correspondingly, as there are many different orchids, one can compare them to either an earlier one that one has had, which maybe has died, or to orchids of friends and family members.

Throughout the chapter of empirical findings, we have illustrated the struggles the project group members have with 'Think Big'. The participants described the difficulties they had relating to the core value and found that the innovation days provided a moment for them to develop their understanding of 'Think Big' (Urde, 2001). This incapability to relate to the value can be resembled with an orchid without any blossoms or one that was not in bloom. In other words, the bare branches of the orchid represent the members' incapability to relate to 'Think Big' on a personal level, which, therefore, clouded their understanding of this value in their work. Despite of the difficulties with relating to 'Think Big', the members still appeared to subconsciously practice several aspects of the core value<sup>12</sup>, where we found ourselves that this can be seen as small buds that are evolving on the branches of the orchid. However, as the participants did not acknowledged these aspects, it can be argued that the buds of the orchid never blossomed.

The support and liberation the innovation days provide can be seen as the wooden branches that are there to support the flower to stand tall and blossom over the organization. In other words, the participants are allowed to create and develop their understanding of 'Think Big', and set aside any other distractions of their work (Fitzgerald & Desjardine, 2004). Further, the innovation days take place four times a year; equivalently, the wooden branches that support the orchids are not always in place, and can be adapted to the needs of the flower. Without the support of these wooden branches, the innovation days, the members find themselves struggling with understanding and maintaining the core value (Sandberg & Targama, 2007). They do not seem to acknowledge the smaller buds and tend to not reflect over their comprehension of 'Think Big', without the innovation days. Nevertheless, the understanding of 'Think Big' to be and radical, ground-breaking element can also limit the members'

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<sup>12</sup> Please refer to section 4.4.1 in Empirical Findings.

understanding and the different potential ways of comprehending the core value. The routinization of member's work could result in the members neglecting the incremental ways in which 'Think Big' can be understood and implemented in their work (Porter, 2015). Similarly, the small buds of the orchid may not be acknowledged; however, it still has the potential to develop without the support of the innovation days, as this was the case for few of the members.

The metaphor illustrates the different ways in which project groups members understand the organizational core values in relation to their work, as we have interpreted and understood them to be. We are aware that the metaphor in itself does neither cover all aspects of our empirical findings, nor can it be generalized as it was based and developed upon our empirical findings for a particular organization. However, we still believe that we have made a theoretical contribution that sheds light on core values from a more ambiguous perspective through *orchids*.



## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to study core values and how they are understood in a company, Phal, that emphasizes its core values. The current literature and theories on core values and how to understand them seem to present two rather contrasting perspectives, where one side argues that they are ambiguous, whilst the other seems to claim that they are simple and straightforward. Comprehending the core values from only one of these viewpoints can be problematic as this can cloud the employee's understanding of them. Therefore, in order to possibly find a perspective in-between these rather extreme viewpoints, we developed the following guiding question;

*How do members of project groups understand the organizational core values of Phal in their work?*

Our emphasis, when conducting this research, was on comprehending and interpreting the understandings that project group members have about Phal's three core values; 'Always Open', 'Act as One' and 'Think Big' in their work. By employing qualitative methods during the gathering of our empirical material and using an abductive approach, continuously, during our research project, we were able to identify themes from both the literature on understanding core values and our empirical material. In this chapter we summarize our main findings and our theoretical contribution, as well as reflect upon the practical implications of our research and lastly, recommend directions for future research.

### 6.1 Main Findings

Our empirical findings illustrate that the three core values, namely 'Always Open', 'Act as One' and 'Think Big', are understood differently by members in project groups in their work, and can, therefore, demonstrate the ambiguous nature of these values (Alvesson, 2002).

We found that by attending meetings, applying humor and comparing 'Always Open' and 'Act as One' to other companies, some of the project members can be seen to create a shared understanding of these core values, which is supported by Sandberg and Targama (2007). However, other project group members pointed out that they do not need these dimensions in order to comprehend 'Always Open' and 'Act as One' in their work. Understanding the core values does not seem to be as easy and straightforward as most literature argues, which can be

seen to lead to some possible tensions of understanding them. Interestingly, even though, the interviewees state that ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ are part of their personality and feel natural, some of the project group members still appeared to need dialogue, small-talk and jokes in order to understand them in their work, which underlines the ambiguous nature of the core values (Trethewey, 1999; Alvesson, 2002). Another tension that we found was that the core values seem nearly too natural, as some respondents can be seen to neither be able to name them, nor to separate their meanings and, hence, it appeared as if they possibly do not critically reflect upon ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ and take them for granted to a certain extent.

We also found that there was quite a distinct difference in how project group members understand the core values in their work, especially ‘Think Big’. There also seemed to be a general consensus regarding the innovation days reflecting ‘Think Big’. Surprisingly, most members seemed to have constructed an understanding of ‘Think Big’ that appeared to be radical and ground-breaking, and, thus, they found themselves struggling to incorporate and implement ‘Think Big’ in their work. Interestingly, the main tension that we found was that, despite of their lack to be able to understand 'Think Big', the participants displayed several aspects of this in their work. However, these aspects of ‘Think Big’ were in line with the subheadings<sup>13</sup> and appeared to be more incremental, rather than radical. The subheadings of ‘Think Big’ appeared to confuse the members even more, which can be compared to having too many core values (Barchiesi & La Bella, 2014), as this seemed to restrict the comprehension the members had of ‘Think Big’ (Alvesson, 2002). The inconsistent interpretation and understanding of ‘Think Big’ reveals its ambiguous side along with its implication, despite of what the literature says about the clarity of core values (Alvesson, 2002; Trethewey, 1999).

Therefore, we would like to conclude that due to the tensions that we found in our empirical material and the ambiguous nature of the core values, we propose a metaphor that portrays core values in a different and more critical light. Metaphors can be used to understand complexities and ambiguities around a certain concept, where the metaphor acts as a device for thinking and talking about a complex phenomenon, like core values (Alvesson & Spicer, 2011).

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<sup>13</sup> Please refer to Appendix I.

## 6.2 Theoretical Contribution

The metaphor that we developed in order to understand core values better is *orchids*. In this metaphor, we discuss the idea that the blossoms of the orchid represent the core values and how they differ in terms of species, colors, patterns and environments. These blossoms have their roots in the soil, where the soil represents the culture of Phal and how delicately the soil needs to be taken care of in order to avoid malnourishment. Further, the concept of understanding is demonstrated through the care and nurture provided to the orchids, as they are sensitive species.

The project group members said that ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ lie naturally and, hence, this could be linked to orchids as they are natural too. Orchids are very sensitive; if they are water too little or too much they die. Similarly, there needs to be a balance of reminders through departmental meetings and workshops, humor and comparisons in regards to the core values, in order for the employees to understand them in their work. As ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ can be seen to be of a quite ambiguous nature, these above-mentioned dimensions are needed; however too much of these dimensions can possibly lead to the employees getting tired and cynical of the core values. Hence, these values are still somewhat clear and straightforward as project group members are able to understand them to their work, at least to a certain extent. Additionally, ‘Always Open’ and ‘Act as One’ appear to almost be too natural as the employees can neither remember their names, nor separate their meanings. Similarly, watering the orchids once a week seems quite manageable; at the same time, yet it is easy to take them for granted and forget to water them.

‘Think Big’ also appeared to be of an ambiguous nature but was harder for the project group members to relate to. Therefore, this core value can be compared to an orchid that does not bloom, where the bare branches of the core value represent the employee’s incapability to relate to ‘Think Big’, and, therefore, made it harder for them to understand in their work. We found that innovation days seemed to support the employee’s comprehension of the core values, in particularly ‘Think Big’. Similarly, orchids usually have wooden branches that support the flowers to stand up and appear visible for every organizational member. The innovation days are only four times per year, which can be illustrated by these wooden branches as they can be taken out. Nevertheless, understanding of ‘Think Big’ seemed to differ amongst employees, which can be illustrated by an orchid that also has small buds that

never blossom, as the employees failed to acknowledge the small steps they can take towards ‘Think Big’.

In conclusion, the metaphor demonstrates that core values are somewhat clear since there is a way for the project group members to understand them through meetings, innovation days, humor and comparisons. Nevertheless, this metaphor also highlights the tensions that we have found when analyzing our empirical material and illustrates the ambiguous nature of the three core values. Therefore, it can be argued that there seems to be a standpoint in-between the two rather extreme perspectives; however, this standpoint is somewhat leaning towards the ambiguous nature since these tensions of understanding ‘Always Open’, ‘Act as One’ and ‘Think Big’ appear to overrule the clarity of these values.

### 6.3 Practical Implications and Further Research

Aside from the limitations highlighted in our methodology chapter<sup>14</sup>, we feel it is of importance to highlight that our findings cannot be generalized due to a limited time frame within which we have operated. In order to be able to develop a study that can be generalized, a longer period of time needs to be dedicated where larger selection of empirical material can be collected in a larger context. These aspects could have potentially made our research study more generalized (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Another limitation of our study is that we are aware that our metaphor does not cover all aspects. In other words, there might be some aspects that are not as relatable to the metaphor as they possibly can. Although, we have developed this metaphor based on our empirical findings, we hope that it can shed some light over the core values from a critical and theoretical stand. It can perhaps also be used to understand other empirical material and inspire others to build upon our research. It would be interesting to explore more aspects of this metaphor within the studied department as well as its applicability in other departments and organizations, especially in organizations where core values might not be as strong as at Phal.

Apart from further exploring our proposed metaphor, the results of our empirical findings have generated a number of additional intriguing questions and findings, whereupon some we have touched and reflected over, whilst others we believe are valuable to look into. For

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<sup>14</sup> Please refer to section 3.7 in Methodology.

instance, there might be other ways to understand the core values in relation to one's work apart from the ones that we have focused on as well as different themes, such as power and politics. The studied department also appeared to have its own three values, which might also be a way of comprehending the broader core values, 'Always Open, 'Act as One' and 'Think Big'. Further, we touched upon how differences in work experience affect the employee's understanding of the core values in relation to their work, which can be further researched as well as that different positions within the project group could be taken into account. As we have only focused on the internal aspects in regards to how employees understand core values in their work, it would be interesting to look into external aspects and its potential implications.

In conclusion, in this thesis we have proposed a new metaphor, core values as *orchids*, to take a more hands-on approach and gain a better understanding of the complexities and ambiguities around them. We have illustrated that the core values are quite ambiguous; however, there is a way of understanding them through reminders, meetings, innovation days, humor and comparisons. Therefore, we argue that they can be understood from a standpoint in-between the two rather extreme perspectives; although, this standpoint leans towards the rather ambiguous nature of the core values. Even though this metaphor is based on our empirical findings, we would hope that our metaphor generally increases the understanding of core values and how it varies depending on how you comprehend your work. Our aspiration and hope is to provide others with a more critical and different understanding of core values and inspire them to develop our concept further through future research.

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## Appendix I – Chart of Core Values

*Chart over Phal's core values and its subheadings.*

Act as One	Think Big	Always Open
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are helpful and act with team spirit</li> <li>• We have fun together!</li> <li>• We commit to decisions made</li> <li>• We show respect for others</li> <li>• We cooperate for the benefit of our customers</li> <li>• We are dedicated and take responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We see the big picture</li> <li>• We act today</li> <li>• We challenge ourselves and others</li> <li>• We push boundaries and set ambitious goals</li> <li>• We achieve big change step by step</li> <li>• We make decisions and prioritize</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are open-minded and innovative</li> <li>• We are honest and transparent</li> <li>• We are always available to our customers</li> <li>• We listen and respond</li> <li>• We embrace change</li> <li>• We think outside the box</li> </ul>

## Appendix II – Interview Guide

### **Original interview guide**

1. Please tell us about your work.

### **Core values**

2. Please tell us about the core values of Phal.
3. How do you define these core values?
4. Can you relate to the core values? How?
5. Do you think about them? In what ways?
6. How do you incorporate the core values in your work?
7. How do the core values influence you? Do they guide you in our work?
8. Do you think everyone defines the core values the same? Why?
9. Do you have a favorite core value? Which one and why?
10. If you would have the chance to replace any of the core values, would you? Why?

### **Expressing core values**

11. How do you communicate the core values?
12. Do you name the core values?
13. How important do you think the core values are? Do you think that they are important?

### **Humor & contradictions**

14. Have you ever joked about the core values? How?
15. Have you heard of anti-core values, like 'Act as Me'?
16. Are there any negative effects of the core values? How do they affect you?
17. Have you ever been in conflict with the core values? In what ways?
18. Do you think there can be some politics involved that can stand in the way for the core values? How?
19. Do you believe that the core values can appear to be an image aspect? Why?

### **Recruitment process**

20. Do you remember your recruitment process at Phal?
21. How do they mention the core values?

### **Workshops, kick-offs & innovation days**

22. Do you have any workshops/kick-offs regarding the core values?
23. Can you tell us more about your innovation days?
24. Do you think everyone defines the core values the same? Why?