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Leading through Organisational Culture in the Virtual Environment

A Qualitative Case Study on Virtual Leadership

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Author:
Sina Akolk & Michelle Haveman

Supervisor:
Stefan Sveningsson

Examiner:
Jens Rennstam

Abstract

Technological advancements cause it to be more common for managers and subordinates to work together from different geographical locations. It is associated with challenges, which virtual leadership is supposed to support in overcoming. As the leader is central in studies on virtual leadership, this qualitative study takes a different perspective and has as its purpose to understand how leadership is expressed in the remote manager-subordinate relation taking the leader as well as the follower perspective into account. A multinational organisation with a strong organisational culture was chosen as a study site for this research. Our empirical material suggests that the organisational culture is of high importance for virtual leadership. Subordinates attribute virtual leadership to managers who express the organisational culture. While virtual leadership as the act of influencing others is marginal in the virtual environment, our findings propose that organisational culture takes over the influencing that virtual leadership is supposed to accomplish. We contribute to the virtual leadership paradigm with a theoretical model that illustrates the attribution of virtual leadership through the influence of the organisational culture.

Key words: Attribution Theory, Leadership, Organisational Culture, Virtual Leadership, Virtual Teams

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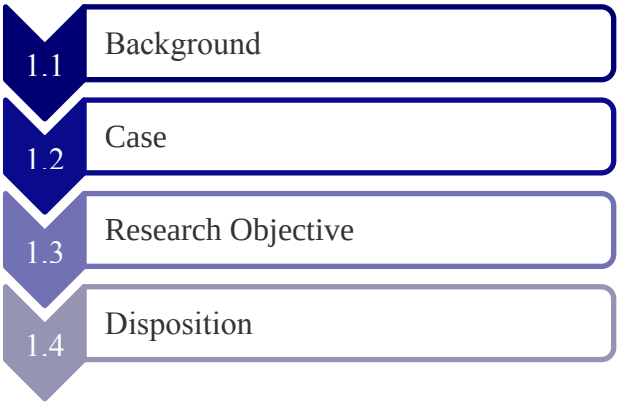
1 Introduction

This chapter serves to introduce the reader to our thesis. First, a general background on the topic is given, which is followed by an introduction to our case. It allows the reader to familiarise him- or herself with the context of the topic of our study and the study site. After that the research objective is presented, consisting of the research gap, the aim of this study and the scope limitations of this research. This will set the context of our research, which will then on its turn allow us to introduce our research question. The final part of this chapter is a comprehensive overview of the disposition of the thesis. It intends to provide the reader with a point of orientation on the structure of our thesis.



1.1 Background

Research on leadership has increased significantly during the last century (Dinh et al., 2014; Harrison, 2018; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). Also in popular management literature there is a strong discourse around leadership. Nowadays leadership is seen as something potentially powerful that could make a difference in an organisation and is considered to be crucial for the success of a contemporary organisation (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Gil et al, 2011). Amongst scholars the assessment of what is meant by leadership differs and is ambiguous and vague. As Stogdill (1974, p. 7) noted "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept". We will base our research on the definition of Yukl (2010, p. 8): "Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives". This definition sees leadership as a process of influencing which is socially constructed and relational while it can include the follower perspective as well as the leader perspective.

A new type of leadership, called virtual leadership (cf. Schmidt, 2014), remote leadership, distance leadership or e-leadership (cf. Gil et al., 2011), emerged due to technological advancements that causes the number of employees working in virtual teams or remotely to increase (cf. Martins, Gilson & Maynard, 2004). As a result of these trends, it can be observed that nowadays managers and subordinates do not always work in the same office location anymore, but are more likely to be geographically dispersed (cf. Kelloway et al., 2003). This trend of the physically dispersed work has necessitated to take a new look into the role and nature of leadership in a virtual setting environment (Kayworth & Leidner, 2001). According to Avolio and Kahai (2003), advancements in technology, however, affect the way leaders and followers connect with one another, which implies that the technology can also affect leadership between the remote manager and his or her subordinate. The virtual environment that managers and their subordinates work in is characterised by autonomy and less frequent interactions in comparison to a face-to-face environment (cf. Zigurs, 2003). Thus, one would expect leadership more difficult to be realised remotely and probably not so salient in the way people talk about it.

1.2 Case

The case company used for this research is a large international retail company that we call LeadEx. The official name of our study site will remain anonymous. LeadEx has 150,000 employees worldwide and is operating in around 50 different countries. The company was originally founded in Sweden. Much of the Swedish national culture as well as the culture set by the founder is residing in the strong organisational culture of the study site. The organisational values seem to be strongly connected to the organisational culture. The website of LeadEx defines the following eight organisational values:

> Togetherness, caring for people and planet, cost-consciousness, renew and improve, simplicity, different with a meaning, give and take responsibility and lead by example (LeadEx, 2018).

The organisational values are highly emphasised by LeadEx. One can find them written on walls or posters in the office spaces. Moreover, they were highlighted during a tour we joined given by an employee around the company's premises. It was also indicated that they used value-based recruitment for their employees.

The organisation has offices all around the globe and is faced with globalisation. The globalisation at LeadEx causes that certain teams have to work virtually. Thus, it is no exception that the manager and subordinate work in geographically dispersed locations. Besides that, leadership is a popular discourse at LeadEx. Everyone can be considered as a leader. The popularity of leadership and the globalisation that creates a need for the manager and subordinate to work remotely make LeadEx an interesting and potentially insightful study site for a case study on virtual leadership.

1.3 Research Objective

In the following, we present the research objective of our study. We start with the research gap and continue with the aim of our study, before we discuss scope limitations and conclude with the research question.

Research Gap

Avolio, Kahai and Dodge (2000, p. 663) commented "the question is not whether to study e-leadership, but where to start". This quote reflects our approach when deciding on the position of our study in the field of virtual leadership, looking specifically at an area where we could propose theoretical contributions. In this section we will elaborate on the starting point for this research.

While studying the field of leadership, we came across many different perspectives on leadership, such as the classic leadership perspective including traits, styles and situations, the symbolic perspective on leadership and the relation-oriented leadership perspective (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). These dominant perspectives are often leader-centred and mainly look at what a leader does to its followers (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). Also less dominant follower-centred perspectives and theories are becoming more popular in the leadership field. Scholars such as Shamir et al. (2007) argue that to understand leadership one needs to look at both the leaders and followers as co-constructors of leadership. Pfeffer (1977) proposes for leadership research not to place the focus on concepts of leadership as how the leader should be or behave, but to concentrate on the social processes and phenomena that make somebody a leader. However, a recent book published by Harrison (2018) mentions that previous leadership research still focuses on highlighting

the leader while overlooking other relevant aspects of leadership such as the follower and the context.

Similar as the leadership research, also the virtual leadership research puts great emphasis on the leader (e.g. Kayworth & Leidner, 2001; Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rosen, 2007). It appears that there is a lack of perspectives on leadership from the follower perspective in the remote environment. Popper (2013, p. 7) argues that "in the case of distant leaders it is recommended that more attention be devoted to exploring the psychology of the followers, namely, their projections, their patterns of construal and attributions as key processes in explaining the image of distant leaders in the eyes of the followers". We thus believe that our research on virtual leadership contributes by providing the perspective of both the leader as well as the follower.

Moreover, we are confident that we can contribute by not looking at the functionality of how leaders should be or behave, but rather studying how leadership is viewed and experienced in the virtual environment in practice, as the context may be more important than the leadership style (cf. Kelley, 2005). We believe that taking a step back and studying how – if at all – managers and subordinates express or talk about leadership in their remote work relationship will provide richer insights into the virtual leadership topic.

Aim of the Study

In light of the geographical dispersion of the manager and their respective subordinate being more common and its possible implications on leadership, the aim of our study is as follows:

We intend to bring new theoretical insights to the field of virtual leadership on how the remote managers and subordinates view and interpret leadership and how virtual leadership is expressed in practice.

This is mainly done for the academic sphere, but can also be worthwhile for the business sphere. We hope that these insights will support a more reflexive approach in understanding the context of virtual leadership in the remote manager-subordinate relation.

Research Scope Limitations

The scope of our research is purposefully limited to four aspects. First, we acknowledge that the topic of leadership including virtual leadership is complex with many different theories

and aspects to it. We are unable to cover every aspect and theory of leadership and thus virtual leadership, but rather intend to focus on the aspects that are most salient and that could provide insightful and theoretical contributions. Second, we aim to provide a better understanding of virtual leadership in practice, meaning we do not aim to question the concept as is. Third, we do not focus on the effectiveness or results of virtual leadership. We limit our focus to how it is expressed and interpreted in practice. Fourth, we do not provide a generally applicable guideline to how virtual leadership should be practised, instead we focus on providing a rich description specific to our case company on how leadership is interpreted in the virtual environment and how these interpretations are expressed in practice.

Research Question

The above aims and defined scope limitations lead us to the following research question:

How is leadership expressed within the manager-subordinate relationship while both work from geographically dispersed locations?

1.4 Disposition

This section presents the disposition of this thesis and provides an orientation for the upcoming chapters.

Chapter 2: This chapter provides the reader with the theoretical background of this study and introduces the knowledge needed to create a better understanding for subsequent chapters. Relevant concepts like leadership, virtual leadership and the organisational culture are presented.

Chapter 3: The methodological choices and the approach for our thesis are presented in this chapter. Here we discuss our research philosophy followed by explaining our research approach. Furthermore, the data collection and analysis methods are explained. We state the limitations of our research as well as present our proactive approach regarding the credibility of our research.

Chapter 4: The empirical material is presented with a narrative that commences with the discourse of leadership at LeadEx. We then present four leadership ideals that are talked about in the company and four virtual leadership challenges that this particular company is

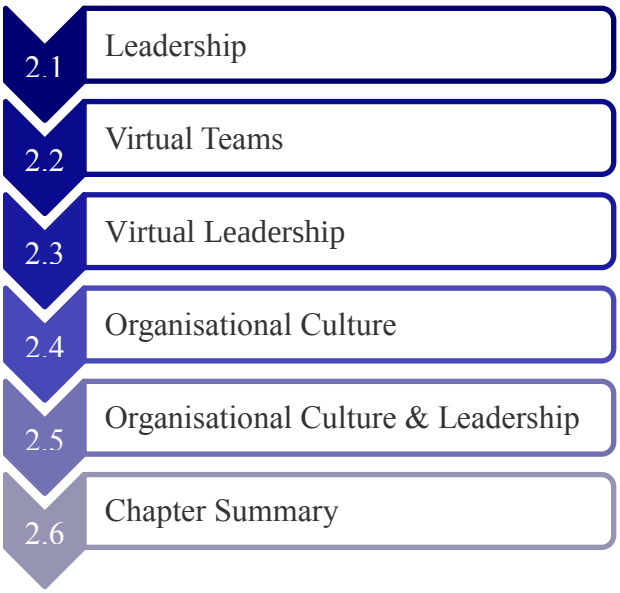
faced with. After that we look at how these leadership ideals are mediated through technological means. The chapter is ended by suggesting the existence of interplay between the organisational culture and virtual leadership.

Chapter 5: Here we discuss our findings and provide a critical view to the insights that we gained from the empirical material. This enables us to contribute our own theoretical development and theoretical model to the research field of virtual leadership.

Chapter 6: In the last chapter our thesis research is concluded and summarised. It includes an overview of the main findings and contributions. Moreover, it provides practical and theoretical implications, as well as opportunities for potential further research. We conclude our thesis with an epilogue.

2 Theoretical Background

In this chapter we provide the reader with the theoretical background relevant to our study. First, the leadership theories are presented. After that a brief explanation of virtual teams is given to provide the context for virtual leadership. Having introduced the literature on virtual leadership, we continue with the organisational culture as the organisational culture is salient in our case company. We relate the theories on organisational culture to leadership before concluding the chapter with a summary.



2.1 Leadership

Stogdill (1974, p. 7) noted that "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept". Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) doubt whether a universally accepted definition for leadership is possible, as it would hinder new ideas and creative ways of thinking. Since the definition of leadership differs among scholars and there is a tendency to associate leadership only with positive terms, scholars such as Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) argue for a more nuanced view on leadership. We will base our research on the definition of leadership of Yukl (2010, p. 8):

> *"Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives."*

As the definition sees leadership as influencing others, it includes the aspect that leadership is relational and socially constructed. This means that one cannot only focus on the leader as is the case with the traditional leadership perspectives discussed below, but also has to take the view of the followers into consideration.

The concept of leadership is generally accepted as something potentially powerful as well as a cure for all organisational ills (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Bolman & Deal, 2008). Leadership is often misunderstood since a distinction between leadership, power and position is not made (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Power is exercising authority based on force, while leadership is influencing others based on meaning instead of force (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Positions such as manager and subordinate in the organisational structure do not imply that there is leadership per sé, although it is tempting to equate leadership with a senior position (cf. Bolman & Deal, 2008). Managers are often expected to be leaders to their subordinates and it is argued that this is where the manager's influence is most clearly seen (Mintzberg, 1989; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Managers like to refer to themselves as leaders due to the positive identity connotations (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). According to Alvesson (2004), an individual's identity refers to how the individual views him- or herself by answering the question "Who am I". The answer to this question is often constructed by the individual based on the subjective meaning by considering how he or she relates to others (Alvesson, 2004). The identity of a leader is often considered more attractive than the identity of a follower (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).

Regarding leadership there are many different theories that try to explain the phenomenon, however there is still no universally accepted theory (Harrison, 2018). The dominant perspectives on leadership can broadly be classified in three themes: the classic leadership perspective, symbolic forms of leadership and relationship-oriented leadership styles (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The classic perspective includes concepts like traits, styles and situations and is mainly interested in managers and formal superiors instead of influencing processes among people (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). In contrast to the classic perspective, the symbolic leadership perspective, which includes charismatic, transformational and authentic leadership styles, focuses on influencing meaning and creating a sense of purpose (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Furthermore, relationship-oriented leadership styles concentrating on employee happiness and coaching have gained focus (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

These dominant perspectives on leadership are more leader centred and mainly look at what a leader does to its followers (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). In contrast to these dominant leader-centric perspectives, Meindl (1995) argues for a follower-centric approach that views leadership and its consequences as mainly constructed by followers, while Shamir et al.

(2007) argue that to obtain an understanding of leadership one needs to look at both leaders and followers as co-constructors of leadership. The leader-member exchange (LMX) is one of the leadership theories that focuses on the two-way relationship of leaders and followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). However, the usage of the LMX model is limited as it is mainly descriptive instead of normative or prescriptive (Gerstner & Day, 1997).

Some researchers criticise that too much focus has been placed on studying "how leaders should behave as opposed to describing how leaders are actually being selected and rewarded" (McElroy, 1982b, p. 27). Pfeffer (1977) supports this view and suggests to not place the focus on concepts of leadership that is, for example, which traits a leader has to possess or how a leader has to behave. Instead Pfeffer (1977) proposes to concentrate on the social processes and phenomena that make somebody a leader. One concept for that is the attribution leadership theory. The attribution leadership theory is based on the assumption that "a person is a leader (good or bad) because others say so" (McElroy, 1982a, p. 413). This means with other words that the leader is ascribed his role through observers (Pfeffer, 1977). People ascribe the role of a leader to somebody in order to make sense of events (McElroy, 1982b). They do so to feel in control (Kelley, 1971 cited in Pfeffer, 1977). Pfeffer (1977) suggests that organisational roles which are regarded as leadership positions encourage organisational members to also associate leadership effects with the position.

Traditional attribution leadership-research has focused on the leader. It is concerned with attributions leaders make about people's behaviour and how the attributions influence their behaviour towards them rather than on the perceptions of subordinates (cf. Martinko, Harvey & Douglas, 2007). While we agree with Martinko, Harvey and Douglas (2007) that attributional processes can contribute in understanding leader-member relations, we think that – in line with McElroy (1982b) – greater focus should be placed on understanding the process of organisational members attributing the role of a leader to someone.

After having looked at theories of leadership, we continue with a brief introduction on virtual teams to provide the context for virtual leadership.

2.2 Virtual Teams

The managers and subordinates that we studied are part of virtual teams. Virtual teams, also called remote or distributed teams, are defined as "teams whose members use technology to varying degrees in working across locational, temporal, and relational boundaries to accomplish an interdependent task" (Martins, Gilson & Maynard, 2004, p. 808). Remote teams are regarded as having high degrees of autonomy rather than being controlled directly (Zigurs, 2003). It is generally believed that they are more challenging to be managed than face-to-face teams (cf. Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Berry, 2011; Connaughton & Daly, 2005; Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017). This is due to the complexity and amount of coordination required (Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). "[I]nfluencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it" (Yukl, 2010, p. 8) – our definition of leadership used – may thus increase in significance. Therefore we will take a look at virtual leadership in the following.

2.3 Virtual Leadership

Leadership in remote teams who use technological means to communicate is called virtual (Schmidt, 2014), remote, distance or e-leadership (Gil et al., 2011). We classify the research on virtual leadership relevant to our research question in the following three areas: leadership styles, leadership traits, leader and virtual team performance as well as virtual challenges. While doing so, we are aware that a clear distinction between these categories is not always possible as the studies related to these areas may overlap.

Virtual Leadership Traits

Scholars have analysed the traits of effective team leaders in virtual settings, although Sivunen (2008) remarks that the leadership qualities required in the virtual setting have not been extensively researched. Based on a combination of a quantitative and qualitative approach Kayworth and Leidner (2001) identified among others that effective virtual leaders express empathy, assert authority without being perceived negatively and communicate in a timely manner.

Sivunen (2008) took a different approach and explored the expectations that organisational members have of their leader using a qualitative study. She identified that members expected their leaders to motivate them, provide support, also with regard to using technological means of communication, and set clear objectives. Whereas she found that most expectations were fulfilled, leaders generally lacked the ability in providing clear goals.

Other researchers like Connaughton and Daly (2005) emphasise the importance of communication in virtual leadership. This is supported by Balthazard, Waldman and Warren (2009) who identified in a simulated virtual environment that communication rather than personality traits lead to the emergence of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is suggested to influence followers "by making them more aware of the importance of task outcomes and inducing them to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the organization" (Yukl, 1999, p. 286).

Kayworth and Leidner (2001) question whether leadership in the virtual environment compared to the traditional environment may not potentially be simpler for the virtual leader rather than more complex as virtual leaders have a smaller solution set available which they can use. Thus, they argue that leaders only need a limited amount of skills, which they need to be good at and which they can focus on to train. In addition, Kayworth and Leidner (2001) claim that a virtual leader needs to play less roles simultaneously. This makes it potentially easier to acquire and exhibit the skills needed.

Virtual Leadership Styles

Gibbs, Sivunen and Boyraz (2017) reviewed 37 articles on leadership in virtual teams. They observed that there is a trend "to move away from the study of vertical leadership styles such as leader-member exchange (LMX) or transformational leadership to study emergent forms of leadership such as shared leadership" (Gibbs, Sivunen & Boyraz, 2017, p. 592). The studies which concentrate on the leader (e.g. Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rosen, 2007, Sivunen, 2006) imply that more leadership is needed in the virtual environment compared to the face-to-face environment due to the distance and the challenges associated with that (cf. Gibbs, Sivunen & Boyraz, 2017). Other studies (e.g. Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Pearce, Yoo & Alavi, 2004), in contrast, focus more respectively also on shared leadership behaviours (cf. Gibbs, Sivunen & Boyraz, 2017). What is striking about the studies Gibbs, Sivunen and Boyraz (2017) looked at is that most studies conducted in an organisational setting focused

on the leader. The perspective of the follower seems to have been neglected. In addition, studies focusing on shared leadership behaviour mainly used student teams suggesting that findings may not be applicable to the organisational setting (cf. Gibbs, Sivunen & Boyraz, 2017).

Quantitative studies have analysed the perceptions of different leadership styles in virtual teams. Ruggieri (2009), for example, compared transformational and transactional leaders in virtual teams and studied how satisfied team members were with the leadership style. Whereas transformational leadership is associated to influence the follower through motivation to perform certain tasks, transactional leadership focuses on the leader-member exchange motivating follower compliance (Yukl, 1999). Ruggieri's (2009) findings suggest that a transformational leader is more satisfying than a transactional one. Moreover, the former is perceived as being better (Ruggieri, 2009). Joshi, Lazarova & Lialo (2009), in contrast, looked at the perception of inspirational leadership in remote teams. They found that inspirational leadership was positively related to trust and commitment. The relation was stronger the more dispersed the team was.

Virtual Leader and Virtual Team Performance

Research on virtual teams has shown that leaders' behaviour can influence team outcomes (Pearce, Yoo & Alavi, 2004). Neufeld, Wan and Fang (2010) explored in a quantitative study how leadership style, physical distance as well as communication effectiveness between leaders and followers influence the perceived leader performance. They found that the performance of leaders were perceived more strongly when a transformational leadership compared to a transactional leadership style based on rewards was used. In addition, communication effectiveness strongly predicted leader performance, whereas leader performance and communication effectiveness were to their surprise not influenced by distance.

Whereas Neufeld, Wan and Fang (2010) studied the perceived leader performance, Purvanova and Bono (2009) analysed the team performance in virtual teams. They found that transformational leadership rather than transactional leadership is related to higher team performance. Pearce, Yoo and Alavi (2004) provide further empirical evidence of virtual team performance. Their findings resulting from a quantitative study suggest that shared leadership is a better indicator of virtual team performance than vertical leadership.

Moreover, Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) studied the impact of traditional hierarchical leadership, shared team leadership and structural supports on the performance of virtual teams doing a quantitative study. Their empirical data suggests that hierarchical leadership was less strongly related to team performance than structural supports if the team was more virtual. Since shared leadership was not influenced by the degree of virtuality, they suggest that shared leadership may be a powerful leadership style in the virtual environment. Nonetheless, we believe that one can also conclude from their study that structural supports can possibly replace or at least supplement leadership (cf. Bell & Kozlowski, 2002).

Virtual Challenges

Leading a team in the virtual environment poses challenges to the leader. Some of the challenges associated with remote teams are:

> *"communication and collaboration difficulties, low levels of media richness compared to co-located teams, potentially lower team engagement by team members, difficulties in creating trust and shared responsibility among team members, isolation, high levels of social distance between members, and challenges in monitoring and managing virtual teams"* (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017, p. 569).

We like to take a deeper look at the issue of distance associated with leading remotely. Antonakis and Atwater (2002) stress that when speaking of distance one needs to distinguish distance on three dimensions: the leader-follower physical distance, perceived social distance and perceived task interaction frequency. They consider the distance important for understanding the leader's influencing process.

The physical distance causes that communication mainly happens through systems. This makes it more complicated to influence meanings and feelings (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Facial expressions and gestures are not visible for the virtual team leader in non-face-to-face interactions. However, in contrast to the general assumption that physical distance results in less frequent interactions, Popper (2013) stresses that this may not be the case due to the technological advancements. He emphasises that instead of focusing on the physical distance, the psychological distance is more relevant with regard to how leaders are perceived. The term psychological distance describes the followers' subjective perception of a leader being distant or close (Popper, 2013). He suggests that

understanding the follower's judgement may be significant for distant leaders' influencing process.

Next to the physical distance, the social distance poses a challenge. The social distance is defined as the "perceived differences in status, rank, authority, social standing, and power, which affect the degree of intimacy and social contact that develop between followers and their leader" (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002, p. 682). In virtual teams the creation of interpersonal relationships is generally assumed to be more difficult due to the lack of informal social contact and exposure (Kerber & Buono, 2004). Leaders of remote teams who encourage the sharing of personal stories contribute to the development of more personal relationships which facilitate connecting the team members (cf. Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rosen, 2007).

Since it is a "challenge for leaders of virtual teams […] to create a level of collaboration and productivity that rivals the experience of the best collocated teams" (Kerber & Buono, 2004, p. 5), the literature on virtual leadership discusses how to lead virtual teams effectively (e.g. Kayworth & Leidner, 2001; Ruggieri, 2009; Zigurs, 2003). Researchers like Zaccaro and Bader (2003) or Zigurs (2003) suggest that trust is crucial in leading virtual teams. However, trust is more challenging to build because of the distance (Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). Sivunen (2006), moreover, suggests that identification is important in virtual teams and one should encourage members to identify with the team by creating a team spirit. Taking the team members and their opinions into account, giving positive feedback and clarify common goals are some of the strategies she identified in a qualitative study applicable for enhancing team identification.

Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) argue, however, that the increased pressure in organisations to use digitalised information and communication systems are constraints for the leadership process. Managers are expected to perform leadership through systems instead of social interactions, which thus creates dilemmas if leadership is seen as a social process (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Leadership is marginal if the leaders and followers only meet a couple of times a year, although in the eyes of the follower this might preserve the aura and mystique of the leaders (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

Summary Virtual Leadership

Before we continue with the organisational culture, we like to state that it appears that most studies on virtual leadership are based on quantitative research. Qualitative research has been neglected. Moreover, it seems that studies tend to focus on analysing specific leadership styles and how these relate to the performance of virtual teams instead of taking a step back and view how virtual leadership is actually practised in remote teams. In light of this, it is suggested to gain further understanding on how both followers and leaders view and experience leadership and the challenges associated with a remote environment.

Since the organisational culture is rather strong in our case company, we continue in the following with providing a theoretical background on organisational culture.

2.4 Organisational Culture

We define organisational culture as "the shared values, beliefs, and norms that influence the way employees think, feel, and act toward others, both inside and outside the organisation" (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017, pp. 150–151). According to Schein (2010), culture consists of three layers. He suggests that visible artefacts are at the surface. These include structures, processes or observed behaviour (Schein, 2010). After that there are espoused beliefs and values which represent a person's values, beliefs and assumptions (Schein, 2010). Schein (2010) argues that in some companies the espoused values may contradict the actual observable behaviour. This means that employees may believe, for example, that performance is valued at the company and leads to promotion. However, an outsider may observe that this is not the case. Rather politics and hierarchy may decide on employees' promotion. The deepest cultural level according to Schein (2010) are the basic underlying assumptions. These are unconscious, taken-for granted beliefs and values which determine our behaviour, thinking and feeling (Schein, 2010).

Culture is closely related to meaning in the sense of how one relates to and interprets events (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). In the context of organisational culture the focus is placed on the shared meaning of the organisation's members and not on the individual's interpretation (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). However, Grey (2005) stresses that the goal is to align the organisation's ideals with the individuals' so that employees

ideally embody the organisational values proposed by management. This Grey (2005) calls culture management. Organisational members ideally have a shared identity (cf. Schein, 2010).

It is important to distinguish culture from the social structures and behaviour (cf. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Whereas culture guides people in their actions through values, beliefs, norms and meaning, social structure refers to the interactions and behaviour as such (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016).

2.5 Organisational Culture and Leadership

Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) see culture as essential for understanding leadership. Also other scholars (e.g. Bass & Avolio, 1993; Schein, 2010) argue that leadership and organisational culture are closely intertwined. Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) stress that culture guides how to think, feel and act, whereas leadership tries to influence it. They thus consider leadership "a culture influencing-activity, the systematic influencing of meaning" (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017, p. 67). Although leadership can influence culture, they think that rather the opposite is the case: culture forms leadership (cf. Bass & Avolio, 1993). Culture sets the boundaries and norms in which ways managers can act (cf. Biggart & Hamilton, 1987). This is supported by Schein (2010). He moreover suggests that culture is difficult to change. He assumes that culture is stable as it remains even when members leave the organisation. Culture thus provides stability and gives organisational members predictability (Schein, 2010). Nonetheless, the role of culture generally has been neglected in leadership research, literature and among practitioners (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

Organisational culture is sometimes associated with being driven by the founders of the organisation (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Schein (2010) considers culture the result of a founder's or leader's influence that was adopted by the group. However, once the culture stabilised, it will be more difficult to influence the culture and also the organisational culture will guide which leaders' behaviour will be considered acceptable (Schein, 2010).

Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017, p. 74) suggest to see organisational culture as an alternative to leadership:

> *"Culture in the sense of a shared framework of meanings and values guides experiences and action and thus takes care of the many functions otherwise supposed to be dealt with through leadership – and to some extent management."*

Whereas Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) see shared values as an alternative to leadership, Gill (2002, p. 313), in contrast, sees values and leadership as being connected: "Effective leaders are role models for corporate values: they set an example." Gill (2002) suggests that an effective leader should promote shared values. Organisational values guide employees in the organisation (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

2.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter we have looked at existing research on the topic of leadership along with virtual leadership. We have seen that the studies on virtual leadership place a strong focus on leadership styles in the virtual setting and the performance or effectiveness of leaders respectively virtual teams. Although there are studies taking the perceptions and expectations followers have about leaders into account, they seem to be rather rare. Most studies focus on the leader. They are of quantitative nature and were conducted in organisational as well as simulated settings.

We related leadership to organisational culture noting that culture can potentially be seen as an alternative to leadership. However, we believe that practical research is needed to gain more insights into this phenomenon. We are confident that our study site provides a good start due to the prevalent organisational culture.

In contrast to the strong focus on the leader in research, we suggest to take an unbiased view in our study on virtual leadership. We will hence explore the view of both managers and subordinates on leaders. Moreover, we will study how virtual leadership is actually expressed in an organisational setting in remote manager-subordinate relationships. We believe that this distances us from existing research in so far as we do not assume from the outset to find virtual leadership (cf. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003).

3 Methodology

In this chapter we elaborate on the methods chosen for our thesis. We first explain our research philosophy. Secondly, we present our research approach. Thirdly, we go into how we collected our data. Lastly, we explain how we analysed our data and discuss the limitations and credibility of our study.

3.1 Research Philosophy

Our research philosophy is based on the interpretive tradition, in particular hermeneutics. Interpretivism takes the standpoint that reality is socially constructed through the meaning created by individuals (Prasad, 2018). It contrasts positivism that assumes the existence of an objective social reality (Prasad, 2018). Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) argue that the observed reality is part of a deeper underlying process. As we are interested in the sensemaking, more specifically the process in which the managers and subordinates interpret, rationalise and give meaning to virtual leadership (cf. Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), we argue for an interpretive approach for the socially constructed reality. The goal of interpretive traditions is to understand the subjective socially constructed reality, whereby understanding meaning and intentionality as well as causal explanations are emphasised (Prasad, 2018).

Within the interpretive tradition we took on the hermeneutic approach. Hermeneutics is generally seen as a theory for understanding or verstehen (Prasad, 2018). We used the hermeneutic approach to understand and interpret our qualitative data. According to Prasad (2018), the goal of hermeneutics is to clarify the obscure and it entails going back and forth between empirical material and theory. Within our hermeneutic approach we used the

hermeneutic circle for understanding our data. The hermeneutic circle is a concept which asserts that the text or a part can only be understood from the context or the whole and vice versa that the whole can only be understood from its parts (Prasad, 2018). By doing so the hermeneutic circle helps establish a linkage between a text and the wider context. Throughout this research our own pre-understanding on the topic of virtual leadership was constantly challenged through the usage of the hermeneutic circle comparing the text to its context, which caused our own understanding to change several times until a theoretical satisfaction was reached (cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Prasad, 2018).

3.2 Research Approach

In line with our research philosophy our research approach is based on a qualitative cross-sectional case study, using an abductive approach. In this section we elaborate more on the research approach choices. We executed a qualitative study, meaning that we collected qualitative data in order to understand and interpret the phenomenon of leadership in the manager-subordinate relation where both work in geographically dispersed locations.

We used an abductive approach, which entails taking on a pragmatic approach and seeks to choose the best explanation for phenomena amongst alternatives (Swedberg, 2014). Abduction refers to a midway between induction and deduction: induction starts with the empirical data whereas deduction uses a theoretical base (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). The abductive approach starts with an empirical basis, but does not reject theoretical preconceptions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In line with the hermeneutic circle, the abductive approach allows us to move back and forth between empirical material and theoretic material. According to Blaikie (2009) for genuine abductive research the hermeneutic tradition is most appropriate and the combination of both could lead to more productive theory generation. This is because in both the abductive approach and the hermeneutic tradition theory and data are intertwined. As Blaikie (2009, p. 156) says: “research becomes a dialogue between data and theory mediated by the researcher”. With the qualitative data being interpreted and reinterpreted in accordance to existing theoretical concepts (Blaikie, 2009), theory is produced when a best explanation to answer the research question is achieved. Out of an epistemic modesty perspective we aim to make cautious knowledge claims (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017).

This research was executed to write our master thesis. It was performed with a cross-sectional time horizon, meaning that we gathered our data during a defined period of time in order to answer our research question.

Our research is based on a case study. Yin (2013, p. 321) defines a case study as "an in-depth inquiry into a specific and complex phenomenon, set within its real-world context". This entails that a study site or an organisation is chosen to perform an in-depth study of virtual leadership in the remote manager-subordinate relation. The criteria that influenced the selection of the study site was that the organisation had multiple offices in different geographical locations, where managers and subordinates worked in globally dispersed teams. In the selected study site, which will remain anonymous, we performed all our primary data collection. We strived for a good relational foundation of research with the individuals on our research site as we were dependent upon their support and as the relational foundation was important as a feeder and enabler of the overall quality of our research (cf. Dutton & Dukerich, 2006). We are both outsiders to the organisation and we have no affiliation with the organisation other than it being our study site.

3.3 Data Collection

For our study we used three different data collection methods, encompassing semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis. The interviews were used as primary source for the empirical data. Although the observations and document studies also provided us with primary data, these two data sources were regarded as complementary data to provide a context. This data collection allowed us to study the social world of the social actors in accordance with the abductive approach (cf. Blaikie, 2009). According to Blaikie (2009), the social world can only be discovered from the accounts that the social actors provide as the way they have constructed and interpreted their reality is embedded in their language.

Firstly, we executed 10 semi-structured interviews. The responses of the interviewees were similar to each other, which led us to believe that this was a sufficient number of interviews. The interviews were executed in an attempt to understand the world from the interviewees' point of view and their meaning making and to attempt to uncover their lived world prior to any scientific explanation (Kvale, 1996). Our study focused both on the leader perspective as well as the follower perspective of leadership, since leaders lead followers (cf. Alvesson,

Blom & Sveningsson, 2017) and we wanted to receive an encompassing view. We made the assumption that the managers are the leaders and the subordinates are the followers. Although this may not always be the case, we decided that regarding our research limitations this would be the most feasible and meaningful way to study virtual leadership, as managers are often regarded to be leaders (cf. Mintzberg, 1989; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Two semi-structured interview templates were developed, one for the managers and one for the subordinates. Semi-structured interviews allow for the interpretation of meaning and to create knowledge via the interaction (Kvale, 1996). The interviews had an average duration of one hour and were held in English, which is considered as the corporate language of our study site. We interviewed four managers of different teams from different departments in the organisation. They were located in different geographical locations, namely two located in Sweden, one in the United Kingdom and one in the United States of America. For each manager we correspondingly interviewed one or two subordinates, being six subordinates in total. The criteria was that the corresponding subordinate must work in a different geographical location than the manager. The subordinates were located in the United Kingdom, the United States of America and China. The interviewees had different nationalities and worked in different departments within the company. Within Sweden the interviews were held face-to-face, but for the remote employees the interviews were held through Skype with some interviews being Skype video calls and some being phone calls. The interviews were conducted by two interviewers, as this enabled one interviewer to ask the questions and the other interviewer to engage in interpretative listening, pay attention to the context and ask for follow up questions which is an important aspect of the hermeneutical approach in interviews (cf. Kvale, 1996). Upon permission of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded. The interviews were treated with discretion, anonymity and confidentiality for all interviewees which enabled an honest and open conversation, thus increasing the credibility of our data (cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

The second data collection method that we used for this research were observations. The value of adding observations to the interviews was to gain a broader understanding of the context. We wanted to understand what our interviewees do and how our interviewees act under certain circumstances. The context that observations provided us, such as the organisational structure, culture and interpersonal relations, helped us in understanding the background of the organisation, which is essential when using the hermeneutic circle (cf. Prasad, 2018). We executed two different types of observations. The first type of

observations was conducted during on-site visits, when we visited the company in the three different locations in Sweden. We observed the offices, the people in the offices and how information was communicated. The corporate language was English which thus did not provide us with any language barriers. The second type of observations was done when we had the online interviews. We observed the contact before having the interview as well as instances during and after the interview. Despite some minor technological problems, we did not face any major problems executing these types of observations.

The third data source that we used for this research were document studies on the organisation. The value of this document study, similarly as the observations, lies in its ability to provide us with a background and a context (cf. Bowen, 2009). We used online documents to provide us with a background on the company's appearance, their rhetoric used and their organisational culture among others, which similarly to the observations is important for the usage of the hermeneutic circle (cf. Prasad, 2018). For the document studies the authenticity and usefulness of the documents was first determined, taking into account the purpose of each document, the context in which it was produced and the intended audience (cf. Bowen, 2009).

3.4 Data Analysis

For the analysis of the empirical data collected, we used methods appropriate with the type of data. Using the hermeneutic approach meant that in the analysis process we went back and forth between our empirical material and the theory (cf. Prasad, 2018). For the data analysis we used the hermeneutic circle which included a constant movement between the text and its context (cf. Prasad, 2018). The interviews were considered as the text and the observations and document studies were used to provide a context. Throughout the data analysis process it was important to be aware of different assumptions (cf. Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) and we continuously challenged ourselves by exploring the empirical data from different angles (cf. Styhre, 2013). The hermeneutic cycle in combination with our abductive approach facilitated a continuous adjustment and refinement of the presentation of our empirical section and the theory (cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Our intention originally was to study virtual leadership at a more general level. However, our empirical material led us to believe that the context, especially the organisational culture, was even

more important in virtual leadership than previously assumed. It thus caused us to explore the interplay of virtual leadership and organisational culture.

After conducting the interviews, the recordings were used to transcribe the interviews. The transcriptions of the interviews were used for coding, which is seen as an iterative procedure (cf. Styhre, 2013). In our transcribed interviews we looked for sensitising concepts and overlapping themes, which we interpreted as relevant. We also looked for contradictions and inconsistencies in our empirical data to avoid cherry picking. According to Ryan and Bernard (2003), researchers often work with their pre-set themes, however, one should keep an open mind to what is really being said. Our pre-set themes included communication, challenges in the virtual environment, influencing, leadership and the leadership of the CEO as well as the founder. During the process we changed, added, merged and removed certain themes in order to create an order out of the chaos of data and to present a relevant story in the empirical section.

Besides the interviews, the observations were used to understand people within their social and cultural contexts (cf. Prasad, 2018). The observations were written down and the data gathered from the observation was analysed in its relation to the interview data. We placed the salient themes from the interviews along with the written observations. It is important to note that observations are subjective and dependent on the interpretations of the observer (Styhre, 2013). This means that in the empirical data from our observations that we present, our bias and interpretation as a researcher are present. The context that the observations provided is presented as complementary data throughout the empirical section.

Moreover, we analysed documents. The analysis of documents is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents (Bowen, 2009). Our document analysis was an iterative process that involved skimming, reading and interpretation of each document (cf. Bowen, 2009). As the documents were intended to be used to provide context, we looked for data in the documents that provided a context to the previously defined interview themes. Bowen (2009) argues for readers of the documents to not simply take the documents as accurate and precise. Thus, we engaged in establishing the meaning of the documents and its contribution to our topic. The presented data and interpreted meaning of the documents include the subjective interpretation of us as researchers. We present the data of the document studies as complementary data throughout the empirical section.

With regard to the empirical section, data from the interviews formed as a base, but was placed alongside our interpretations of the interviews itself, as well as our interpretations of the complementary data from the observations and document studies. The empirical section was written and rewritten several times into a coherent text with a narrative that eventually facilitates the discussion.

3.5 Research Limitations

This research as a master thesis is bound to certain limitations regarding the time we have to perform this research and our available resources to execute this research. Taking these limitations of time, resources and also the size of the organisation into account, we realise that our empirical data may not fully represent the entire organisation or a real-life situation. In general, case studies have the potential weakness that they can be highly case specific and thus provide little basis for generalisation (Yin, 2010). However, we do not aim to generalise our empirical findings to every real life situation, but we focus on bringing insights into understanding remote leadership in the manager-subordinate relationship.

3.6 Credibility

In qualitative studies credibility is used to assure the quality and trustworthiness of a study (Golafshani, 2003). This is in contrast to the quantitative research paradigm and positivism, where the quality and trustworthiness of a study is usually expressed as reliability and validity, which is earned through replicability, consistency and accuracy (Golafshani, 2003). However, this only tangentially relates to qualitative studies using a human instrument (Tracy, 2010). According to Tracy (2010), the quality of a study depends on eight factors: a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence. Although aiming for all of these in our study, we will elaborate more on the credibility of our study in this section.

Tracy (2010) explains that using different data collection methods, as we did, increases the credibility of qualitative research. Data from interviews, observations and document studies is often combined for triangulation. Triangulation of our data sources is used to counter threats to trustworthiness such as reactivity, researcher bias and respondent bias, which

improves the quality and credibility of our study (cf. Bowen, 2009; Tracy, 2010). Although Tracy (2009) mentions that triangulation does not completely correspond to researches that have an interpretivist approach as hermeneutics is considered to be. She mentions that even though the combined data points to one conclusion, it does not assure that this particular reality is true (Tracy, 2009). Tracy (2009) talks about crystallisation instead of triangulation. Crystallisation encourages researchers, similarly to triangulation, to have multiple types of data, researcher viewpoints and theoretical frameworks (Tracy, 2009). However, unlike triangulation, crystallisation assumes that it will not provide a more valid singular truth, but it allows for different aspects of a problem to be explored, creating a deeper understanding and encouraging consistent (re)interpretation (Tracy, 2009).

Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) refer to source criticism to increase the credibility of qualitative research. Source critique is defined as the evaluation of an information source (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017). Using interviews as a primary data collection method forces us to rely on interviewees' recounts of leadership and their social context, which is often less reliable than it appears (cf. Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017). To avoid a lack of source critique and improve the quality of our study we aimed for careful questioning, probing, evaluation, reflection and if necessary rejections of the interviews (cf. Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017). This is also the reason why we asked open questions and waited with straightforward questions on leadership until the very end of the interview, so that we could see whether the interviewees would bring up the topic themselves. The different interviews with the managers and subordinates provided us with mostly homogenous data. Thus, we did not have to reject any of the interviews. However, certain questions were misinterpreted by some interviewees. Therefore we excluded these from our empirical data.

The empirical section presents a selection of quotes and material that we assessed as representative, credible and coherent to the story. In the empirical section our interpretation, including a critical perspective, of the presented quotes is given. As researchers in the interpretivist paradigm, it is important to acknowledge that our comments are our own subjective interpretations. However, by using multiple sources of data, engaging in source-criticism and actively taking on different perspectives of looking at data we are certain to ensure credibility.

3.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter we have explained the methods that we used to conduct our research. Our research philosophy of hermeneutics is based on an interpretivist approach. This means that we go from a specific part of data to the whole context. In light of our research philosophy, we have used an abductive approach to our qualitative cross-sectional case study. This abductive approach has given us the ability to not have a too narrow focus, but to explore different aspects of virtual leadership and then narrow it down with a focus on the organisational culture in virtual leadership. To collect the data we have used three different methods which entailed interviews, observations and document studies. The interviews were treated as the base of the empirical findings and the interview quotes as the text. In light of the hermeneutic circle, the observations and the document studies were used to provide a context for this text. We have also actively worked towards assuring the credibility of this study by using crystallisation and source criticism amongst others.

4 A Case of Virtual Leadership and its Interplay with Organisational Culture

In this chapter we present our empirical data. First, we describe the discourse of leadership at LeadEx. After that, we discuss how the remote manager and subordinate interpret leadership. We do so by providing four leadership ideals and presenting how these leadership ideals are reflected in situations where the interviewees talk about the happening of leadership. We continue with elaborating on the challenges for virtual leadership that the remote manager and subordinate face in the virtual environment. As technology plays a key role in the virtual setting, we then explore how the leadership ideals are expressed through technological means. Finally, we conclude this chapter by presenting how expressing the organisational culture at LeadEx replaces virtual leadership.

4.1 The Popular Discourse of Leadership
4.2 Leadership Ideals
4.3 Challenges for Virtual Leadership
4.4 Leadership through Technology
4.5 Leadership Expressing Culture
4.6 Chapter Summary

4.1 The Popular Discourse of Leadership

In this section, we illustrate that leadership seems to be a popular discourse at LeadEx. The employees tend to talk about leaders and leadership frequently. In general, our interviewees express that they feel satisfied with the leadership at LeadEx:

> *"I think I've been quite fortunate, especially here at [LeadEx], that I had not really bad leadership."*

It seems that for our interviewees leadership has positive connotations. At LeadEx co-workers consider their manager as their leader. This is described by one of the subordinates:

> *"I think the manager is my leader. So when I was working with [my manager] [...] then he was my leader. Now I work with a different team and the new manager in that team is a leader for me."*

That the interviewee considers all her managers to be leaders may not be surprising as the organisational values regard everybody as a leader. The organisational values state the following:

> *"We see leadership as an action, not a position."* (LeadEx, 2018)

It seems that everyone can thus be regarded as a leader regardless of the position. Subordinates consider themselves also as leaders as one subordinate explains:

> *"I see myself as a leader for the people who report to me directly and the people who report to me just locally. So most of the other managers in this office – their direct managers like [my manager] – don't sit here. So someone has to act as the leader for those individuals […] and I take that role."*

The subordinate regardless of her official role considers herself as a leader. In general leaders are viewed positively, whereas manager tendencies are considered to be bad:

> *"The bad leader has probably more of the manager tendencies."*

Referring to manager tendencies the subordinate here seems to have the traditional picture of a manager in mind and not the image of the manager as a leader which LeadEx tries to promote. Although one manager regards tasks that could be considered more managerial as leadership:

> *"Leadership means to me giving and receiving clear direction. Clarity, creating clarity, simplifying."*

This confusion between managerial tasks and leadership can be seen as an expression that also managers who only execute managerial tasks can be considered as a leader at LeadEx. It appears that the employees engage in identity work and prefer the positive connotation by referring to themselves as leaders instead of managers. The organisational culture promotes the view that everyone can be a leader regardless of their organisational structure. It appears that the organisational culture has influenced the interviewees' understanding of leadership to the extent that they also consider anyone as a leader in practice.

4.2 Leadership Ideals

After having looked at the discourse of leadership, we continue with the managers' and subordinates' view of leadership. We focus on the four leadership ideals expressed by the interviewees. The first is role modelling, the second caring for people, the third is having or encouraging personal relationships and the fourth is empowerment. For each of the five leadership ideals we intend to see how they relate to the organisational culture. Moreover, we look at how these ideals are embodied in the actual manager-subordinate interactions at LeadEx.

Role Modelling

The interviewees view leaders as people who behave as role models for colleagues. This means that they demonstrate the behaviour which they expect from others. One subordinate suggests that if one as a leader shows the desired behaviour, the co-workers follow voluntarily. However, if the leader is not willing to do something him- or herself, then he or she cannot expect others to follow:

> *"To be a leader I think [...] [is to] lead by example. [...] So you would want to demonstrate what you want to see in others. You can't say that you want everybody to work hard, if you will not [be] the hard worker yourself. You can't say that you want everybody to stand up and talk, if you don't. I think it is having trust and I think appreciating your leader because they are something that you would aspire to be."*

The organisational values include the principle to 'lead by example'. That this value is highlighted by the interviewees suggests that they embody the organisational values. One may thus say that the organisational values respectively the organisational culture influence their understanding of a leader. According to the organisational values, to 'lead by example' is defined as follows:

> *"We see leadership as an action, not a position. We look for people's values before competence and experience. People who 'walk the talk' and lead by example. It is about being our best self and bringing out the best in each other."* (LeadEx, 2018)

It seems that the interviewees do not only talk about leadership as being the role model, but also demonstrate it. One subordinate states the following about her manager:

> *"[My manager] is the perfect example of leading by example. […] In our interaction I think he did everything just right. He showed me how great a manager can be and he opened many possibilities for me."*

The subordinate stresses that the interaction with the manager is considered to be exemplary. The subordinate continues expressing why his manager leads by example.

> *"I think [my manager] is very good at making others comfortable and meeting others expectations. He is very supportive. He encourages me a lot and also I received good guidance from [my manager] […]. After my graduation in the last meeting, [my manager] send me an email which was really touching. […] it basically encouraged me to aim higher, to accomplish more and it is full of hope, it makes the future very promising. It's a very personal way to communicate with a co-worker from the manager's perspective. Because with the managers that I have had before [at a different company], I cannot imagine anyone to send me such an email, but [my manager] did that."*

The subordinate expresses that the support, comfort, encouragement and guidance that she received from the manager are examples of the manager's role modelling. Also the personal communication seems to influence the subordinates' judgement on the manager's leadership by example. Through sending the personal email and encouraging the subordinate to set herself higher goals, the manager demonstrates the organisational values of leading by example, togetherness and caring for people. In this way the manager is regarded a role model concerning the organisational values at LeadEx. Being the role model is a way to influence and encourage the desired behaviour in others. By demonstrating the organisational values the organisational culture is reinforced.

Caring for People

One of the other leadership ideals that the interviewees have is that leaders are supposed to care of people. One subordinate emphasises that a good leader cares about the co-workers whereas a bad leader does not:

> *"I think it can make a huge difference, someone who is just about the sales figures and not about the people. It really needs to be about the people, because it is those people that are giving you sales figures. So a bad leader is one that just cares about the targets and not for the people."*

One of the managers that was interviewed describes that a good leader provides a balance between work and personal life and acknowledges that a human being does the job:

> *"A good leader is a person that is good on challenging and good on supporting. You have a good balance of being very goal-oriented, but at the same time you know that there is a person, a private person behind it. So it is the work-life balance that is important to have as well."*

The interviewees seem to agree that leaders are supposed to care about the co-workers and that this is important when interacting. Caring for people is one of the organisational values of LeadEx (cf. LeadEx, 2018). This underlines that co-workers relate their understanding of a good leader to the organisational values and embody it in their thinking.

One manager confirms that the well-being of his employees is important to him. This manager considers it as crucial as working in the remote environment is stressful:

> *"For me I've always emphasised health and happiness is what helps us, do the things we do and also balance our lives. […] for us, it's added stress because not seeing your colleagues and having a combined effort, deliver one service together from three different cultures, three different time zones can add to the additional stress […]. Of course, there are deliveries, but for that deliveries will be good you have to be healthy and happy."*

Subordinates describe that their managers demonstrate caring for people in their behaviour and that they appreciate it when the manager cares about them. One of the subordinates of the above mentioned manager expresses that her manager was good in influencing them to feel good:

> *"Being positive and being optimistic. [My manager] seems always happy and he is very good at influencing the others to be happy."*

Both managers and subordinates emphasise in their stories that the emotional caring about a person, expressing interest in the person and the personal well-being, health and happiness are key to leadership. This suggests that the organisational culture, which puts the emphasis on people, is reflected in the employees' identity. Putting the person instead of the work in the focus may make the virtual interaction more personal and facilitate influencing efforts in the remote environment.

Personal Relationships

Besides the caring for people, having a more personal relationship is described as leadership qualities by our interviewees. One of the subordinates considers having an emotional connection to someone as being part of leadership:

> *"[Leadership for me] is someone that I can connect with emotionally."*

This quote reflects the importance of showing interest in people and their emotions and the need for a personal relation, if an employee wants to be considered as a leader in this company. The interviewees expect from a leader to be able to relate to them on a more personal level. This more personal relationship that goes beyond the working relationship between the manager and the subordinate is described by our interviewees as an important leadership quality. Another subordinate remarks that the personal relation might be part of the organisational culture:

> *"I have only been within [LeadEx] and I think we are a little bit more personal in the relations. I get the feeling that when I talk to more external people then it's purely a business relationship that they have with their manager and in many parts of [LeadEx] you could have a more personal relationship."*

Indeed the organisational values promote the personal relationship in terms of togetherness. Togetherness is defined as follows:

> *"Togetherness is at the heart of the [LeadEx] culture. We are strong when we trust each other, pull in the same direction and have fun together."* (LeadEx, 2018)

We experienced the personal relationship and atmosphere ourselves when performing our study at LeadEx. Despite being students and outsiders to the company, the relationship was informal. Co-workers were extremely supportive, accommodating and genuinely interested in us, providing us with a feeling of comfort. The fact that employees place great emphasis on the personal relation indicates that the organisational values are salient in the working life and co-workers seem to identify with this value and appreciate it.

The interviewees talk about three different aspects with regard to the personal relationships: the sharing of personal life, being friends and trust. These three aspects are elaborated on in the following.

Sharing of Personal Life

The managers and subordinates stress the importance of sharing their personal life. One of the subordinates responded in the following when asked what a bad leader was:

> *"Somebody who doesn't communicate decisions, doesn't engage with the team, makes no effort to value getting to know everybody on a personal level. But at least ask about your weekend or, you know, talking about your family or is everything ok, that sort of empathy."*

The interviewee emphasises that she wants her leader to ask about her personal life such as her weekend or her family.

One subordinate mentions that her manager takes interest in her personal life:

> *"[He] takes an interest to what I do outside of work as well. It's more than just all about work, […] he knows that I'm involved in different things [privately], so you know we talk about that as well."*

Subordinates in general seem to stress that they appreciate sharing stories from their private lives with their manager. A manager stresses the importance of mutually sharing private stories. The manager suggests that being aware of the personal life of his subordinates supports in creating stronger bonds which he considers to be important in the virtual interaction. The manager does admit that these personal bonds take more of an effort to establish when working together virtually:

> *"I know a lot of the birthdays of […] the co-workers' kids. […] Those are the things that [...] actually make your bonds stronger and you get to know these people a little bit more personally. […] When you're in an office, you tend to talk about a lot more things than you would when you are not there and so those are the things we have to work a little extra hard on. Birthdays, anniversaries, you know, new girlfriends, new boyfriends, new husbands, new wives, all of this bond stuff, it sometimes seems like a drama, but these […] contribute to [working well together]."*

This manager talks about the sharing of personal life as something that supports working well together. The organisational culture promotes personal relationships encouraging employees to talk about what happens in their private lives. The sharing of personal life can improve the feeling of togetherness between the manager and the subordinate. It seems that even though the sharing of the personal life takes more effort in the virtual environment it still appears to be executed. For someone to be considered as a good leader it is important that stories about the personal life are shared and a personal relation is formed.

Being Friends as an Expression of Personal Relationships

Our interviewees do not only emphasise the ability of a leader to connect with the employees on a personal level. A leader is also described as being a friend to the employees. This can be seen as an expression of the personal relationships at LeadEx. One manager says the following:

> *"Leadership is also sometimes being a friend and taking off the manager hat and listening to a colleague, your co-worker and say what's going on, what's bothering you, not talking about work but maybe the personal life."*

To describe a leader as a friend may seem very personal. This view, however, is reflected in the organisational values which emphasise togetherness. The organisational culture stresses the community feeling and spirit of being together and enjoying each other's company. It appears to encourage friendships. It is in line with how some managers and subordinates described their relationships. Being asked to describe the relationship with her manager, one subordinate stated:

> *"It's open, supportive, humorous; guidance, so I get a lot of guidance and support, knowledge, and I would say it's very friendly rather than a kind of boss. Yeah, I treat him more as a friend than a boss. [...] Even though yet we are not in the same country or even in the same office, I know that he's there for me. So I can email him or I can ring him or we can have a Skype [chat] and he will always make time for me."*

The subordinate stresses that her manager is there for her and that she can rely on her manager. In this sense the relationship facilitates the remote communication using Skype as she feels she can approach him. This suggests that even though there is a formal hierarchy, the manager and subordinate feel comfortable enough to communicate as equals due to the personal relationship. Moreover, co-workers feel comfortable in the relationship since they feel they can be themselves. One manager emphasises that the close personal relationship like a friend has been important in the virtual interaction:

> *"So I can say that I feel like a brother, a sister or a very close friend at times and that has been very crucial in the journey. We don't physically get to see each other every day, so handshakes and hugs are very few and [this is why] often […] we have to come up with electronic or technical versions of those."*

The manager suggests that feeling close respectively having a close relationship to the co-workers is important to compensate for the physical distance. The interviewees also express that being friends provides them with a feeling of belonging to LeadEx, which suggests that the company is part of their identity. The subordinates feel comfortable contacting their managers for support. Consequently, they may be more open for being influenced.

Relationships Characterised by Trust

Besides the sharing of personal stories and being friends, another aspect that is talked about with regard to the leadership ideal of having a personal relationship is trust. This is reflected in the following quote of a subordinate:

> *"A good leader gives you freedom, gives you trust, support and then if needed you need to be direct. I think this feeling of building the trust and*

> *the relation, I think if you do that, then you can achieve the goals and create the goals, then you have involvement and engagement."*

The interviewee emphasises both the relation and trust to be important in leadership and in achieving goals. For leadership to happen it seems that the interviewees find it important to be able to have trust between both parties. Again this reflects the organisational values of togetherness of LeadEx:

> *"We are strong when we trust each other."* (LeadEx, 2018)

The interviewees' view of trust in leadership is thus in line with the company's organisational values. It seems that their view of trust is also reflected in the actual relationship between managers and subordinates. The relationships are described as being characterised by trust as the following subordinate expresses:

> *"[I]f I need something besides listening – because sometimes I just want him to listen, but sometimes I need him to take something to the leadership team and then I feel very comfortable that he's doing that, so I think there's a lot of trust there as well."*

In this sense the emphasis of trust may reflect that the subordinate embodies the organisational culture and that the organisational culture is part of her identity. The subordinate feels that her manager takes care of her requests. There is trust in the sense that she can rely on him and as her manager listens to her she feel heard. The personal and trustworthy relation may support possible influencing efforts from both the manager and subordinate. Another subordinate emphasises that trust is crucial in a virtual relationship since one cannot observe what the other person is doing:

> *"So the first day he became my manager, when I came into [LeadEx], the very day [my manager] said that no matter what you do, don't lie. So that's what I did not lying to my manager […]. In a remote office it is not easy to build the trust, but I think that's a very important thing for remote managers and remote co-workers. Because most of the time we cannot see each other and we can't see what another is doing, so trust is what keeps us in a very good relationship."*

The subordinate follows her manager's instructions not to lie to him. It seems like her manager influenced her moral values. This may be seen as moral leadership respectively followership. Trust may serve as a facilitator for communicating and sharing information as it provides the foundation for honest interactions.

To summarise, the personal relationships between the manager and the subordinate are characterised by the sharing of personal life, being friends and trust. That the manager and subordinate appreciate having personal relationships is closely linked to the organisational culture. The interviewees consider the personal relations as important in virtual leadership. Therefore, the close relationship between the manager and the subordinate may help during the virtual interaction and communication and it may potentially form as a base for leadership.

Empowerment

The last leadership ideal is empowerment, which means that authority or power is given to a person. Some interviewees consider it as important that leaders provide autonomy, as is reflected in this quote from a subordinate:

> *"So, I think an open and trustful leader gives you space, [he] doesn't kind of micromanage as have you done this and have you done that, but that gives you space and freedom."*

The idea of giving the employees space to act is grounded in the organisational values. The organisational value 'Give and take responsibility' is defined as follows:

> *"We believe in empowering people. Giving and taking responsibility are ways to grow and develop as individuals. Trusting each other, being positive and forward-looking inspire everyone to contribute to development."* (LeadEx, 2018)

The organisational values are expressed in the way employees talk about leadership. The interviewees stress autonomy. It seems that also in practice interviewees feel empowered in their remote work as is reflected in the following quote from the subordinate:

> *"Most I appreciate his trust in me […], that he allows me to really handle things, to take ownership for this group here in the US and [he] allows me*

> *to take the flexibility and trust that I know what needs to be done and that I'll handle it."*

The virtual environment can provoke that managers cannot micromanage as close supervision is not possible remotely. This is explained by one subordinate:

> *"Because you are not there with each other. He is not just standing by for my shoulder looking at what I'm doing. So for that to happen he has to trust that I can do the job […] and I trust that he has my best interests. It's hard and I think he does."*

The autonomy as part of empowerment seems to be necessary in the virtual environment. Team members rely on one another to get the job done. It appears that our remote interviewees work rather autonomously. Although one can argue that this may diminish the possibilities to influence on behalf of the managers, the managers may actually contribute to reinforcing the culture. By allowing autonomy and empower the subordinates, the managers represent the organisational values. At the same time, it gives the managers the opportunity to focus on leadership in the interaction with their subordinates instead of focusing on the tasks.

Conclusion Leadership Ideals

To conclude, the organisational values influence the meaning of leadership and create leadership ideals. The culture promotes leadership through role modelling, caring about the co-workers, developing personal relationships and empowering the employees. Leadership at LeadEx means expressing and adhering to these leadership ideals. It appears that the leadership ideals of managers are not only talked about, but also experienced by the subordinates in practice. Before we explore how these leadership ideals are maintained in the virtual communication, we will address the challenges associated with virtual leadership.

4.3 Challenges for Virtual Leadership

The virtual channels that are used for communication causes managers and subordinates who work remotely to be confronted with challenges and communication barriers that do not exist in a face-to-face environment and potentially make virtual leadership more difficult. Besides

the technological problems that weaken the general interaction, we have defined four challenges for leadership that the interviewees in the remote environment face. These are presented in the following.

Not Seeing the Other Person

The first challenge is associated with not being able to see the other person. Even though Skype allows to do video calls and have a visual image of the other person, it is still different than seeing each other and interacting in person at the office. One manager includes in his leadership philosophy to see how a person is at that moment:

> *"I have to look at your body language, I have to see, where are we today? How do you feel today? And I have to look at your body language. That's for me my leadership philosophy. That means I have to answer questions, I have to be very observant to see where, in what state are you this morning."*

This manager refers to a more situational approach of leadership in his philosophy by seeing how the other person is doing at that moment. This is reflected in the leadership ideal 'caring for people'. Despite the manager not being able to see his subordinates, the manager still claims that the same leadership philosophy is used for leading virtually:

> *"I use the same philosophy no matter what, no matter where you are, even on the phone, but it might be that I use more questions when I can't see the person."*

Asking extra questions on how a person is and how a person feels can help overcome the challenge of not seeing each other face-to-face. Asking questions to obtain that kind of information may be a solution, but it would require more effort than it would in a normal face-to-face environment. Not being able to see the person face-to-face, to know how they are doing is a challenge, as the virtual environment weakens the leadership interaction and the potential power of leadership.

Lack of Social Interaction

The second challenge is, as managers and subordinates indicated, that they miss the social interaction that one could have in the office, but cannot experience in the virtual environment. The following quote from a subordinate reflects this:

> *"I suppose it can [be different], you miss out on the coffee chat, the lunch chat, the personal face-to-face interaction and yeah, you can skype or you can phone, but it's not the same."*

These social and spontaneous chats which one may assume to be rather absent in the virtual communication could potentially help to build a personal relationship between the manager and the subordinate. When having a good personal relationship, it might be easier for the manager to influence and practice leadership over the subordinate. However, personal relationships are potentially more difficult to establish as one misses out on spontaneous interactions at the coffee machine, for example. Chance encounters do not exist in the remote environment which make the influencing possibly more challenging.

Staying Connected

The third challenge that working in a virtual environment poses for the manager and subordinate is to stay connected. Besides the challenges in keeping everyone on the same knowledge level, it is also a challenge to create and maintain a more personal connection. A subordinate stresses the importance of staying connected:

> *"I think it's important to share information especially as I mentioned from the US side we don't sit in Sweden. We don't get the habit of fika every morning and see what's happening. [...] So it's really to stay connected and be included and then hopefully be able to influence something."*

In the above quote it is stressed that staying connected and be included is important to influence something. It is not only about sharing information but also to stay connected in a more personal way. One subordinate suggests that working remotely requires more energy and effort from the manager to be there for his or her subordinates and to stay connected in a more personal way:

> *"I think it's because of we are not located in the same location, so he managed to, you know, it requires more efforts for him to be always supportive and always be there and he managed to do that. I think that being not in the same location actually helps with the result, but it requires more energy and efforts from the manager."*

The virtual connection could possibly weaken the bond between the manager and the subordinate. Not sharing the same office and thus the same context is more demanding on the leadership relations as well. If the manager assures that the subordinates feels connected and included, promoting the organisational value of togetherness, it might be easier for the manager to influence the subordinates.

Mystique of the Manager

The fourth challenge is that the possibly weaker connection between the manager and the subordinate can create a mystique around the manager as a person. One subordinate describes that she is not sure how they would work together when being in the same office:

> *"I would say that if we got the option to [...] be in the same office, probably we will get a better chance to know each other and I would learn a lot more from [my manager]. But there is also a chance that, because in Chinese there's an old saying that: distance will generate beauty, so I'm not sure how much the chance is, but there could be a possibility that we might hate each other."*

This mystique around the manager can be beneficial as the subordinates can imagine their manager as someone greater than they might actually are. This potentially contradicts with the leadership ideal of having personal relations. Having personal relations may reduce the mystique around the manager. The mystique around the manager involves a psychological and emotional distance between the manager and the subordinate that could obstruct the process of influencing. To comply with the leadership ideals at LeadEx the manager may thus want to avoid creating a mysterious image of themselves and really emphasise a personal relation with the subordinates.

Conclusion Challenges for Virtual Leadership

The challenges in working remotely compared to a face-to-face environment causes that working remotely is associated with more barriers for leadership compared to working face-to-face. Challenges like not seeing each other, missing the social interaction, being disconnected and the mystique of the manager can be seen as challenges for virtual leadership. These challenges can weaken the interaction between the remote manager and subordinate, which can in its turn weaken the leadership potential and thus the power of virtual leadership. Which is the reason why it is important that these challenges are overcome.

Considering the challenges that the virtual environment poses, the question arises how the interviewees' leadership ideals are maintained in the virtual communication respectively interaction. In the following, we thus explore how the technological means allow the leadership ideals to be expressed.

4.4 Leadership through Technology

We now turn to instances where leadership ideals are expressed using technological means of communication. The physical distance between the manager and subordinate requires them to use technology to communicate. Communication using technological applications is often taken for granted. However, in understanding leadership as a social interaction, we consider it important to investigate how the virtual communication influences leadership. Moreover, as managers and subordinates do not only communicate using technological means, but also meet face-to-face on rare occasions, the importance of these meetings with regard to the leadership ideals and virtual leadership is also discussed.

The existence of the technology is appreciated by our interviewees. In general the interviewees talk about the different means of communication as a tool to communicate and not necessarily as a tool for virtual leadership. However, taking into consideration the four leadership ideals presented, we do see some potential for virtual leadership through Skype and social media. Other tools such as phone calls, emails, SMS, the intranet and WeChat are used for information sharing. Thus, they do not appear to be related to leadership efforts. With regard to virtual leadership the focus here is hence placed on Skype and social media.

Skype seems to be the predominant means of communication that is used most by the remote manager and subordinate. Skype meetings are often part of a routine and happen on fixed days and times, but also as needed. Skype is used for both information sharing and a more informal way of interacting. One manager describes a situation where his subordinate wrote him to have a more personal interaction:

> *"[My subordinate] wrote on Skype that she's sitting here, just me and my dog and I feel a little bit alone, I haven't spoken to anyone today. So then [my subordinate] could reach out to me, so we had a chat."*

The subordinate expresses that she feels lonely, but this is helped by her manager using Skype as a way to have a more personal informal contact. The personal contact is closely related to the organisational value of togetherness, where employees feel that they have a sense of belonging. The above quote demonstrates that managers use Skype to show that they care for their subordinates, which is described as a leadership ideal. One manager also expresses that video chats on Skype enable him to see the body language and how people feel, which can help the manager in taking care of his or her subordinate:

> *"We started to enable video capabilities [so] that [...] you can read people's body language, especially if they're having a bad day [...] and then you see the look on their face and they can also see the look on your face [...]. So the video really gave it a more personal touch and I don't think it's something that we can go without in the future. So hopefully maybe in the near future we have stuff like haptic touches where you can [...] kind of shake hands and feel like that you are really shaking hands with someone across and give someone a hug and it really feels like you are getting a hug, so the visual definitely helps in terms of the technology when connecting or talking with the co-workers."*

This manager expresses that the visual image that Skype offers gives a more personal touch to the conversation and improves the interaction between the subordinate and the manager. The manager expresses his desire for hugging, which in general seems something that is important for the interviewees. The virtual hugging and personal contact reflects one of the leadership ideals, namely the personal relationship, as well as the organisational value of togetherness. Skype is not the only technological mean that facilitates a more personal

relationship, also social media facilitates this personal relationship as expressed by our interviewees. The managers and subordinates indicate that they are friends on Facebook and other social media.

> *"We're linked kind of on Facebook, so [my manager] can see what I've been doing on the weekend and I can see what [my manager has] been doing on the weekend, so I suppose it's more social."*

As on social media people tend to post things of their personal life, this can help the remote manager and subordinate to get to know each other better. Being friends on Facebook can make them feel included as they can also share personal stories regarding their weekend as in this example. Both the being friends and the sharing of their personal life are part of the leadership ideal 'having personal relationships'. Both Skype and Facebook as a technological means for communication can facilitate the illusion that the leadership ideals are exercised, although actual influencing as part of virtual leadership seems absent.

Although the remote manager and subordinate are often bound to use technology for the communication, they also have face-to-face meetings from time to time. The managers and subordinates stress the importance of face-to-face meetings, especially when it comes to the personal relationship:

> *"I think it is important to meet face-to-face now and then at least once a year. It is important because then you have a face, you know each other a little bit better. It is much easier to have a phone call from someone that you have a face to, that you have seen and met and talked to than someone that you don't know at all."*

Meeting a person in real life may give someone a better impression of the other person, which can create trust and improve the personal relationship. The face-to-face meetings all have a formal purpose, however, these meetings can also have more of an informal touch as one subordinate expresses:

> *"During once a year we meet for a development talk normally face-to-face, either he comes here or I come to Sweden. […] We have a very kind of informal relationship. So they go well in that sense. A lot of dialogue and a lot of sharing. […] It could also be a dinner in the evening as well, as our meetings are quite informal."*

The socialising and work combined can create a nice atmosphere during these face-to-face meetings. It seems that the subordinates generally look forward to meeting their manager face-to-face:

> *"I look forward to the [face-to-face] meetings with [my manager], because on that day it's not boring, it's interesting and I kind of go away with something whether it's something for the future or something for now."*

In above quote we can see some kind of influencing during the face-to-face meetings, as the subordinate says that she always goes away with something new. From a leadership point of view, even in virtual teams, leadership can thus also happen during the face-to-face meetings. Besides the influencing during the face-to-face meetings, the face-to-face meetings can also be regarded as important for some kind of virtual leadership. This is as the face-to-face meetings are described as a base for a personal relation between the manager and the subordinate, which is considered to be one of the leadership ideals. The personal relation established in the face-to-face meetings can, when working remotely, help the manager and subordinate to reinforce their leadership ideals formed by the organisational culture.

Nonetheless, the face-to-face meetings are rare. The main part of the communication happens through the technological means. Although there are various challenges for the virtual leader related to the virtual setting, it seems that the technology still offers the opportunity for managers to express and perform the leadership ideals. The face-to-face meetings contribute in so far as they allow for face-to-face leadership. This forms a base for supporting the expression of the leadership ideals in the virtual environment. Hence, the technological means for communication which allow the expression of the leadership ideals can facilitate the illusion that virtual leadership is exercised, although actual influencing seems absent.

4.5 Leadership Expressing Culture

Having seen how the leadership ideals are expressed using technological means of communication, we now explore how the interviewees' understanding of leadership is related to the organisational culture. When the interviewees talk about leadership it becomes clear that they link their understanding of leadership to the organisational values of LeadEx. One subordinate explains the following about the relationship between the organisational culture and leadership:

> *"If they're a good leader our values at [LeadEx] fit perfectly into that scheme. [...] So whatever your corporate culture is and whatever expectations you have of your co-workers, you should be demonstrating those."*

Managers and subordinates describe that they share the organisational values. One subordinate assumes that when you work for LeadEx long enough, then also the personal values will become similar:

> *"I think we [my manager and I] have the same values. I think those of us that work for [LeadEx] for quite some length of time, we have […]. So we don't all have all of them, but we all have enough in common so that we value each other and that's why those of us that's been here for quite a while are still here – because we like working with like-minded people and [my manager] is very much a like-minded person with myself."*

The quote suggests that working with like-minded people facilitates the interaction. It creates a feeling of comfort and togetherness. One manager proposes that his subordinates require less guidance in their remote work due to the fact that they know LeadEx and the organisational culture:

> *"They've worked for [LeadEx] for many years, so we have the ground already in place […]. If I would have someone who is newly recruited from outside, no matter whether he or she is young or old, [that] doesn't matter so much, but with less experience from [LeadEx], then I would need to spend more time and behave in another way, but in this case no."*

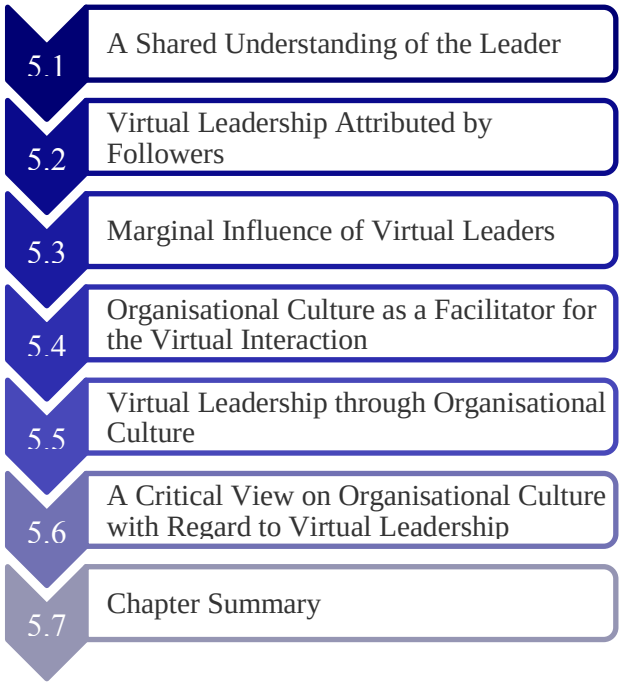
Above quote puts forward that the organisational culture guides employees in their work. It facilitates leadership for the managers in the way that it takes over the influencing and guidance. As the actual influencing seems rather absent and the influence of the organisational culture is reflected in the leadership ideals, it is suggested that the organisational culture takes over the role of leadership.

4.6 Chapter Summary

To conclude this chapter, leadership is a popular discourse at LeadEx. Everybody can be considered as a leader. The organisational culture at LeadEx is strong and the interviewees have an almost homogenous view on leadership. The four leadership ideals like role modelling, caring for people, having a personal relationship and empowerment are highly influenced by the organisational values and culture. Even though the virtual environment poses challenges such as not seeing the other person, a lack of social interaction, being disconnected and the mystique of the manager, the leadership ideals seem to be expressed. The communication using technology as well as the occasional face-to-face meetings, which the remote manager and subordinate have, facilitate the expression and realisation of the leadership ideals. Actual instances of influencing, as we defined leadership, are scarce or completely absent. Leadership at our case company is strongly associated with expressing and following the organisational values. Thus, we suggest that the organisational culture takes over the role of leadership.

5 Discussion – Rewriting Virtual Leadership

In this chapter we compare our empirical findings with existing theory. We start by comparing the understanding of leadership at LeadEx to the dominant leadership theories. We discuss how virtual leadership is attributed and question the influence of the leader in a virtual environment. After that it is discussed how the organisational culture facilitates the remote work taking into consideration that the virtual interaction is associated with challenges. We summarise the findings of our case study by suggesting that virtual leadership is expressed through the organisational culture. The chapter is concluded by taking a critical perspective on a strong organisational culture with regard to virtual leadership.



5.1 A Shared Understanding of the Leader

In our case study it appears that there is a shared understanding among the interviewees about virtual leadership that can be formulated into four leadership ideals. The four leadership ideals are closely linked to the organisational culture of our specific case company. We thus consider them to be highly case and context specific. We do not expect the same leadership ideals to emerge in case studies in different organisations, the leadership ideals should thus not be generalised (cf. Yin, 2013). However, we see value in comparing the four leadership ideals to the existing theory.

The four leadership ideals at LeadEx are that leaders needs to behave as a role model, care for people, encourage personal relationships and empower the employees. When comparing the four different leadership ideals to the existing theory it seems that each of the leadership ideals contains certain aspects of the different approaches on leadership (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). For example, the leadership ideals of role modelling and empowering

contain different aspects of leadership style theories (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The leadership ideals of caring for people and the personal relationship seem comparable to relationship oriented theories of leadership, while they also contain some aspects of the leadership trait theories such as trust (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The main argument here is that the four leadership ideals seem to be a mixture of several leader-centred approaches to leadership and it cannot be narrowed down to one all-encompassing leadership theory (cf. Harrison, 2018). Bolman and Deal state (2008) that each perspective highlights significant possibilities for leadership, however on its own it is incomplete. A combination of the different approaches to leadership is suggested to be more beneficial for understanding this complex phenomenon (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

In our case study the organisational culture and values influence the interviewees' understanding of virtual leadership. It is important to emphasise that the organisational culture and values appear to be consistent regardless of the location or the country of the interviewees. This suggests that the organisational culture is strong and subcultures are not salient. With organisational culture being so important for leadership one can see comparisons to the theory of symbolic leadership. In symbolic leadership the leader uses symbols to create meaning which can inspire followers to identify with the organisation and its culture (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Winkler, 2010). One can see particular characteristics of the symbolic approach to leadership overlap with our research findings, such as the strong link between the expression of the organisational culture and the emphasis on leading by example while embodying the organisational culture. However, there are differences between our findings and the symbolic leadership approach. The symbolic leadership approach is extremely leader-centred. Two of the major approaches in symbolic leadership – charismatic and transformational leadership – even have the tendency to paint leaders as heroes or saviours (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The symbolic leadership approach focuses on the effect leaders have on their followers, assuming that leaders are there (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Winkler, 2010). We, in contrast, took the follower perspective into account (cf. Meindl, 1995; Shamir et al., 2007; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992) and did not assume that leaders are there. We found that leadership is rather an attribution process, as the interviewees base their judgement whether someone is a leader on the extent to which he or she expresses the organisational values. The symbolic leadership approach offers a good insight into certain aspects that are comparable to our empirical

findings, however, one should also recognise the differences described. In the following section we will elaborate more on the attribution of virtual leadership.

5.2 Virtual Leadership Attributed by Followers

To be regarded as a leader at LeadEx, it seems that one has to behave according to the cultural norms and expressing the organisational values. However, whether one expresses the organisational culture and is hence considered a leader is dependent on the view of the followers, the subordinates. This suggests that virtual leadership is constructed by the followers. We see overlaps with the attribution theory. As discussed in the theoretical background on leadership in section 2.1, this theory states that in order to explain events, people will develop their own understanding of what caused the events by making attributions (McElroy, 1982b). With regard to leadership, this implies according to McElroy (1982b) that subordinates will reason, for example, that a leader is good or bad depending on how they see that the leader influenced an incident or outcome such as the group performance. Similarly, as a subordinate makes attributions whether a leader is good or bad, we can assume that a subordinate can attribute leadership qualities to his or her manager. In the case of LeadEx it seems that subordinates attribute their manager to be a leader when he or she expresses the organisational values. It is crucial to emphasise here that subordinates may do this attribution process unconsciously. Although some interviewees clearly expressed that leaders are people who embody the organisational values, other interviewees may not be aware that they consider people as leaders based on their cultural expressions. For example, one subordinate considers that her manager leads by example as he sent her a personal email for her graduation. For her it apparently is a symbol that her manager cares for her. It appears that her manager's behaviour is in line with the organisational value caring for people. Thus, she considers her manager as a leader. Another subordinate might have interpreted the same event differently and attached less meaning to such an email. We can thus state that the process of attribution is subjective and that subordinate attributions for the same outcome can differ (cf. Martinko, Harvey & Douglas, 2007).

Kelley and Michela (1980, p. 460) argue that the attributions people make "constitute the person's understanding of the causal structure of the world and, therefore, are important determinants of his interaction with that world". In other words, this means that the

attributions managers and subordinates make affect how they will behave. It is suggested that if one makes wrong attributions for a cause, this can have potentially negative consequences (cf. Martinko & Gardner, 1987). For example, in our case if a subordinate interprets that his or her manager does not express alignment with the organisational culture and values, then the subordinate may not consider the manager as a leader. This can cause that the subordinate may not follow the direction and goals set by the manager. The manager in turn may interpret the subordinate's behaviour as not reliable which may result in not sharing information with the subordinate anymore. Especially in the virtual environment where direct supervision is not possible (cf. Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017), this can have negative impacts on the relationship and performance of the remote manager and the subordinate.

We like to summarise that leadership at LeadEx is an attribution process. Managers who reflect the organisational values and culture are regarded as leaders by the subordinates. However, even though the managers are attributed to be leaders by their subordinates, the manager actually influencing the subordinate as part of leadership (cf. Yukl, 2010) seems to be less salient in the virtual environment. In the following section we hence elaborate on the marginal influence of virtual leadership.

5.3 Marginal Influence of Virtual Leaders

In the popular discourse about leadership, it is often assumed that leaders have a lot of influence on their subordinates and drive change (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). It is highlighted that leaders are able to "produce, control and change culture" (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017, p. 67). Also with regard to virtual teams, Kayworth and Leidner (2001) suggest that leadership is vital to achieve success in virtual teams. However, Alvesson and Sveningsson (2013, p. 377) stress that "a strong discourse emphasizing leadership and that this is repeated by mass media, the public, people in organizations, and leadership researchers is no proof of anything – except, perhaps, about the popularity of this discourse". We see this phenomenon reflected in our case company. At LeadEx leadership appears to be a popular discourse, but in the virtual environment at our case company it seems that virtual leadership is not as salient as one would assume based on the literature (e.g. Zimmermann, Wit & Gill, 2008).

In our case it appears that the culture has a greater influence than the remote leaders. The influence of virtual leaders seems to be marginal, although when the remote manager and subordinate meet face-to-face, the managers do seem to influence their subordinates. For example, as mentioned in 4.4 Leadership through Technology, one subordinate mentions that she always goes away with something new. In the interview she reports that her manager inspires her to think about her future. This can be considered as the manager influencing the subordinate. However, the trigger to reflect on the future are generally the development talks which take place once a year and are normally held face-to-face. Frequent virtual influence from remote does not appear to be the case here. Incidents or occasions of virtual leadership seem to be very rare when we take into account the stories of all the six subordinates that we interviewed. In contrast, influencing through expressing the culture became evident in our observations as well as the stories that the interviewees told us.

Leadership includes influencing others (Yukl, 2010). Thus, managers who express the organisational culture and lack actual virtual influencing arguably do not perform leadership. In our case it seems that the organisational culture takes over the influencing aspect of leadership. Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) explain that with a strong organisational culture and shared meanings in place, as is the case at LeadEx, the potentiality of leadership influencing others or accomplishing change is small. Although Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) mention this in relation to leadership in a face-to-face environment, we claim that this is also valid in the virtual environment.

Considering that interactions among managers and subordinates are associated with more challenges in the virtual environment as described in the section 4.3 Challenges for Virtual Leadership, it does not seem surprising that the actual influencing aspect of virtual leadership is not salient. However, with regard to the emphasis the virtual leader has in the literature (e.g. Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rosen, 2007; Zigurs, 2003), we think that this is surprising. In the following section we will elaborate on the challenges in the virtual environment and the influence the organisational culture has on these challenges.

5.4 Organisational Culture as a Facilitator for the Virtual Interaction

Organisational culture is associated with organisational members sharing the same meaning (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). We suggest that a shared meaning facilitates the

virtual interaction since everybody has the same expectations regarding the interaction. Schein (2010) supports the view that organisational culture facilitates a shared understanding. The culture is suggested to provide organisational members with a feeling of predictability and security (Schein, 2010). In this sense the culture seems to give the interviewees the feeling that they know what to expect from one another. The interviewees consider not seeing each other in person, the lack of social interaction, staying connected and the mystique of the manager as challenges in the remote environment. These challenges are similar to the ones scholars describe (e.g. Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017; Kerber & Buono, 2004; Kirkman et al., 2002). The challenges that the virtual environment is faced with can weaken the interaction between the manager and the subordinate and thus also the potential and power of leadership. We suggest that the organisational culture supports the manager and subordinates in overcoming or at least minimising the virtual challenges faced.

The first challenge we have defined is that managers and subordinates do not see each other in person most of time. Not seeing the body language and the other person's reaction can cause difficulties in the interaction. This is supported by Kerber & Buono (2004) who argue that the absence of face-to-face interaction can potentially increase the likelihood of misunderstandings. The interviewees, however, do not consider that this hampers their interaction. One manager asks more questions in the virtual interaction on Skype to better understand his subordinate and the context the person is in, while others bypass the issue by using video calls on Skype. This allows them to see the body language and gives them the feeling that the interaction is more personal. The values of caring for people and togetherness (cf. LeadEx, 2018) encourage the managers and subordinates to ask extra questions on how the other person is doing and have skype calls that allow for a more personal interaction which make the interviewees appear to feel more comfortable in their virtual manager-subordinate relationship. This shows that although the challenge remains – they still work from a distance – the interviewees find ways to deal with it and get accustomed to not seeing their counterpart.

The second challenge the interviewees experience is the lack of social interaction compared to a face-to-face environment. Similarly, Kirkman et al. (2002) identified the challenge of feelings of isolation in a study conducted with managers and organisational members in virtual teams. At our case company it seems that managers and subordinates counter this issue through communicating via Skype. When subordinates feel lonely, they dare to reach

out to their manager as described in 4.4 Leadership through Technology. When the subordinates address themselves to their managers – even when it is only because they feel bored – managers appreciate this openness and make the subordinates feel welcome. Although the lack of social interaction cannot be solved completely in the virtual environment due to potentially different time zones and the nature of remote work, it seems that managers and subordinates at LeadEx are able to minimise the lack of social contact and associated feelings of loneliness and isolation at least to a great extent by living up to the organisational value of togetherness (cf. LeadEx, 2018). This underlines that although managers and subordinates are physically distant, they may still mentally perceive each other as being close because of the frequent interactions on Skype (cf. Popper, 2013). Feeling psychologically close has benefits in so far as it increases the likelihood that the attributions a manager and subordinate make match (Martinko & Gardner, 1987). This decreases the risk of inappropriate actions or behaviour (cf. Martinko & Gardner, 1987).

The third challenge for virtual leadership is for the manager and subordinate to stay connected. It is assumed to be more difficult due to the distance and thus missing out on the informal conversation (cf. Kirkman et al., 2002). Zigurs (2003, p. 344) suggests that leaders need "to make their presence felt in a positive way". It seems that at our case company the remote manager and subordinate stay connected through having a good relationship in which employees feel comfortable as friends. Scholars like Zigurs (2003) and Zaccaro and Bader (2003) suggest that trust is crucial in leading virtual teams. This is confirmed by our interviewees who consider trust in their interaction and as a leader's characteristic essential. Although trust is more challenging to build because of the distance (cf. Zaccaro & Bader, 2003), this does not seem to be an issue at our case company. Also the sharing of stories from their private life may promote feeling connected (cf. Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rosen, 2007). Having personal relations and as a part of that trust, being friends and sharing their personal life are part of the organisational values and seem to help the remote manager and subordinate to feel that they stay connected. This supports the view that the organisational values facilitate the virtual interaction.

The last challenge is the mystique of the manager. Distance can create a mystique around the manager in the sense that the manager is perceived in a greater light than the manager might actually be (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). A leader at LeadEx, however, is expected to build a personal relation with the co-workers. By having a personal relationship

and getting to know each other on a more informal level the mystique is reduced. Although the personal relationship is beneficial for the information sharing, it can also create problems when the manager is not the glorious person the subordinate expects him to be before getting to know him better. However, due to the personal relations that the organisational values promote, it seems that managers and subordinates have the same understanding and expectations about a leader respectively manager (cf. Schein, 2010).

We can summarise that although there are challenges for virtual leadership when managers and subordinates work remotely, it seems that the interviewees manage to overcome them or at least are able to deal with them. It is important for virtual leadership that these challenges are overcome. This is because these challenges can potentially weaken the interaction between the leader and follower, which could in its turn weaken the potential and power of virtual leadership. In the literature on leadership in the virtual environment it is described as the task of the leader to overcome the challenges that the remote manager-subordinate face (cf. Kerber & Buono, 2004; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). Zaccaro and Bader state (2003, p. 380) that in a virtual environment "leaders serve to promote more effective team functioning". However, in our case it seems that the organisational culture helps the remote manager and subordinate to overcome these challenges. It appears that as the managers and subordinates embody the organisational culture, they have a shared understanding of which behaviour is needed, expected and accepted in their interactions. This, we suggest, makes the physical distance less problematic.

5.5 Virtual Leadership through Organisational Culture

The organisational culture is not only beneficial for the virtual interaction of the remote manager and subordinate, it also has a positive impact on virtual leadership. Scholars like Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) take the view that in the daily work leadership is often marginalised and other modes of organising prevail. Leadership can only happen in interactions or written communication (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). These are, however, less frequent in a virtual environment than in a face-to-face environment, especially when manager and subordinate are located in different time zones (cf. Kerber & Buono, 2004). Leading through organisational culture may consequently be an effective alternative for managers to influence in the remote environment. This is because the

organisational culture is generally expressed even when interactions are absent (cf. Schein, 2010). It provides the framework in which organisational members can act (cf. Schein, 2010). Since organisational culture can limit managers' scope of action, some scholars argue that culture forms leadership rather than the other way round (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Schein 2010). This suggests that one cannot consider leadership without considering the organisational culture context (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Lord & Dinh, 2014; Schein, 2010). Let us recall our definition of leadership:

> *"Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives."* (Yukl, 2010, p. 8).

Above definition underlines that the leader and follower must have a shared understanding of what shall be accomplished and how to accomplish it. The 'what to accomplish' seems to be based on a mutual agreement between the manager and subordinate. The manager and subordinate decide together in the development talks what is the long-term goal. As the development talks are face-to-face and only take place once a year, virtual influence is absent. Also in the daily remote work the subordinates mainly decide themselves what needs to be done. This is in line with scholars such as Zigurs (2003) who argue that virtual work is characterised by autonomy. We can conclude that virtual leadership is not salient with regard to what needs to be done.

Let us take a look at 'how to do it'. Based on the stories of the interviewees, it appears that the 'how to do it', the way to accomplish things, is outlined by the culture (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Schein, 2010). The interviewees share the leadership ideals of role modelling, caring for people, personal relationships and empowerment. For example, the culture promotes the view that one should interact on a trustful and personal basis and give autonomy (cf. LeadEx, 2018). It suggests that rather than leadership it is the culture which influences how things should be done. Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) argue that culture influences the members' behaviour. The interviewees describe their way of interacting in line with the culture. It seems that the interviewees attach high importance on embodying the organisational values. If one does not behave according to the culture, they stand the chance to being refused. That culture can be seen as an alternative to leadership is argued by Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017). They suggest that culture can guide

behaviour similarly as is assumed from leadership. People who express the culture at our case company are regarded as leaders and role models. Leadership is thus – in contrast to our definition from Yukl – an attributional phenomenon as explained in 5.2 Virtual Leadership Attributed by Followers.

We can state that virtual leadership at LeadEx is performed by means of the organisational culture. Due to the distance, organisational culture may be a more effective means to influence co-workers' behaviour than leadership. The interviewees attribute leadership qualities to a person based on how they perceive that he or she embodies the organisational culture and reflect the leadership ideals. We would like to introduce the following model to explain how virtual leadership in this case is performed.

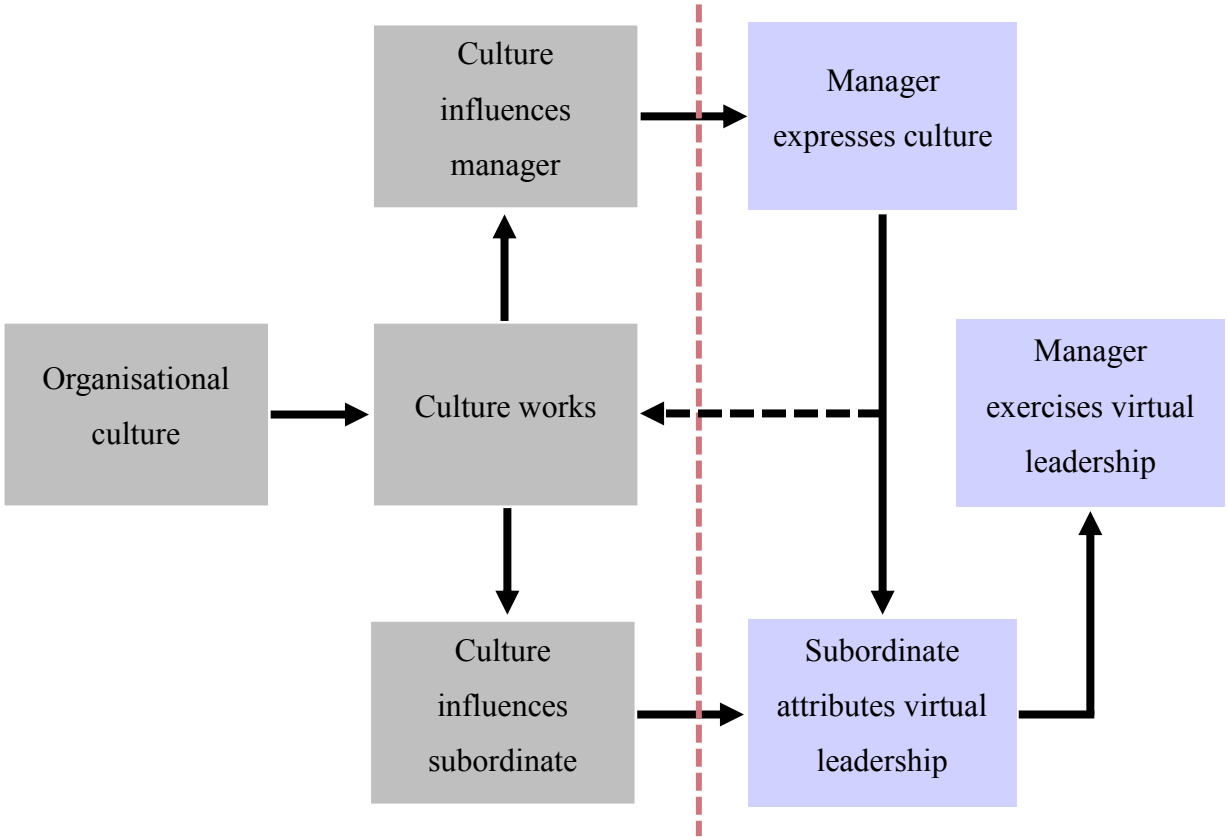


Figure 1: The Process of Attributing Virtual Leadership

The model above represents the relations between the organisational culture and virtual leadership as of how we identified it in our research. The dotted line in the middle separates the model in two sections. The section on the left represents the part where cultural assumptions have its influence and this could potentially be unconscious for both the

manager and the subordinate (cf. Hatch, 1993). The section on the right indicates where the expressions of culture can be found more on the surface and reflected into reality as symbolic artefacts (cf. Hatch, 1993).

The model starts with the organisational culture. When the culture is considered to be strong, as in our research, we can assume that the culture *works*. This means that it influences the thoughts of the employees (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Hence, in the figure it is depicted that the culture influences both the manager as well as the subordinate. As the manager is influenced by the culture, the manager expresses the organisational culture in his behaviour that is in the way he interacts with colleagues. By doing so, he reinforces the existing culture (cf. Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). The reinforcement of the culture is represented by a dotted line in the model. The subordinate who observes the manager's expression of the organisational culture attributes the manager to be his or her leader. The person does so to make sense of events (cf. McElroy, 1982b). Based on the culture the manager and subordinate both have the same understanding of a leader in a remote environment. It causes the subordinate to attribute that the manager exercises virtual leadership.

5.6 A Critical View on Organisational Culture with Regard to Virtual Leadership

After having looked at the interplay between the organisational culture and virtual leadership, we like to take a more critical view on a strong organisational culture with regard to virtual leadership. Our findings show that leadership and organisational culture are closely intertwined (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Schein, 2006). From a virtual leadership perspective this can be considered as positive, as by expressing the organisational values the followers seem to attribute leadership. However, one should also consider the potential disadvantages of the strong link between the organisational culture and virtual leadership.

Scholars like Willmott (1993) compare the organisational culture to a system of totalitarian control. Willmott (1993) argues that a strong organisational culture brainwashes the members of the organisation. While one pretends to give employees more autonomy, he criticises that employees are actually more controlled. Employees control themselves

through a form of self-discipline and subject themselves unconsciously to the organisational culture (Willmott, 1993). Although one could argue that some employees follow the organisational culture voluntarily, we do recognise the influencing power of organisational culture since we see this phenomenon reflected at our case company. Employees embody the organisational culture and adapt their behaviour to the cultural expectations communicated through the organisational values. Hence the employees embody the organisational values which is considered to be the goal of culture management (cf. Grey, 2005). In this case company the strong organisational culture has positive effects on the virtual interaction due to the common expectations that the employees share regarding their behaviour and way of communication. Nonetheless, a common culture involves risks. It seems that employees expect from each other to adapt to the culture. This like-mindedness can result in a homogenous group which is not triggered to critically reflect upon themselves or their behaviour as they are not challenged and exposed to different ways of thinking (cf. Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). Alvesson and Spicer (2016) call this lack of critical reflection functional stupidity. According to them, like-mindedness can result in a lack of creativity and innovation, as things are not questioned. In general the absence of critical reflection can be beneficial because it helps employees to get done with their work and supports a harmonious work relation (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016), but it also has its disadvantages for leadership.

With regard to leadership, Schein (2010) argues that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture. Schein (2010, p. 2) defines leadership as "the ability to step outside the culture that created the leader and to start evolutionary change processes that are more adaptive". The essence and challenge of leadership is the ability to perceive the limitations of one's own culture and to evolve it when necessary (Schein, 2010). The interviewees in our case seemed to be well aware of their organisational culture. However, we believe that they demonstrated little critical reflection on their own organisational culture's limitations. There also appears to be little incentive from the interviewees to change or evolve the culture. In general managers who deviate from the organisational values and prototypical leadership ideals are likely to be not accepted in the organisational community and face resistance when trying to influence. In this way the organisational culture can also limit the scope in which leadership is accepted (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). It means that people who actually break out of the common norms by demonstrating a different behaviour, asking critical questions or questioning the

current way of working may in the case of LeadEx not be considered as a leader. They are probably more perceived as a troublemaker, as most people don't like to change what they consider to be normal (cf. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Change can be slow because it takes time to convey to employees that change is needed and makes sense. Schein (2010) suggests that turnarounds are only achieved by involving all organisational members. He assumes that especially organisations with a long success history, as in our case company, are unlikely to question their current assumptions and success since it provides a source of identity for the employees (Schein, 2010).

In the virtual environment leadership is assumed to be more difficult (cf. Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rosen, 2007). In our case company virtual leadership as the act of influencing seems not salient. The organisational culture provides an alternative to leadership. However, it seems that the organisational culture is simply accepted as it is not questioned for its limitations or restrictions. We thus like to suggest that in our case company employees should be open for other organisational members who challenge the existing organisational values and be inspired by different modes of thinking. In addition, they should critically reflect upon themselves and their behaviour.

5.7 Chapter Summary

To summarise, in this chapter we discussed our findings while comparing them to the existing theory. We illustrated that our empirical findings regarding virtual leadership include aspects of various dominant leadership theories. However, there is not one theory that explains the entire virtual leadership phenomenon.

Virtual leadership at LeadEx is an attribution process. Managers who reflect the organisational values and culture are regarded as leaders by the subordinates. This means that one should acknowledge organisational culture much more as a way to influence and guide employees' behaviour in the virtual environment instead of placing too much emphasis on virtual leadership and the leader in general. Organisational culture creates a common understanding among managers and subordinates of how a leader should be. This shared understanding that the organisational culture provides facilitates the virtual interaction between the manager and the subordinate which in turn helps them to overcome the challenges the virtual environment is assumed to have. However, having a strong

organisational culture has been criticised as it can potentially limit critical reflection of the organisational members.

Actual leadership as the act of influencing others is marginal at LeadEx. We assume that this is because the strong organisational culture takes over the influencing aspect. We thus created a model explaining how virtual leadership is expressed in the remote manager and subordinate relationship. This model illustrates the attribution of virtual leadership through the influence of the organisational culture.

6 Conclusion

In this final chapter, we conclude our empirical study by explaining our research findings and answering our research question. We will start by reintroducing our research objective and explain our contribution to the field of virtual leadership. Moreover, we provide practical implications as well as suggestions for future research and conclude with an epilogue.

6.1 Research Objective

The aim of our empirical study is to bring insights into how leadership is expressed in manager-subordinate relationships that work in geographically dispersed areas and use technological means for interacting with one another. We do this by means of a qualitative case study at LeadEx. Moreover, it is our intention to contribute to a greater understanding of how managers and subordinates view and experience leadership. We have thus formulated the following research question:

How is leadership expressed within the manager-subordinate relationship while both work from geographically dispersed locations?

6.2 Research Contribution

In this section we will conclude our research question by summarising our main findings and present our theoretical contributions. Based on the literature review in chapter 2 and the discussion in chapter 5, we believe that our research contributes to the theoretical field of virtual leadership in various ways. In attempt to understanding how the manager and subordinate interpret and express leadership in the virtual environment, we discovered that

the strong organisational culture at LeadEx plays a more important role than previously expected.

Virtual Leadership is Complex

Instead of focusing on one dominant paradigm within the mass of leadership theories and literature, our research provides insights into how virtual leadership is interpreted and offers a broader explanation. Our interviewees of LeadEx have a shared understanding about virtual leadership. The four leadership ideals of role-modelling, caring for people, personal relations and empowerment at LeadEx are a mixture that contain particular aspects of different leadership theories. Aspects from the trait, style, relationship-oriented and symbolic leadership approaches are reflected in our empirical material.

Our research highlights that there is no universally accepted theory (cf. Harrison, 2018) that encompasses a complete explanation for the complex phenomenon of virtual leadership. This suggests that for understanding the phenomenon of virtual leadership one has to consider different perspectives (cf. Bolman & Deal, 2008) and existing theories.

Virtual Leadership is Challenging

The virtual environment is associated with challenges (cf. Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Berry, 2011; Connaughton & Daly, 2005; Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017). Based on our empirical findings we formulated four challenges for the virtual interaction, namely, not seeing the other person, lack of social interaction, staying connected and the mystique of the manager. These challenges imply difficulties for the virtual interaction and can possibly weaken the interaction between the leader and the follower and thus the potential for leadership. Hence, it is important to overcome the challenges. Scholars suggest that it is the task of the virtual leader to ensure that this is done (cf. Kerber & Buono, 2004; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). However, the organisational culture can support the remote manager and subordinate to overcome the challenges or at least enable them to deal with them. In our research it appears that the strong organisational culture causes the managers and subordinates to have a shared understanding of what is expected and accepted in the interactions which facilitates the interactions. This thus makes the physical distance less challenging for the virtual manager and subordinate suggesting that less virtual leadership is needed.

Virtual Leadership is Marginal

The empirical findings of our study suggest that virtual influencing at LeadEx is marginal. We chose to work with Yukl's (2010) definition of leadership, in which he defines leadership as the process of influencing others. Our empirical findings show little evidence of the manager influencing the subordinate in the virtual environment. We did find one example where a subordinate indicated that she was influenced by her manager, but this was in the face-to-face environment. Considering that the interactions among remote managers and subordinates are associated with more challenges, the lack of actual influencing may not be surprising. However, with the current literature emphasising the importance of the virtual leader (e.g. Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rosen, 2007; Zigurs, 2003), finding a lack of actual influencing and thus arguable a lack of actual virtual leadership may be considered as surprising.

At LeadEx the organisational culture seems to take over the influencing aspects of leadership. Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) explain that with a strong organisational culture and shared meanings in place the potentiality of leadership influencing others or accomplishing change is small. Although Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) mention this in relation to leadership in a face-to-face environment, our findings suggest that this is also valid for virtual leadership in the virtual environment.

Virtual Leadership is Attributed

Our study demonstrates that virtual leadership is attributed by followers. The subordinates consider managers who express and reflect the organisational values and culture as leaders. This attribution process is subjective and can be done consciously or unconsciously. Managers who want to be considered as virtual leaders have to demonstrate alignment with the organisational culture and express the organisational values. When a subordinate interprets that his or her manager does not express alignment with the organisational culture and values, then the subordinate may not consider the manager as a leader. In this way we provide empirical support for the attribution theory applied in the context of leadership (cf. Martinko, Harvey & Douglas, 2007; McElroy, 1982b; Kelley & Michela; 1980).

The attribution theory in the context of virtual leadership also illustrates that followers have a greater significance than the literature regarding this topic suggests. In previous virtual leadership research the focus was mainly placed on the leader (e.g. Kayworth & Leidner,

2001; Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rosen, 2007). However, we suggest that a stronger emphasis should be put on studying the follower perspective for understanding the phenomenon of virtual leadership.

Virtual Leadership is Organisational Culture

Our findings imply that organisational culture replaces leadership in the virtual manager-subordinate relationship. As previously explained, subordinates attribute leadership to the managers who express the organisational culture and values. While leadership as the act of influencing others is marginal in the virtual environment, it is rather the organisational culture at LeadEx that influences the organisational members in their remote work. We suggest that the organisational culture can replace virtual leadership, but that this is done through an attribution process. Based on this conclusion of our empirical findings we developed and introduced the model of "The Process of Attributing Virtual Leadership" (p. 57). This model presents the attribution of virtual leadership through the influence of the organisational culture. The model also answers our research question and thus describes how leadership is expressed within the manager-subordinate relationship while both work from geographically dispersed location.

6.3 Practical Implications

Besides contributing to the theoretical field of virtual leadership, this study aims at contributing to practice. The findings suggest that organisational members who want to be regarded as leaders may want to devote attention to how they are perceived by others. It is suggested that to be considered as a leader one should express the organisational values. Moreover, it seems that organisations whose managers and subordinates work in virtual teams can facilitate the virtual interaction by having a strong organisational culture. Nonetheless, organisations should be aware of the implications associated with a strong culture. As we have argued, a strong culture may impede critical reflection and change which can have consequences on creativity and innovation (cf. Alvesson & Spicer, 2016).

6.4 Future Research

A case study as ours is difficult to generalise (Yin, 2013). Thus, we encourage similar studies to consolidate our findings. Furthermore, we propose the following possibilities for future research:

First, we argue that a greater emphasis should be placed on the subordinate respectively follower perspective when studying virtual leadership. We believe that this provides richer insights into the socially constructed nature of leadership.

Second, with regard to the challenges that managers and subordinates experience when working remotely, we suggest that further research is necessary to examine the effects a strong organisational culture has on these challenges.

Third, we believe that doing further investigations in other organisations on how virtual leadership is expressed in remote manager-subordinate relationships or virtual teams will support to deepen our understanding in this area of research. Since our focus was placed on a company with a strong organisational culture, it may further be interesting to study how virtual leadership is expressed at companies where the organisational culture is not salient.

Fourth, the actual influencing aspect of virtual leadership is marginal at LeadEx. It may be interesting to investigate in an organisation where the organisational culture is similarly strong and find out whether there is more or equal amounts of influencing from the leader.

6.5 Epilogue

LeadEx appears as a company with a strong organisational culture. Despite working at different continents or different locations and having partly different cultural backgrounds, the employees of LeadEx presented a consistent picture of the company. Their view on leadership and the actual practice corresponded highly to the organisational culture and values. We have taken it seriously to present a comprehensive outline of the employees' views with regard to virtual leadership and their experiences of the virtual interactions. Along with our own interpretations and explanations, we have brought insights into the topic of virtual leadership which challenge the existing view of the importance of the leader in the

remote work. Nonetheless, since there are potentially further interpretations applicable, we encourage the reader to critically reflect upon our interpretations and explanations.

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