



LUND UNIVERSITY  
School of Economics and Management

# Exploring E-leadership: the Follower's Experience

by

Marika Arvidsson and Johanna Sjögren

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Supervisor: Ola Mattisson  
Examiner: Stein Kleppestø



# Abstract

First and foremost, e-leadership is leadership virtually performed. The aim with this master thesis is to analyze how e-leadership is experienced by the followers. The study is qualitative with focus on interviews to test the theoretical concepts existing already. First, the findings from the review of academic literature in the field is summarized in a theoretical framework, which explains how the leader and the followers relate to each other. According to the findings, the leader-follower relationship in a virtual context is based on trust and communication.

Concluded from interviews with four leaders and eight followers, four vital practical aspects were discovered with regards to communication and trust in the leader-follower relationship. The topics are: 1) self-sufficiency, 2) structure, planning and accessibility, 3) virtual meetings, and 4) personal relations. Self-sufficiency refers to the importance of individual responsibility, whilst structure, planning and accessibility considers the need of being prepared and organized when spontaneous contact is rare and difficult. Further, virtual meetings refer to how the virtual team meet and the importance of keeping those meetings efficient. Lastly, the barriers for developing personal relationships are experienced to influence the work of the virtual team. These topics were frequently referred to in the interviews with the followers, hence concluded crucial aspects to consider for an e-leader. Even though this research has some limitations, one of them being the narrow scope of respondents (mostly women in tech companies), the results provide topics for future research as well as broadening the concepts of leadership, followership and teams in a virtual context.

Keywords: e-leadership, distance leadership, followers, virtual teams, digitalization, trust, communication

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# Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1	Background	2
1.2	Purpose	3
1.3	Research Questions	3
1.4	Problem Discussions	3
1.5	Definitions	4
<b>2</b>	<b>Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1	Preliminary Version of Theoretical Framework	6
2.2	The Leader	7
2.2.1	The Intention of Leadership	7
2.2.2	E-Leadership	8
2.3	The Team	11
2.3.1	The Intention of Teams	11
2.3.2	Virtual Teams	11
2.4	Final Version of Theoretical Framework	13
2.5	Communication	15
2.6	Trust	16
2.7	Summary of Theoretical Framework	18
<b>3</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>20</b>
3.1	Choice of Theory	20
3.2	Empirical Data	22
3.2.1	Selection of Respondents	22
3.2.2	Empirical Collection	23
3.2.3	Interviews	24
3.3	Method of Analysis	26
3.4	Data Applicability	26
3.5	Suggestions for Methodological Improvements	26
<b>4</b>	<b>Empirical Data</b>	<b>28</b>
4.1	Why Do You Work in Virtual Teams?	30
<b>5</b>	<b>Analysis</b>	<b>31</b>
5.1	Patterns Found from Interviews	31
5.1.1	Self-sufficiency	32
5.1.2	Structure, Planning and Accessibility	33

5.1.3	Virtual Meetings.....	35
5.1.4	Personal Relations.....	37
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>39</b>
6.1	<i>Implications.....</i>	<i>39</i>
6.2	<i>Suggestions for Future Research.....</i>	<i>41</i>
6.3	<i>Epilogue.....</i>	<i>42</i>
	<b>References.....</b>	<b>43</b>
	<b>Appendix A.....</b>	<b>47</b>
	<b>Appendix B.....</b>	<b>49</b>

# List of Tables

Table 1 - Changes and opportunities for e-leaders and virtual teams (DasGupta, 2011) .....	9
Table 2 - The followers .....	29
Table 3 - The leaders .....	29

# List of Figures

Figure 1 - Theoretical framework basis .....	7
Figure 2 - Final version of Theoretical framework .....	13
Figure 3 - Final version of Theoretical framework .....	19
Figure 4 - Communication - Trust relationship from the followers' perspective .....	32
Figure 5 - Communication - Trust relationship from the followers' perspective .....	40



# 1 Introduction

*Once upon a time, an organization within the area of cyber security with very talented employees, had office locations in Malmö Sweden, London U.K and Boston U.S. At the office in Malmö, two employees had the required expertise, three in London and two in Boston and everyone needed to meet for meetings to plan, structure and further on implement a global cyber security task, especially when the organization is planning to open new office location both in Zurich and Hong Kong. The meetings require the employees to fly to one of the office locations once every two weeks, usually requiring to stay for two or three days. Traveling has taken up a lot of important time the employees could spend on other tasks. Recently, the interest of attending the meetings virtually has increased, meaning they can sign in on their computer and be a part of the meeting from where ever they are that day. Consequently, the organization has not only saved an enormous amount of money on travelling, the employees saved time, and the meetings are scheduled as normal over the internet. The term e-leadership has been brought up multiple times, however the interpretation of the term varies among the team members.*

*Recently discovered by the team members is the simplicity to contact people virtually rather than face-to-face communication, this meaning the members located at the same office in Malmö find it more comfortable to call the person in the next room using computer applications instead of walking into the next room. These colleagues can be defined as the followers in the team, where the leader is located at another office. Issues such as computer difficulty and structure of the meetings have been brought to the team leader's attention. Attending a meeting virtually without a set agenda with required preparations has proven to be a hazard. When discussing what the team members are missing from working in face-to-face interactive teams, the hang outs by the coffee machine was a common denominator.*

## 1.1 Background

There is not one perfect definition of leadership and no common consensus on the best possible way to create leadership (Bolden, 2004). Frederick Winslow Taylor stated in the early part of the 20th century, employers would get more out of their workers if the employees were to practice different parts of the production they were specialized within (Chambers, 1973). James MacGregor Burns introduced the term transforming leadership in 1978, saying transforming leadership is a process where leaders and followers are working together to reach the result of helping others advance to a higher level of both motivation and moral (Burns, 1978).

Today, leadership does not focus on the leader only, equally on the followers, supervisors, peers, work setting/context and not to mention culture, including a greater diverse representation of individuals from the entire spectrum of diversity. This has increased rapidly over the past 20 years, now including private, public, and not-for-profit organization districts (Avolio et al, 2009). Leadership has over the past 20 years become a central focus (Bolden, 2004). Further, leadership concepts bring a focus to the influence of one individual and the impact individuals have on others and the organization.

One of the things affecting modern leadership is digitalization. Likewise, since the world is going through a digitalization process, this changes processes in businesses (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). The development is fast, and in 2007 it became clear that 94 % of the world's information was stored digitally compared to only 21 years earlier when over 99 % of the information was analog. Considering the increased use of internet as DOMO (2017) presented, virtual teams have emerged by cause of collaborations within organizations due to a higher level of Advanced Information Technology (AIT) combined with possibilities created by increased usage of internet. Hambley et al. (2007) declares the importance of different skills required of virtual leaders in difference to when practicing face-to-face leadership. One of the most important things a virtual leader is required to do, is to provide a common goal with directions for the group, combined with a clear vision.

AIT can be described as numerous techniques and knowledge frames providing the opportunity for multiple participations in activities, by displaying data and knowledge through management, transmission and retrieval. This including email systems, knowledge management systems and

executive information systems (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Avolio et al., 2001). Further developed into more a digitized version, AIT is including self-service technologies, hub of devices, smart products and artificial intelligence making it possible for people to have applications in their smartphone, tablet or computer to use as ways to communicate (Bantau & Rayburn, 2016). Along with the increased practice of AIT comes the responsibilities leaders have to create a social structure to gain usage from when implementing AIT within the organization. AIT creates a variety of possibilities for creation and interpretation within the organization, consequently determines how the organization will use AIT, to what extent and how it will contribute to the overall performance (Avolio et al., 2001).

## 1.2 Purpose

The main purpose is to analyze how e-leadership is interpreted and experienced by the followers. The main purpose is then divided into two subsidiary purposes: **A**: to provide a theoretical framework to e-leadership, and **B**: to explore the applicability of the theoretical framework to the followers' experience of e-leadership.

## 1.3 Research Questions

- How could e-leadership be defined and analyzed?
- How do followers experience e-leadership?
- What factors in e-leadership are prerequisites to make followers content?

## 1.4 Problem Discussions

Today, the amount of organizations using e-leadership through virtual teams is increasing rapidly, some employees are only a part of virtual teams with limited face-to-face contact with colleagues (Ferrazzi, 2014). The perspective of this varies from everyone in the virtual team,

meaning the impact of digitalization and globalization has affected organization and teams in diverse ways. This provides global organizations with the possibility to create teams regardless of where the employees with the right potential is positioned, maximizing the employees' skills whether the team members are positioned at the same office, or even the same country. Nevertheless, for organization's to be able to fully use the potential of virtual teams, the area needs to be further researched.

The research today is mainly providing the leader's perspective. However, team satisfaction and team performance are positively related to each other in a virtual team context (Robert & You, 2018), making it meaningful to discuss e-leadership from the follower's perspective. Savolainen (2014) concluded in e-leadership the business goals are achieved through people via the use of digital communication, which changes the leader-follower relationship earlier studied. This can be analyzed not only through interviews but through observations and surveys in order to have a more in depth understanding of the leader-follower relationship in virtual teams.

This thesis will therefore explore the followers' perspective on e-leadership and working in virtual teams. By first providing a theoretical framework of how e-leadership is presented in academic literature today, a basis for the analysis will be present. This framework will later be evaluated based on empirical data from interviews on the followers' experience of e-leadership. If leaders know how their followers' experience e-leadership they have the fundamental knowledge to satisfy them, and as stated by Robert and You (2018), team satisfaction will lead to team performance. As mentioned, the followers' perspective is poorly researched and this thesis will therefore explore this area and uncover prerequisites for virtual teams. Consequently, the contribution will also be topics for further research.

## 1.5 Definitions

There is a certain amount of terms used in need to be properly defined, these terms being used throughout the thesis are complex terms with more than one definition found in research. Consequently, a presentation of the definitions appropriate for this study follows.

The amount of definitions to the term **leadership** can be counted to infinity, however, the chosen definition is: “Leadership is the behavior of an individual when he or she is directing the activities of a group toward a shared goal” (Kleppetø, 2017). Avolio et al (2001) define **e-leadership** as: “A social influence process mediated by AIT to introduce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behavior, and/or performance with individuals, groups and/or organizations.” (Avolio et al., 2001, p. 617). In some research, e-leadership and distance leadership are used interchangeably. E-leadership is, as defined by Avolio et al. (2001), leadership conducted via AIT and the team can be located in the same site or at different geographical place. On the other hand, **distance leadership** is leadership where the leader and the followers are geographically dispersed (Poser, 2016). A decision has been made to look at the two concepts e-leadership and distance leadership simultaneously, since they often occur together. Distance brings in a need for using AIT to lead and AIT facilitates geographically dispersed teams. Furthermore, ‘geographically dispersed’ comprises both Swedish and international teams in this thesis.

Baker (2007) claimed the traditional view of a **follower** is a passive subordinate, led by a Great Man. This has developed to the view of a more participative and effective follower. Because of the more contemporary view of a follower, it is important to study followers and leaders in relation to each other. Further on, specified by Gibson et al. (2009), a **team** is a group of individuals, two or more, with a collective responsibility to achieve set goals. This is further discussed by Katzenbach and Smith (2003) saying the individuals are well aware of the set goals and what is required to reach the set goals, in line with being fully committed to the purpose of the team. **Virtual teams** are often geographically and culturally separated providing team challenges. Often, virtual teams are set-up for a limited period of time and a specific need (Zachary & Bader, 2003). Virtual teams are composed of team members who do not meet physically on a daily basis, relying on interactive technology to be able to work as a team (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003; Solomon, 2001), which consist of members from diverse nations, cultures, and different time zones (Avolio et al., 2003).

## 2 Theoretical Framework

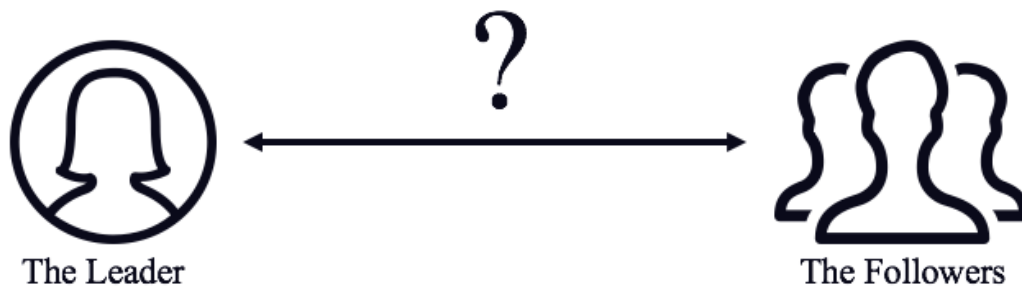
In this chapter, a focus will be on providing a theoretical description to the presented research questions. A first version of the theoretical framework is presented, furthermore a view on leadership and e-leadership, following is the view on teams with more specified on virtual teams. Continuously, based on the literature review of leadership and teams, a second version of a theoretical framework will be presented, including communication and trust. Further on, communication and trust will be analyzed and discussed, both from a leadership and followership perspective. Communication and trust were chosen as prerequisites for the leader-follower relationship in a virtual context based on the literature review, and the foundation for this will be presented more in detail in Chapter 2.4.

### 2.1 Preliminary Version of Theoretical Framework

As a result of analyzing research and theories, a theoretical framework was conducted for this study (see Figure 1). Worth knowing is, Figure 1 is a first version of the theoretical framework, which will be more developed into a final version further on in Chapter 2. Leaders and teams (including followers) are discussed and analyzed together in literature (Avolio et al., 2009; Avolio & Kahai, 2003; Cole et al., 2009; Ferrazzi, 2014). From the definitions of leadership, followership and teams these concepts relate to each other, and exist together. In e-leadership the business goals are achieved through people via the use of digital communication, which changes the leader-follower relationship earlier studied (Savolainen, 2014). This is the foundation for the preliminary framework, which displays the leader and followers relate to each other and their relationship is based on some prerequisites (the question mark). The purpose of the literature analysis is to find out how they interact in a virtual context, i.e. replacing the question mark in the model with important prerequisites for e-leadership.

The two pursuing chapters, Chapter 2.2 The Leader and Chapter 2.3 The Team has subcategories to further narrow down the discussion to e-leadership and virtual teams. The

purpose of Chapter 2.2 and 2.3 is to clearly describe the intention of leadership and e-leadership, following with the intentions of teams along with virtual teams.



*Figure 1 - Theoretical framework basis*

## 2.2 The Leader

In Chapter 2.2 The Leader, a description of the intention of leadership will be followed by a discussion on e-leadership. Worth noting is, from the perspective on leadership used in this study, leaders are someone with a formal authority within an organization. This perspective includes e-leaders as well.

### 2.2.1 The Intention of Leadership

First and foremost, there is an ongoing discussion among researchers whether leadership and management are the same or different (Mintzberg, 2009; Kotter, 1990.). In this thesis, leaders are people with an assigned leadership position, i.e. a formal authority from having a specific position in an organization This was necessary since it was a controllable variable for the chosen method, as opposed to actual behavior in the workplace. Moreover, the definitions of leadership are countless. However, a definition of leadership applicable to this study is: “Leadership is the behavior of an individual when he or she is directing the activities of a group toward a shared

goal” (Kleppesø, 2017). This definition is broad and stems from the relation between the leader and the followers (the team), a view shared with the purpose of this thesis. Bolden (2004) states that some definitions view leadership as a trait or a skill of an individual, whilst some, like the one chosen for this thesis, view leadership as a process of social influence.

Cole et al. (2009) says personal development through support and coaching can lead to followers being more encouraged to engage and perform, providing trust to the followers’ knowledge and performance within the organization by feedback, helping the followers to reach their highest level of potential. Bass (1985) mentioned two ways to encourage their followers, by fostering individual growth and the development each team member can do as an individual. This followed by actively working towards a stronger relationship between the individual team member and the team the individual belongs to.

### 2.2.2 E-Leadership

In research, e-leadership is said to have the same goal as physical, interactive leadership. The differences instead lie in how the goals are implemented. The main difference between traditional leadership and e-leadership is the fact that e-leadership is created in a situation where teamwork is intervened by information technology (Avolio et al., 2003).

When asking Avolio et al. (2003), the purpose of e-leadership is to magnify the relationships between members of the organization, this defined by the set organizational structure. Earlier researchers have found e-leadership requiring a different set of skills than face-to-face leadership (Criswell & Martin, 2007). In his literature review DasGupta (2011) found the following new skill requirements on leaders in a virtual context: stronger written communication skills, strong social networking skills, a global, multicultural mindset, greater sensitivity towards followers’ state of mind, and a 24x7 orientation. Those skills are supposed to mitigate the risks and utilize the opportunities information and communication technology (ICT) provides for organizations, this displayed in Table 1. Whilst ICT serves as a tool for operational planning and similar instrumental aspects of leadership, it is hard to fully utilize the more abstract parts of leadership such as strategic planning, inspiring, and goal setting. At the same time, those parts are perceived as important by the followers (Van Wart, Roman & Pierce, 2016).



*Table 1 - Changes and opportunities for e-leaders and virtual teams (DasGupta, 2011)*

<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
Instant communication with all employees	Effective communication via electronic medium
Using talents in geographically dispersed areas	Building trust without seeing each other
Putting together richer multi-functional teams	Creating electronic 'presence'
Better customer satisfaction via 24x7 service	Inspiring team members
Ability to cut costs	Mentoring employees
Better knowledge management	Monitoring and controlling social loafing
	Preventing lack of technical competence to affect performance
	Maintaining work-life balance in a 24x7 environment

In e-leadership environments, the interaction between leaders and followers is short and fragmented, making it difficult for the leader to get a holistic view of the work situation of the follower. Therefore, trust is vital since trusting followers are more likely to speak up about issues both related to work and private life. When face-to-face meetings are rare, it becomes more crucial to share information to maintain mutual trust. (Savolainen, 2014). In an e-leadership context trust needs to be achieved quickly, which contradicts the traditional view of trust as something developed over time (Savolainen, 2014; Avolio & Kahai, 2003). Moreover, Savolainen (2014) found e-leaders thought regular face-to-face meetings was crucial for building trust in new leader-follower relationships. Sporadic contact via ICT might give the follower the perception their opinion or idea is less crucial, since it is harder to know how the message was received, or if it was received at all, in a virtual context than in face-to-face

communication (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). From these literature findings, it is concluded trust is vital in a virtual context.

According to Cascio and Shurygailo (2003) it is essential for e-leaders to establish norms and ground rules in the early stage of the virtual team, to prevent lack of control and encourage the team members. A stated challenge of leadership is the increased geographic distance, in despite of that, there is no defined leadership style being the perfect one applicable for e-leadership. Essential for the e-leader is to properly and thoroughly analyze the influence the e-leaders' leadership style has on the virtual team members, and adjust from there.

The constant stream of new information enhanced by technology shifts the command system. While traditional leadership is concerned with giving direct instructions, e-leadership is depending on followers' ability to make their own decisions in line with the intention of the leader (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). The introduction of more information due to technology have made less information exclusive for leaders and more common knowledge. Leaders therefore need to be able to quickly justify their decisions towards followers (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). Along with the increased usage of technology, the potential for virtual work evolved as well, including employees and team members started to give up the formal connection to the organization they worked in. As a result of the increased usage of technology, communication is no longer limited to face-to-face conversations or hand-written messages, emails, phone calls and communication over internet have slim to none limitations, making it less critical where the team members physical location is. Consequently, virtual teams using e-leadership to function is now a normal aspect in organizations (Johns & Gratton, 2013).

Moreover, well performed e-leadership is obtained when e-leaders turn the challenges into opportunities by adapting their leadership style to the new, virtual context and choosing the right ICT for the task (Lilian, 2014). In contrast, Avolio and Kahai (2003) are confident e-leaders are able to perform in the same way as traditional leaders. To increase team members' ability to identify themselves within the virtual team, the virtual leader must work towards strengthening individuals value to others in relations to performance appreciation (Kark & Shamir, 2002). Weisband (2008) conducted an analysis, proving the more promising leadership styles are direct and goal-driven.

## 2.3 The Team

In Chapter 2.3, teams and team members are the keys. Important knowledge about what differs a face-to-face interactive team from a team virtually interactive, further how to maximize the virtual team performance will be discussed. Worth noting is teams are accordingly a group of individuals with a leader and followers. The team can be seen from a perspective where the team followers does not exist without a leader and vice versa, a perspective focused on in this study.

### 2.3.1 The Intention of Teams

As previously defined, Gibson et al. (2009) defines team consistent of a specified group of individuals, two or more, with a collective responsibility to achieve set goals. What frames a team as well as the definition to what a team is can be counted to infinity, including the numerous definitions similar to one another. The purpose of teams diversifies depending on the organization the team belongs to, along with the situation. However, a common reason why organizations create teams is a proven need for a group of individuals to create a diverse way of working including high quality decision-making and flexibility. Cross-functional teams can be described as a group of individuals from diverse work areas within the same organization creating a team for a certain reason, this as an example to solve a single problem evolving the different work areas or on a project basis.

### 2.3.2 Virtual Teams

As defined by Zaccaro and Bader (2003), virtual teams are often geographically and culturally separated which provides challenges. Another feature of virtual teams is they are often set-up for a limited period of time. Virtual teams predominantly rely on IT as a main way for communication in a flexible structured environment, including tasks with the capability to be performed and discussed virtually (Powell et al., 2004). To lack technical knowledge as a team member of a virtual team has proven to be a negative effect on the team member's individual performance (Kayworth & Leidner, 2000).

Along with the continuous confidence in using virtual communication at the majority of time, effectiveness is something researchers find challenging to reach when there is a lack of face-to-face interaction between the virtual team members (Powell et al., 2004). Regardless if it is a team project performed through virtual connection or physical connection, clear ownership must exist at all levels all through the project (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). Further, an interesting statement by Mansour-Cole (2001) is virtual teams should take-off in individual responsibility rather than group thinking. Altogether, this means team identification and communication of the shared goal, the boundaries, and the purpose of the team is essential.

Meetings are the essence of virtual teams, moreover effective meetings provide more informal communication to the virtual team members. In comparison of virtual teams and physical interactive teams, Cascio and Shurygailo (2003) describes scheduling meetings for virtual teams a more difficult process than it is for teams positioned on the same location, thus more time consuming. When the need for discussing important documents, check-ups and diverse presentations is high, the time distributed for these topics to discuss is necessary. To provide the time to prepare for the meeting is a technique in order to have more effective virtual meetings (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). By conducting meetings over video-conferences, facial expressions and body language are visual to every participant in the meeting, proven to have a significant meaning throughout (Neeley, 2018).

Essential for virtual teams is the importance of the leaders detailed project planning, including four issues mentioned by Cascio & Shurygailo (2003) being coordination requirements, resource constraints, accountability for progress, and the mapping of task boundaries to team boundaries (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003, p. 366). This coupled with the importance of team building exercises and/or the team meeting face-to-face during the early stages of the team life cycle. Generally, real time collaboration is rare in a virtual team setting as opposed to traditional teamwork. Even though virtual teams can be separated geographically, team members can still and are still expected to work together as if they were located in the same office, let alone collaborate accordingly. For this to work, team building exercises is essential (Powell et al., 2004).

Further on, how to effectively communicate, together with other training found appropriate for the specific team and requirements has proven to have a positive outcome. Moreover, team satisfaction and team performance are positively related to each other in a virtual team context

(Robert & You, 2018). This meaning if the followers are satisfied their performance level will also increase. Further on, in the research of Savolainen (2014), it was stated how leaders perceived being reachable was expected from their team, which then implies they can only manage a reasonable amount of followers to fulfill this expectation.

## 2.4 Final Version of Theoretical Framework

From the literature review on leadership, e-leadership, teams and virtual teams it was discovered that communication and trust are two common prerequisites for working in virtual contexts, mentioned by multiple researchers (Avolio et al., 2001; Avolio & Kahai, 2003; Powell et al., 2004; Savolainen, 2014). Moreover, communication and trust are the two factors tying leaders and followers together. What is crucial regarding this relation in a virtual context is digitalization. This since digitalization makes the virtual team possible in the first place. Further on, as technology develops, the possibilities and limitations of virtual teams might change. Concluded, trust and communication are from the literature review determined to be the two factors affecting the leader-follower relationship, and therefore studied further in this thesis on followers' experience of e-leadership. The developed theoretical framework can be seen in Figure 2. The theoretical framework is defined with the aim to structure and ease understanding for the literature along with empirical data in this study. With the model presented, the aim is to show with not only words but also visually, the connection between the leader and the followers in a virtual context. The awareness of the connection between leader and team has existed for a long time, however the impact digitalization has had is vital to point out.



Figure 2 - Final version of Theoretical framework

How the leader relates to the follower and the team in terms of communication and trust is as previously outlined influenced by digitalization, and since digitalization is what separates traditional teamwork and work in virtual teams, communication and trust are the two aspects of focus in this thesis. Cascio and Shurygailo (2003) says virtual teamwork is simplified as a result of technology, and trust is strengthened through shared responsibilities and working towards a common goal. More on how trust and communication between followers and leaders are discussed in academic literature is presented below and in Chapter 2.5 Communication and Chapter 2.6 Trust.

Communication is determined a prerequisite since it is the main condition different between traditional teams and virtual teams. The most common way of communicating is no longer face-to-face but via IT solutions. From the leader's point of view, Mintzberg (2009) claims managers' oral communication is about 60 and 90 % of the work so of course it is a crucial aspect to look into when the workplace changes due to digitalization. Trust is chosen for similar reasons. When the team is not meeting physically, they need to trust each other on doing what was agreed upon. Additionally, Savolainen (2014) concluded trust was more important in e-leadership than traditional leadership. Further, in research made by Mackenzie (2010), it was revealed 88 % of the managers of virtual teams thought their employees trusted them but only 46 % of the employees said they had a trusting relationship with their managers. These two findings together make it interesting to find out how followers perceive trust in virtual leader-follower relationships. Moreover, Zaccaro and Bader (2003) says virtual teams are often created for a short period of time, making it essential to quickly build up trust. This is contradicting to the traditional view on trust building as a time-consuming process (Savolainen, 2014; Avolio & Kahai, 2003). Altogether, the conditions for the relationship factors communication and trust are significantly different in a virtual context compared to a face-to-face context. This makes it interesting to look into when evaluating followers' experience of e-leadership.

The following challenges of e-leadership was determined by Dasgupta (2011): Effective communication via electronic medium, Building trust without seeing each other, Creating electronic 'presence', Inspiring team members, Mentoring employees, Monitoring and controlling social loafing, Preventing lack of technical competence to affect performance, Maintaining work-life balance in a 24x7 environment. A closer look into the two first challenges was decided upon, related to communication and trust, since those two were the ones directly linked to the leader-follower relationship. Even though the rest of the challenges are

linked to the follower as well, they are more angled towards task and performance and therefore would have required another research approach to be able to fully understand (e.g. performance is not something you experience, it is a fact). Moreover, proven by Powell et al. (2004), is the requirement for good communication when working in virtual teams, with the intention of every team member understanding the norms, goals, structure and values properly. Further mentioned is the communication is beneficial to a team regardless of in what way, provided a common language along with understanding is determined. Avolio and Kahai (2003) recommends leaders of virtual teams should preferably promote communication in the team, hence including shared learning in the team. Moreover, establishing trust can be performed through setting expectations, further along to reach the set goals or establish more than the set goals frequently. When discussing trust, to foster an environment with trust amongst other things, is essential during the early stages of the virtual team. Additionally, trust is proven to be a component encouraging team effectiveness (Powell et al., 2004).

## 2.5 Communication

Members in virtual teams communicate through AIT, including synchronous, asynchronous, one-to-one communication alternatively one-to-many (Avolio et al., 2001). Synchronous communication is in the same time, such as phone calls, and asynchronous is delayed communication as in emails. The expectations existing on the virtual team members is the successful outcome of common tasks should be on every team members' responsibility. All parties are required to be involved at some level, demanding specific plans and schedules need to be communicated. To coordinate tasks, check-up meetings and plan future meetings, email is commonly used, together with electronic boards and internal websites (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003).

As previously mentioned, Mintzberg (2009) claims managers' oral communication is about 60 and 90 % of the work. Further, managers seem to attend to soft information, where this type of information comes from gossip, hearsays and speculations. This type of information might be lost when the barriers for communication increases due to the virtual nature of the team. Comparing formal reports and informal conversations, the face-to-face or over phone conversations include tone of voice and instant interactions. This information is therefore richer than written communication. This is vital in an e-leadership context since first, the informal

information might be lost due to barriers to small talk over ICT, and second, if emails and other written communication forms such as chat forums are used there will still be a lack of non-verbal interaction. Stated by Cascio and Shurygailo (2003), regardless of team members working virtually, not all communication is obligatory to be executed in written form. Verbal communication is still an effective way when working virtually, once the team members has created a clear structure of meetings to furthermore decrease the email communication. To use the way of communication in line with the purpose of the communication is highly appropriate, as such, a phone conversation is not always the best option for virtual meetings when the need for visual content is high.

Stated by Cascio & Shurygailo (2003) is the importance of not assuming a certain task will be identically interpreted based on geographical or team limitations, moreover the way of communicating. Diversity in how to provide feedback to one another and time efficiency is common in multicultural teams (Molinsky & Gundling, 2016). A common challenge for global teams having employees spread all over the world, perhaps only in daily contact with each other by email as a consequence of different time zones, is creating trust (Neeley, 2018). In this manner, the barriers for communication also becomes barriers for trust building. Specifying in his article, Watkins (2013) points out the importance to use clear and disciplined ways of communicating in the team, this along with actively listening, talking clearly and limit side conversations during virtual meetings. Proven by Ferrazzi (2014) successful virtual teams consist of team members with certain characteristics, namely high level of emotional intelligence, good skills in communication as well as the potential to work efficiently independent.

## 2.6 Trust

Trust in relation to virtual teams is well researched. In the start-up phase of a virtual team, the importance of meeting face-to-face to connect yet build relationship and trust is crucial for the virtual team in the future, this to not only get to know each other better on a professional level but on a personal level as well (Cornwell, 2016; Poser, 2016; Tobak, 2014; Watkins, 2013).



Schein (2010) defines the relevance of why every group should learn how to become a group, regardless of virtual or not, coupled with clear roles identified. Avolio et al. (2003) states the importance of virtual teams spending the time in the beginning of the project identifying who the team members in their team are, individual and team expectations and nonetheless how each and every team member want to work in the team. This resulting in higher performance levels months after these tasks has been performed. Further, Powell et al (2004) claims as of 2004 virtual team research have not paid attention to whether the traditional team view is useful in a virtual context. This is problematic since virtual teams might not collaborate or ‘work together’ in the same way as traditional teams do and therefore face different challenges. When virtual team members meet during introductions or kickoffs, the team manager can support swift trust in an early stage, occasionally through describing rules in need of continual communication to not only foster trust, but reduce risk of uncertainty as well (Neeley, 2018). Mentioned by the author is also: “People decide to trust one another immediately until proven otherwise - often because they have no other choice” (Neeley, 2018).

Passable trust is when an individual feels enough trust to another individual to share information with the individual and it can exist as a permanent state, minus the fact where it is expected to go more in depth or develop any further (Leonardi & Neeley, 2017). For teams stretched all over the world using electronic communication as a majority of their communication, passable trust is notably beneficial (Neeley, 2018). Open dialogue foster trust by showing respect and empathy along with clear guidelines are facts essential for effective virtual meetings, this also requiring clear leadership (Ferrazzi, 2014).

Affecting the team dynamics, is the process of building an efficient team with trust capabilities takes time (Tuckman, 1965). Moreover, traditional team building activities are not sufficient to do virtually (Mansour-Cole, 2001). Despite the type of group of individuals it is, trust is usually seen as a challenging thing, furthermore in multicultural teams it can be more challenging for different reasons (Molinsky & Gundling, 2016). At the same time, motivation for learning how to function as a team might be affected by having a limited period of time together. On the other hand, virtual teams can benefit from the geographical dispersion as well. Not being constrained to physical and face-to-face meetings allows choosing human capital from a bigger group (Zaccaro & Bader, 2003).

## 2.7 Summary of Theoretical Framework

To summarize Chapter 2, a description of the leader and the followers in a team view has been presented, following the relation between them managed by two essential prerequisites found for this study, communication and trust. The relation between the leader and the followers can be interpreted by different prerequisites, depending on which area the focus is on, however communication and trust was found as two common denominators for the leader-follower relationship when researching this area. Mentioned by Avolio and Kahai (2003) is how leaders should preferably promote communication and trust within virtual teams, meaning it can lead to sharing learnings within the team. The relation between the leader and the follower in this study is focused on virtual teams. This including e-leadership, a term created in a situation where the work is intervened by information technology, with the aim to magnify the relationship between the members within an organization (Avolio et al., 2003). Moreover, virtual teams (the followers) are often geographically and culturally spread, providing challenges for the team (Zaccaro & Bader, 2003), along with the virtual team relying on IT as a main way for communication (Powell et al., 2004).

Further highlighted by Cascio and Shurygailo (2003) saying virtual teamwork is an outcome of technology, along with communication being perceived through phone meetings and video-conferences and trust by sharing responsibilities by working together towards a common goal. On the topic for trust, traditional team building activities are not sufficient to do virtually (Mansour-Cole, 2001), yet to build relationship and trust is crucial for the virtual team in the future, this to not only get to know each other better on a professional level but on a personal level as well (Cornwell, 2016; Poser, 2016; Tobak, 2014; Watkins, 2013). Hence, communication and trust are two factors tying leaders and followers in a virtual team together, along with a great impact of digitalization as well with the aim to direct, support and structure the process within the virtual team. This view of the leader-follower relationship in a virtual context can be seen in the final theoretical framework, displayed again in Figure 3.



*Figure 3 - Final version of Theoretical framework*

# 3 Methodology

Considering the main purpose of this thesis – to analyze how e-leadership is interpreted and experienced by followers – a decision was made to structure it in subsidiary purposes: to provide a theoretical framework to e-leadership and to explore the applicability of the theoretical framework on empirical data. This in reason of linking the two subsidiary purposes together to properly analyze how e-leadership is interpreted and experienced by followers.

For this study, a hypothetico-deductive method has been taken into consideration (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). A broad problem area was identified to further on be narrowed down. When defining the problem, a gap in existing research was identified, followed with the analysis of how this study can contribute to minimizing the gap. Furthermore, a theoretical framework was developed based on research and analysis done, along with determining measures how the wished conclusion of this study would be. Collecting data by analyzing research articles, books and academic research was accomplished, when collecting data, a broad aspect was taken into consideration in regards to not narrowing anything essential down. During the analysis phase, a reassurance to if the data is relevant was made continuously. Lastly, an interpretation of the data has been done, this including analysis regarding if the data collected along with the empirical data was of relevance to the defined hypothesis.

## 3.1 Choice of Theory

When evaluating previous research within leadership and e-leadership, a reassurance of the accuracy of the data has been developed. As previously stated, multiple researches within e-leadership has been conducted for a specific target group, making those researches essential to analyze as well, this to define how the term e-leadership was used and how their data has been collected. Necessary to understand is the purpose of the conducted study and how the purpose will affect the data collected (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

To execute research, a selection of books, academic journals and reports has been taken into consideration. Stated by Sekaran and Bougie (2016) academic journals and books are most useful sources for information in general, further most reliable as well. As a result of using books, a more accurate view of the topic will be presented, in relations to an academic journal. Worth considering is books are more difficult to find up-to-date than academic journals, with a summary of previous researches combined with the authors perspective of the topic. However, academic journals are usually research within a specific area with a targeted group, thus not very broad in the research field. To not close any doors when researching literature, a combination of information resources has been used to create a broad literature review. Some sources are being used in multiple articles in different ways, consequently the articles have been used in from a general perspective for this study.

As said, a broad area was researched in order to narrow the research down further on, a suggested method by Sekaran and Bougie (2016). By starting off with a broad area of research, a better understanding of the problem area was received, yet an interesting gap in previous research was found: the followers' perspective. Discovered after reading numerous articles, was the majority viewed the leaders' perspective on e-leadership. Further existing in previous research is the angle towards a specific group, this found to be within health care and/or a specific country (Cowan, 2014; DeRosa et al., 2004; Van Wart et al, 2017; Takavarasha et al, 2012). Thereupon, a decision to focus on the study on e-leadership from a followers' perspective was made, since slim research has been found within e-leadership with this target.

The relation between the leader and the followers is described in the theoretical framework in both versions. This relation is affected by communication and trust, seen as two prerequisites for this relation. The theoretical framework is a broad perception of the relation between the leader and the follower in the first version, further in the second version more narrowed down to communication and trust having a great impact on the relation. In reason of creating the theoretical framework as a frame for the used literature and analysis, the framework can be viewed as a reflection of the theory used.

## 3.2 Empirical Data

### 3.2.1 Selection of Respondents

The perfect amount of people to interview for this thesis was not defined, based on not having a specific target group such as gender, age, nationality or employment further wanting to keep going until the respondents no longer provided new insights rather than having a specified number. In the end, twelve people have participated in the study, altogether four team leaders and eight followers. In total, the respondents came from nine different organizations, as three of the respondents worked in the same organization. As a method to reach out to more people with a diverse experience and information, a post on LinkedIn was published to see if some potential respondents could be found, the same on Facebook. On Facebook a post was published on our private Facebook profiles and in a group called “Teknikkvinnor”. Teknikkvinnor is a group with almost 24 000 members (as of May 2018), all women working or studying within tech, or wanting to do so. By reaching out to people on social media, nine people out of the total twelve interviewed were found on LinkedIn and Facebook. The three respondents not found on social media was found through private connections. Out of the twelve interviews, one was held in English, the rest in Swedish. To reach the highest level of relevance of data and information, the people being interviewed has all currently been working in virtual teams.

The respondents are distributed over a wide scope of age, with respondents in the age of 23 years and older. Additionally, the age of the respondents is something believed to have an impact on the answers and perspective to e-leadership and virtual teams, given the fast development of technology and younger people are generally more at ease using it. The individuals interviewed have been working in virtual teams for different time ranges. Some individuals had only been working in virtual teams for a few weeks while some had been working in their virtual team for many years. This probably affects their experience, especially for those who never experienced working in non-virtual teams at a professional level. Further on, the people interviewed with short time experience in their current team, have not experienced as many or profound situations. Nevertheless, the broad range in terms of length of experience among the respondents provided a comprehensive foundation in this aspect.

Out of twelve individuals, seven of these were women and five were men. Comparatively out of the followers interviewed, two were men along with the interviewed leaders where three out

of four were men. The distribution between men and women participating in this study is another aspect affecting the conclusion of the empirical data. The reason for poor gender distribution is the chosen ways to contact people; most respondents were from the Facebook group “Teknikkvinnor”. Correspondingly, a majority of the respondents were women working in tech based organizations. Further on, due to our own educational and professional background, we had connections in the tech industry. This of course gives the study some limitations and less generalizability. When conducting interviews, there were no attention given to if the respondents worked at startup organizations, small-medium enterprises or multinational enterprises. This based on the fact there were no believes in the type of organization could affect the outcome of the interviews, along with finding it irrelevant and lower quality than the other questions being asked. For this study, the organizational prospect was not as interesting as the employees’ thoughts and experience, therefore the type of organization the respondent worked in seemed out of scope for this study.

### 3.2.2 Empirical Collection

When gathering data from respondents, the knowledge whether the respondent is a leader or follower in the virtual team has been essential. Consequently, the interview questions have differed to some extent between the followers’ perspective and the leaders’ perspective. This resulted in the questions for the followers discussing the leaders’ performance and actions, in difference to the questions asked to the leaders which was more self-evaluating. Significant according to us was to collect a perspective from the leaders and not only the followers, in favor of comparing to the literatures view on leaders in virtual teams. This was also done to compare the leaders’ perspective on performance and actions contrary to the followers’ perspective on it. Related to this, the data collected include one example of leader and followers’ working in the same team (one organization; one leader and two followers). Besides this, the respondents work in different organizations. As discussed above, we chose to keep all interview answers for the analysis to broaden the scope of the research.

In total, 16 questions were created for the interviews (see Appendix A and B), all these based on significant prospects found in the literature. Topics such as trust, communication, motivation, goals and strategies were formulated as questions as a consequence to being brought up as prerequisites in several academic researches. During the interviews, follow-up questions

were asked if the respondent did not answer the question as precise as wanted. In retrospective, the questions asked could have been more precise to give responses more easy to compare. For the same reasons, a couple of the questions included multiple questions which gave a wide variety in answers due to different focuses. Yet, a vital purpose of this study is to get new and different perspectives of e-leadership, distance leadership and virtual teams. The fact that the respondents focused on different things is therefore a valuable result in itself since it provides what the followers think is important related to their working situation. For the same reason, at the end of the interview, the respondents were asked if they had anything more to add within the matter.

Worth mentioning is e-leadership to us might mean differently to other individuals and organizations. During interviews and observation, a broad definition to the terms e-leadership, virtual teams and distant leadership was maintained. This to not target the respondents' way of thinking about the term being used. Moreover, since e-leadership, distance leadership and virtual teams are a relatively new topics and the follower's perspective of the phenomenon are poorly studied, the research was kept as broad as possible given the time limitations to cover all possible interesting angles. This is one of the reasons why e-leadership and distance leadership is treated as the same phenomena. It is hard to distinguish how they are used in real life, since they often occur together.

### 3.2.3 Interviews

The interviews held was open. A number of questions were prepared beforehand (see Appendix A and B), yet it was not strictly followed and follow-up questions were allowed to enable more in-depth answers as well as a broad overview of the followers' experiences. The reason for this was to be able to analyze the theoretical framework and at the same time not limit the input from the interviews. An open interview can be defined as "a researcher and a respondent having a normal dialogue. The result of this is data in terms of "words, meanings and stories" (Jacobsen, 2002, p. 160). Open interviews are usually face-to-face meetings or via phone calls. In this case, Skype and telephone has been used as methods of conducting open interviews for all but two interviews which were held face-to-face. This in consideration of Skype and phone calls being a reliable source for high quality conversations over distance. On the other hand, conducting open interviews over phone calls or Skype has negative effects, in particular to not be able to see the body language i.e., when the respondent might feel uncomfortable talking



about some aspects, though this is something visible during a face-to-face interview and not something always notable through the tone of voice (Frey & Oishi, 1995; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). By not being able to see body language during phone interviews, the respondent might not understand the question properly thus answer the question not knowing the meaning of it (Jacobsen, 2002). According to Frey and Oishi (1995) interviews with a length of approximately 50 minutes can easily be successfully accomplished via Skype or a phone call, a time measure aimed to keep during interviews. This on account of after a certain amount of time and questions, the respondents' quality of answers might decrease.

The outline of the interview was presented before questions were asked, with the aim of making the respondent more comfortable. This coupled to enlightening the respondent the interview is anonymous, by ensuring the respondents confidentiality is protected, the willingness to reveal information can increase (Frey & Oishi, 1995; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). As suggested by Jacobsen (2002) and Sekaran and Bougie (2016) a normal dialogue was held to the greatest extent, meaning set questions existed to structure the conversation. Making sure the respondent was heard and valued during the interview, comments such as asking the respondent to develop further, give example and repeat sentences were said. This not only as strategies for making the respondent more comfortable when talking together with keeping the interest alive, yet making the conversation more friendly by attentively listening to the respondent. Data from twelve interviews were at length structured into notes answering the asked questions precisely. This to facilitate the analysis of the respondents' thoughts and answers. Further on, the data collected was analyzed from a perspective of the theoretical framework where the leader-follower relationship in a virtual context is the core.

When the opportunity has been given, the interviews has been recorded, this with approval from the respondent, combined with notes and comments made during the interviews for further data analysis. As indicated by Frey and Oishi (1995) and Sekaran and Bougie (2016), this prepared in advance to ask permission to the respondent in the beginning of the interview, in line with a presentation of the study and the authors of the study. To broaden our repertoire for conducting interviews, the first interview was seen as a training interview. For this interview, a set of broad questions was created with a hope of the informant would talk more outside of just the set questions. This interview is not included in the analysis, hence not part of the twelve interviews considered as the empirical data for this thesis.

### 3.3 Method of Analysis

To be able analyze the interviews, notes taken during the interviews were read several times to get an overview of the answers. After that, keywords were highlighted and at the third step the most influential keyword were summarized in the margin. From there, it was possible to see patterns and recurrent stories. The key findings were written down in a document to be able to analyze how frequently the respondents shared the same things. The most frequent patterns were analyzed together with the theoretical framework. Furthermore, special and unexpected stories were analyzed to be able to determine the value of them. A table presenting the team characteristics were also created to give a context to the keywords and the stories. When reading the interview notes, entire quotes from the person being interviewed could be taken into use to highlight thoughts and emotions from the individual.

### 3.4 Data Applicability

To summarize, this thesis provides a new perspective on the concepts e-leadership, distance leadership and virtual teams by focusing on the followers' experience. The study is qualitative with focus on interviews to test the theoretical concepts existing already. The most important limitation to consider is the narrow scope of respondents in terms of industry (mostly tech) and gender (mostly women). Nevertheless, the results of this study provides topics for future research as well as broadening the concepts of leadership and teams in a virtual context. From a leader's point of view, the results can be used to gain further insight in possible experiences and interpretations of their followers and by that, the leader will be able to adapt their leadership style to the virtual circumstances. On an organizational level, the results can be used to find possible adaptations and changes to fit the workplace to a digital world.

### 3.5 Suggestions for Methodological Improvements

If this study is to be done again, some methodological changes should be considered. First, the selection of respondents should be more diverse to give a more generalizable result, or it should be narrowed down to contain a homogenous group of people. An alternative approach would

be to either focus on women in tech organizations only, or to have a wider selection of respondents.

However, due to the qualitative approach of this study and the purpose to describe a new view on the topic e-leadership and distance leadership, the decision made was to collect answers from as many as possible to get a broader focus. On the contrary to the respondents being in tech industries, the difference in tasks was higher. The respondents worked in both line/continuous operations and projects and within different responsibilities within their organizations.

Moreover, the interview questions asked could have been more precise. Some questions included multiple questions, which gave a wide range of answers not always related to the intended topic. By asking one question at the time the answer received would have been more in depth and easier to compare to each other. Further on, the question “What is communication for you?” was not appreciated by the respondents, neither did it give us any useful input since most answers were more or less standardized and not an actual personal interpretation.

## 4 Empirical Data

This chapter presents interview data with a focus on team characteristics. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a basis for the analysis regarding the circumstances of the team, with the aim to clarify the different followers and leaders that have been interviewed for this study. Table 2 presents the data on the followers' teams and Table 3 presents the same data for the leaders. In total, the result of the twelve interviews are presented. The twelve followers and leaders together represents nine different organizations. Throughout this chapter and the next chapter (Chapter 5 Analysis) leaders are named L<sub>x</sub> and followers F<sub>x</sub>, where x are a code number to be able to distinguish the respondents. Worth knowing is the type of organizations, except for project/continuous and Swedish/European/Global, has not been taken into consideration in this analysis.

Further, in the tables, data on why and how the leaders and followers are working in virtual teams is presented. The reason for including video calls is this was a communication media not used by everyone, in contrast to phone calls, e-mail and other text based communication methods. Further, video calls are the richest media, in theory representing the same communication signals as face-to-face communication. Presenting whether they had recurrent face-to-face meetings is because this is a variable explaining the virtual nature of the team (are they completely virtual or do they have the opportunity to meet face-to-face on a regular basis?). Interestingly, none of the two variables seemed to correlate with any pattern found during the interviews. Additionally, whether the teams worked in continuous processes or projects seemed to be insignificant for the followers' experience. However, the research data is not big enough to draw statistical conclusions, only to provide suggestions for possible trends for further research.

Table 2 - The followers

<b>FOLLOWERS</b>	<b>Reason to work virtually</b>	<b>Swedish/European/Global</b>	<b>Project/Continuous</b>	<b>Using video calls</b>	<b>Recurrent face-to-face meetings</b>
<b>F1</b>	Project job, local resources, geographical distance	European	Project	Yes	Yes
<b>F2</b>	Geographical distance	Global	Continuous	No	No
<b>F3</b>	Geographical distance, other occupation	European	Continuous	Yes	No
<b>F4</b>	Geographical distance, other occupation	European	Project	Yes	No
<b>F5</b>	Geographical distance (merger and acquisition)	European	Project	No	Yes
<b>F6</b>	Geographical distance	Global	Continuous + Project	Yes	Yes
<b>F7</b>	Geographical distance	European	Project	Yes	Yes
<b>F8</b>	Geographical distance, local resources	Global	Project	No	Yes

Table 3 - The leaders

<b>LEADERS</b>	<b>Reason to work virtually</b>	<b>Swedish/European/Global</b>	<b>Project/Continuous</b>	<b>Using video calls</b>	<b>Recurrent face-to-face meetings</b>
<b>L1</b>	Geographical distance	Swedish	Continuous + Project	Yes	Yes

<b>L2</b>	Geographical distance, project job, local resources	Global	Project	Yes	No
<b>L3</b>	Geographical distance	Swedish	Project	No	Yes
<b>L4</b>	Project job, geographical distance	European	Project	Yes	No

## 4.1 Why Do You Work in Virtual Teams?

When speaking from the leader’s perspective, the reason the teams work virtually is because there is a need to have team members at different locations (L3, L4). Furthermore, one of the leader has a team in Asia because certain tasks has been outsourced to other teams within the organization (L2). One leader has a colleague in Australia as the person chose to move there and still keep the employment in Sweden (L1). In terms of the followers, similar reasons were mentioned. Despite the geographical distance, which was a common denominator for all teams, F1 and F8 said the reason also was to be able to use local resources and competences. F1 also said “this is the case when working in projects”. Correspondingly, six out of eight followers are currently working in projects, where one of the six worked both in projects and with continuous tasks virtually, in coupled with four out of four leaders are currently working in projects, where one of the leaders work with continuous tasks as well (see Table 2 and Table 3).

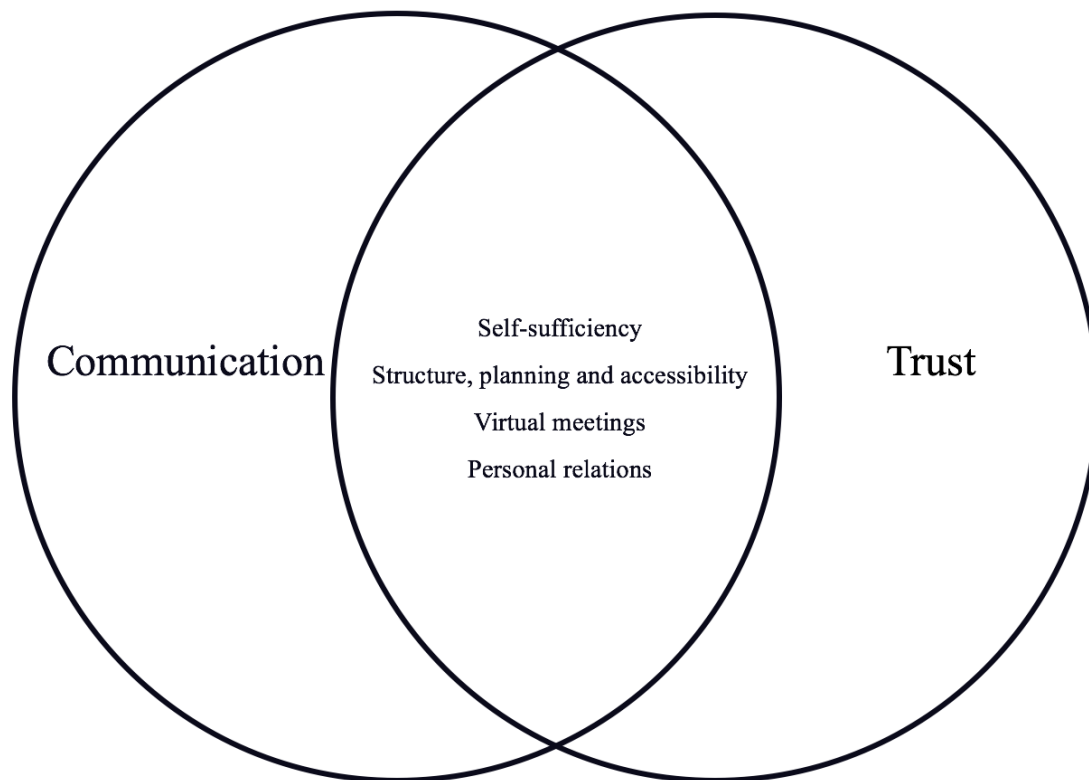
F3 and F4 had other occupations as well, which made it impossible for them to move to the working place whilst they also valued the possibility to plan their own time. Moreover, F5 said the reason for the geographical distance was merger and acquisitions. Having different teams spread out on different time zones can be a challenging aspect when working in the team, however, speaking from an organizational perspective, this provides the ability to cut costs when using talents in geographically dispersed areas (DasGupta, 2011).

# 5 Analysis

This chapter includes a presentation of the findings from the interviews. The stories told by the respondents and the patterns found from their answers are analyzed coupled to the theoretical framework to be able to answer our two last research questions: *How do followers experience e-leadership?* and *What factors in e-leadership are prerequisites to make followers content?*. In addition to the patterns, other interesting ideas and experiences mentioned in the interviews will be presented.

## 5.1 Patterns Found from Interviews

The patterns found from the interviews correlated to the themes found in literature, thus stories about trust and communication were frequent. On a more practical level, four topics related to trust and communication was identified: 1) self-sufficiency, 2) structure, planning and accessibility, 3) virtual meetings, and 4) personal relations. A model of the findings is presented in Figure 4.



*Figure 4 - Communication - Trust relationship from the followers' perspective*

### 5.1.1 Self-sufficiency

From the interviews conducted with the followers, it was evident a large part of the participants (six out of eight) thought they were able to work in virtual teams because they were self-sufficient and independent in their working style. Some of the people interviewed described the reason their team existed in the first place was to capture the competence of a small group of senior people within the organization, whilst others looked at their own working style only. Those who did not mention being self-sufficient or senior was important (F5 and F6) were relatively new to their roles and the related responsibility (six to nine months). This corresponds to Mansour-Cole's (2001) statements about the importance of individual responsibility in virtual teams. Moreover, on the topic of being self-sufficient, it was evident the followers (six out of eight, all but F5 and F8) experienced a trusting relationship with the leader was created when delivering result. To quote one of the followers (F3):



*My boss only sees the results I give him. The research I do is not visible and once I worked on a project for 20 hours and it appeared as no work at all for him. On the other hand, if I'm having a bad day, that is not visible either.*

However, self-sufficiency can be interpreted differently in different cultures. Molinsky and Grundling (2016) discuss the importance of understanding communication varies and how to provide feedback and time efficiency are two factors brought to discussion by the authors. One of the followers (F1) talked about for example Estonians did not want to adhere to mutual concerns, but rather do as they always have been doing. Additionally, mentioned by one of the leaders (L2) with a team in India, is the strong difference of hierarchy between Sweden and India, meaning different ways of working. As an example, for the team in India, the leader must give exact directions including KPIs (key performance indicators). If not, then nothing will be done. On the contrary, the leader said the Swedish culture is more about brainstorming together.

Another interesting observation about leadership stated by one of the respondents is: “The leadership my boss provides is more about guiding me than motivating me” (F4). In fact, similar observation was made by another follower (F3), who said the motivation provided by the leader was a high salary. Correspondingly, Van Wart, Roman and Pierce (2016) stated that in e-leadership it is hard to fully utilize the more abstracts parts of leadership such as strategic planning, inspiring, and goal setting even if those parts are perceived as important by the followers.

### 5.1.2 Structure, Planning and Accessibility

The most frequent story (referred to by all followers but F3) was about the need for structure and planning. This occurred both in relation to virtual meeting and for the work process. One of the people interviewed even explained the team had a weekly meeting for planning and prioritizing. It was the most important meeting of the week, stated the prioritized meeting no matter what other major things might happen at the same time. The reason for the need for planning and structure is the limited time and the barriers for communication. In those cases, there need to be a clear structure to discuss the right topics and use the time efficiently. Cascio and Shurygailo (2003) highlights the essence of coordinate tasks during virtual meetings, along with Watkins (2013) who discussed the importance of using clear and disciplined communication ways in order to reduce waste of time and increase efficiency.

Further mentioned by L4 is the leader misses the conversations in the hallways, additionally finding a challenge during virtual meetings when there is a difficulty managing personalities. To manage team members who talks a lot or sit quiet during face-to-face meetings is not seen as a problem, although this is seen as a challenge during virtual meetings when the team members does not use video meetings. To reduce the problem stated by L4, Kark and Shamir (2002) suggest team members must be able to identify themselves within the virtual team, this also requiring the leader working towards stronger individual values in the team. Brought up for discussion by F2 was the lack of face-to-face interaction along with the lack of fellowship when the team members do not meet twice a day in the coffee room. Further expressed by F4 was “you cannot be afraid to ask questions over Skype/chat when working with your team on distance, this is the new ‘by the coffee machine’.” This was also mentioned to have a negative impact on the commitment in the team. Mentioned by L3 during the interview, when discussing difference between virtual teams and face-to-face teams:

*The coffee room does not exist virtually, meaning you cannot catch each other by the coffee machine. This means you have to give feedback as quickly as possible and try to catch the ad hoc pieces.*

As a matter of fact, on the topic of barriers for communication, more than half of the interviewed followers experienced continuous communication was important and one follower mentioned explicitly the lack of possibilities for spontaneous communication (by the coffee machine or when bumping into each other in the hallway) prolonged the work processes, whilst a number of others (F4, F6, F8) mentioned the lack of direct feedback and dialogues hindered the workflow. This was also mentioned by another leader (L4). The leader missed the talks in the hallway and thought it was challenging not to be able to have spontaneous work meetings.

Correspondingly, the availability and perceived presence of the leader was a frequent topic. This was especially obvious among the followers working in global teams, whereof all said they missed the spontaneity. Moreover, they all experienced continuous communication to be important. On the contrary, only two out of five respectively one out of five of the followers working in European team thought the same. Once again, the number of respondents is too small to draw any general conclusions, but the finding is still an indication of a possible trend. This trend is likely to be explained with the struggle of time differences. For those working in

global teams, the time difference made it even more problematic since it meant they could only get in contact with their leader during a short part of the day.

For the Swedish and European teams, a concern was the mentioned lack of possibilities for quick questions and decisions. This becomes even more difficult in global organizations. This was experienced by F2, who found it inhibitory to only be able to reach the leader in China in the morning. Further, to have one team in India, one in Sweden and one in the United States has a negative impact on the team efficiency according to L2, due to different work hours minimizing the hours all locations can work together. Expressed by the leader (L2) is a lot of communication is handled through email when time difference is challenging, this since the person receiving the email will see it the first thing next day. During the interview, F2 said digital communication within the organization was done without clear guidelines, this meaning no clear directions for how to write emails to colleagues and who should be included in the email conversation. This resulting in a lot of unnecessary information.

When discussing virtual teams with leaders who have their team in Sweden, time zones are apparently not mentioned. However, accessibility is mentioned, as discussed above. Creating trust without seeing each other in addition to being present virtually are challenges found by DasGupta (2011). This was mentioned by F1, who appreciated that the boss always prioritized the team members and valued being accessible. Further F1 thought this leader was more successful and got a more engaged team, than to than another leader who waited until the team members started a dialogue. This is in line with the findings of Savolainen (2014) saying leaders perceived being reachable was expected from the followers.

### 5.1.3 Virtual Meetings

As for the virtual meetings, the need for a distinct purpose and a clear agenda with time slots was mentioned to be key by the followers (seven out of eight). Follow-ups and monitoring was seen as appropriate topics for the virtual meetings, whilst long-term planning was by some people experienced as best done face-to-face. Similarly, a common denominator all the leaders have when discussing efficient virtual meetings is to have a set agenda, this to make sure every participant in the meeting have knowledge of what the meeting will contain. Expressed by F2, is the positive impact an agenda has on meetings, regardless of it is a virtual meeting or face-to-face meeting. Further on, a clear structure and enough time is the essence of an efficient

virtual meeting. F6 said one reason for efficiency being key in virtual meetings is the limited time available for communication and the lack of possibilities to ask quick questions. To use PowerPoint as a tool for effective meetings is brought to our attention as well (L3, L1) along with excel files (F2) for follow-ups. This strengthened by Poser (2016), Schein (2010) and Cascio and Shurygailo (2003), all discussing the importance of structure and planning for successful virtual meetings. Structure during meetings is more crucial than a specific way to lead virtually, according to L1.

Moreover, the followers experienced engagement as a difficulty. Some followers explicitly said they knew their teammates were doing other things, such as answering emails, while having the meeting. Others said it was difficult because you never knew under which circumstance the other people had the meeting; if they were at home in their pajamas, in the car on their way to the next meeting or in a quiet room at work. Some followers expressed due to the circumstances of virtual meetings, it was hard to keep up the level of engagement in the team. On the interview question regarding how they managed to have efficient virtual meetings, one of the followers (F1) said:

*Maybe we do not work efficiently... Physical meetings are easier, it is easier to have engaging discussions there. We have a lot of Skype meetings and I know that people are doing other stuff during those meetings. If there is a video, you can at least see if people are focused.*

When communicating, the leaders interviewed have different ways they prefer. Skype and emails are common denominators when discussing ways of communication, not always including video meetings. In fact, five out of eight followers used video calls and three out of four leaders, along with phone meetings are preferred (see Table 2 and Table 3). A reason for this mentioned in several interviews was, besides tone of voice, people tend to avoid answering questions in emails, either on purpose or accidentally. Distractions such as multitasking during virtual meetings to increase personal efficiency will always be there, however, the participants in the virtual meetings must trust each other concerning participation and encouragement during the meetings. A strategy mentioned by F1, which was successfully use by the follower's leader, is for the leader of the meeting to actively ask questions to the participants, in order to include them in the discussion. Discussing virtually can also lead to not fully using the resources there are, this easily happens when the discussion is not structured in an optimal way. When difficulties in discussing occur, it is essential to make sure everyone has understood what has

been discussed during meetings. DasGupta (2011) mentions effective communication virtually as a general challenge for virtual teams, further highlighted by Mintzberg (2009) discussing the importance of informal conversations such as meeting physically or communicating via telephone to hear tone of voice.

#### 5.1.4 Personal Relations

To avoid the uncertainty, Poser (2016) mentions the importance of face-to-face interaction during the start-up phase of the team. This to create a common ground with shared goals, a common language to communicate in as well as to create an understanding for the norms, structure and values in a proper way (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). By creating a common ground based on those factors, the ease for efficient work will increase. The followers interviewed highlighted both the need to have a personal relationship before starting to work virtually and long-term goals should be set in a face-to-face meeting.

Mentioned by one of the leaders (L3), is the combination of meetings and team building when the team have face-to-face meetings once every two months. This with the aim to have group discussions and improve processes along with working towards a stronger team with high efficiency and trust. Five out of eight followers had recurrent face-to-face meetings, contrary to two out of four leaders (see Table 2 and Table 3). Furthermore, one of the followers (F1) said virtual projects usually started with face-to-face meetings to make sure all team members were committed to the goals, time plans and deliveries of the project. This is supported by the findings of Savolainen (2014), saying e-leaders thought regular face-to-face meetings was crucial for building trust in new leader-follower relationships.

The followers expressed they missed the personal contact with the team and the leader. One follower (F8) expressed the barriers to say "I'm not feeling well" was higher, due to the formal communication style when writing as opposed to talking face-to-face. Further, they mentioned things like not being able to celebrate a good result with a lunch out or small talk when having the morning coffee. For some people, this was a problem even though they had other colleagues at the same site; they explicitly missed spending time with the people in their team. On the other hand, two of the followers (F6 and F4) said it was important to do small talking and similar in virtual meetings as well. Others (F8) saw the lack of personal contact as something harming the team, yet skipping the small talk made the meetings more efficient. Essential for the level of

trust in virtual teams to be as maximized as possible, is to get to know each other on a professional and personal level. This proved to increase trust, resulting in increased efficiency in the team (Cornwell, 2016; Watkins, 2013). Small talk in the beginning of meetings, encouraging team members to reach high level goals and challenges is proven to have an impact on team spirit and effectiveness. Further proven by Poser (2016) is obstacles arising in virtual teams can often be linked back to lack of personal interaction, namely lack of trust. On the contrary, trust must be created through virtual meetings and not only through face-to-face interaction in the start-up phase, meaning every team must find their way to build trust on a regular basis.

One of the followers, (F8) saw the similarities between virtual meetings and trolling, the phenomena of harassments and insults over the internet. The followers experienced people were more likely to criticize and telling-off in virtual meetings than face-to-face and people were more kind to each other in face-to-face meetings. This can be related to one of the leader's (L2) perspective on virtual communication, which is usually more direct and straightforward than face-to-face communication. This is something the followers believe has a negative impact on the team's performance, and occurs based on the person criticizing and telling-off virtually might find it difficult to understand there is a person with feelings on the other side of the virtual conversation.

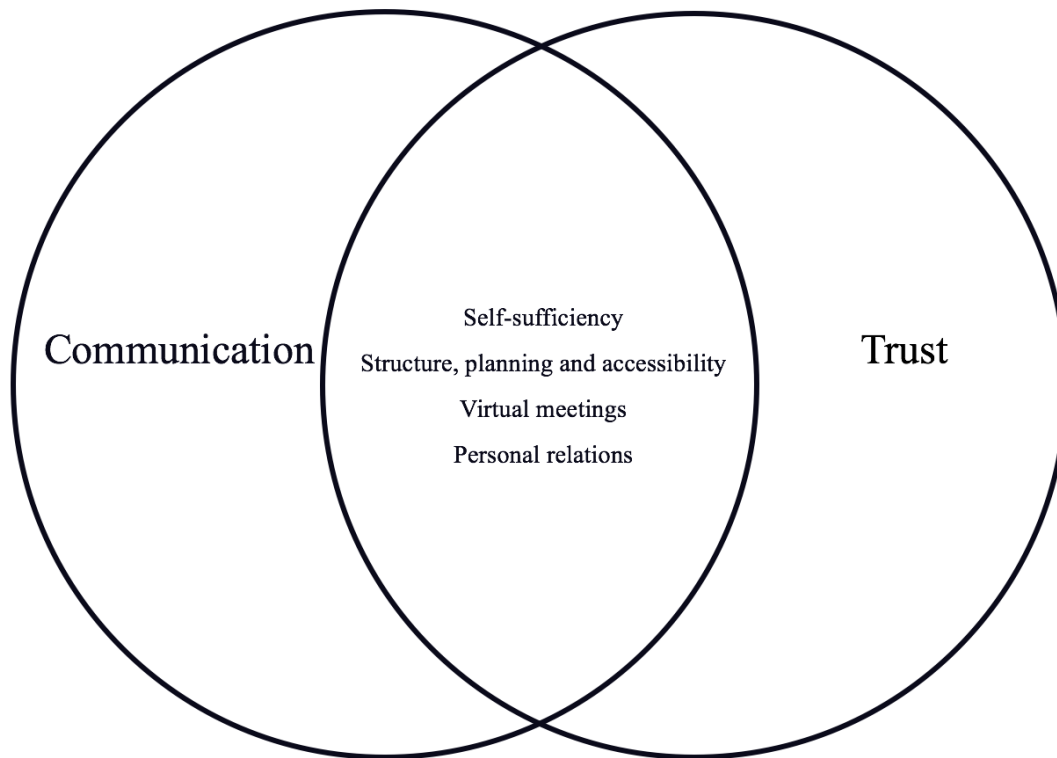
Mentioned by leader L2, who has a team in India, is an "exchange semester" within their organization. This meaning employees in India are provided the opportunity to come to Sweden to work for 1-12 months, sometimes with the opportunity to exchange their Indian employment to a Swedish one after the end of the exchange. As a result of this, there is an international environment at the office more than a Swedish environment, including Swedes acting and behaving more according to Indian norms than Swedish. This together requires an approach more goal driven than the traditional Swedish one. The exchange semester provides the opportunity for team members to meet face-to-face and not only virtually. A similar strategy existed in the team of a follower (F6), with exchange months at different offices globally as a part of the follower's trainee program. This can be seen as a strategy for achieving trust in virtual teams and getting a deeper understanding about the different cultures.

## 6 Conclusion

This chapter aims to summarize the findings of this research on followers' experience of e-leadership. The world is going through a digitalization process, which changes processes in businesses (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). While businesses change, organizations need to adapt to the new circumstances. The new technology offers new opportunities and ways of collaborating (Powell et al., 2004), affecting how teams are built up and operated. Even though the goal of leadership remains the same, the process and tools changes (DasGupta, 2011). Therefore, as a leader, it is necessary to know the opportunities and limitations of leading through digital devices. Since leaders coexist with followers (Avolio & Kahai, 2003), there is a need for leaders to know how their actions and behavior affects the followers in order to optimize their work and output. This process consists of communication, trust building and maintenance as well as utilizing the right technology in an effective way to facilitate communication and trust.

### 6.1 Implications

The theoretical framework was created with the aim to be applicable on the literature as well as the conclusion of the thesis. Within e-leadership and virtual teams, communication and trust are two prerequisites. Thus, communication and trust are two terms essential to have an understanding of for a leader of a virtual team to be able to be efficient. The theoretical framework is still believed to be applicable to the theory along with the conclusion. From the interviews with the followers, compared with the interviews with the leaders, four vital topics with regards to communication and trust have been identified: 1) self-sufficiency, 2) structure, planning and accessibility, 3) virtual meetings, and 4) personal relations. These topics were frequently referred to in the interviews, hence concluded essential aspects to consider for an e-leader. These four topics are, as can be seen in the figure below (Figure 5), the practical aspects of communication and trust in a leader-follower relationship in a virtual context.



*Figure 5 - Communication - Trust relationship from the followers' perspective*

**Self-sufficiency** was seen as important for the virtual team, both since trust was built from delivering results and because of the barriers for communication, for example to ask questions and have quick discussions. Moreover, self-sufficiency is crucial to discuss from a cultural perspective, since hierarchy and titles are of different importance in different cultures. **Structure, planning and accessibility** is important in a virtual context, again because of the barriers for communication. Knowing what is happening in the team's work and being able to get in contact with the leader is therefore crucial for the followers. **Virtual meetings** are the context in which e-leadership is most obviously executed. In those meetings, followers have noticed it affects the meeting when not all participants are attending under the same circumstances (since they are at different places and different time zones). Using the right information technology was also mentioned as an influencing factor, where videos were preferred for discussions whilst emails were good for quick questions, especially when working in different time zones. An important pattern found in the interviews were virtual working environments are a barrier for building **personal relations**. Some followers expressed the personal relations were increased only when meeting physically, whilst other found it important



to do small talking even over ICT. Not being able to ask quick questions or to discuss urgent matters face-to-face was a barrier for developing personal relationships amongst colleagues.

All things considered, this qualitative study is not covering the full complex spectra of e-leadership and working in virtual teams. The conclusions should be seen as indicators for future studies and topics for reflection for e-leaders rather than a universal truth. As technology develops, the circumstances for e-leadership and virtual teams will change, which increases the complexity of the topic even more. Lastly, there are still personal leadership styles and preferred working styles, which is another reason for leaders to use the followers' experience of e-leadership as a method for improving their own leadership in a contemporary virtual context.

This thesis has broadened the empirical knowledge regarding e-leadership by providing the followers' perspective on the leader-follower relationship in virtual teams. Furthermore, it has provided topics for future research within e-leadership (see Chapter 6.2 Suggestions for Future Research), a type of leadership that is becoming increasingly important in conjunction with the technological development. In essence, it has opened up the topic of e-leadership with new perspectives for researches as well as active leaders.

## 6.2 Suggestions for Future Research

Distance leadership, e-leadership and virtual teams are phenomenon we will see more of in the future due to globalization and the development of IT. The benefits for the organizations, such as keeping and finding specialized competence and flexibility, are obvious. The effect on people, on the other hand, is not studied to a large extent. Given this being a qualitative study, there is a need to quantitatively confirm the findings. Further, the majority of the respondents were women working in the Swedish offices of technology based organizations. A broader research group is therefore needed to get a more holistic view of the topic.

Throughout the work with this thesis the difficulties in distinguishing the effects from cultural differences and virtual work was noted, i.e. to know whether the difficulties the followers experienced came from cultural differences among the workers (globalization) or from the limitations of the communication tools. Based on this, it is suggested to continue to research the difference between global distance leadership (geographically dispersed teams using AIT

to communicate) and e-leadership (same location but still AIT mediated). Another suggestion is to look further into whether it is feasible to differentiate the concepts in the first place.

In this thesis we had a broad view on distance leadership, e-leadership and virtual teams and the interviewed people were asked to describe their total working experience. To get a deeper insight, it would therefore be useful to look into the different parts of leadership and team work in a virtual context, such as virtual meetings or virtual real time collaboration. As of the virtual meetings, a few of the people interviewed mentioned the limitations of the digital tools available for document sharing and brainstorming. A more technology oriented research approach would therefore be to look into how the features of the physical workplace could be turned in to digital equalities.

### 6.3 Epilogue

*As a result of the different team members from Malmö, London and Boston meeting face-to-face in the beginning of the project life cycle, the team is now aware of four keystones essential for efficient virtual team work. Firstly, self-sufficiency is a keystone for virtual teams, making it possible for the team members to be able to trust each other from different locations. Further, the team members got awareness of structure, planning and accessibility, creating a common ground for this to be able to be efficient as to not create barriers of communication. To create a structure for how to handle virtual meetings, for instance, agendas, structure and way of communicating, is now an efficient tool for the team. This meaning every team member is aware of the importance of the usage of the right technology along with the proper way to structure the meeting for the participants. To create personal relationships between the team members is something the team members found essential to be able to create trust within the team, this through small talk and encouraging messages. These four keystones are structured within communication and trust, viewed as two important prerequisites according to the team members. As of now, thanks to the e-leader's understanding of the followers' experience, the team is more than ready to function as a virtual team.*

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# Appendix A

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS - LEADER PERSPECTIVE

### Introduction

The respondent will introduce himself: name, position, organization. We will present our purpose with this thesis and interviews.

### Team

Why are you working in virtual teams? Can you describe pro's and con's with it?

-

What characteristics does the assignments have that your team is working on currently? (time limitations, challenges, critical success factors etc)

-

What characterizes the team? (professional backgrounds, areas of expertise, cultural backgrounds, senior team members, size of the team, is someone working full time on this or only part time etc)

-

Has your team been working together earlier? - Virtual or in the same office? How was the relations then? (leader-follower, customer-orderer, colleagues etc?)

-

How do you create goals and strategies for the team and the work processes?

-

How often does the team meet face-to-face?

-

### E-leadership/virtual teams

How is e-leadership/distant leadership being used by your team leader?

-

In what way to your team use e-leadership?

-

How do you feel e-leadership is working for:

- motivating you?
- how is engagement maintained in your team?
- how do you create trust in your team?

What kind of relationships do you have to each other in your team?

-

In what way do you feel that the shared goal is supposed to be the common denominator in everything you do, and in what way does the team leader make sure of this?

-

How are you working in an efficient way during meetings?

-

What do you do to make the work easier for the virtual team?

-

### **Communication**

What is communication for you?

-

From your opinion, what is efficient communication?

-

Can you mention some similarities/differences with communication online and face-to-face?

-

What tools for communication is being used by your team?

-



# Appendix B

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS - FOLLOWERS PERSPECTIVE

### Team

Why are you working in virtual teams? Can you describe pro's and con's with it?

-

What characteristics does the assignments have that your team is working on currently? (time limitations, challenges, critical success factors etc)

-

What characterizes the team? (professional backgrounds, areas of expertise, cultural backgrounds, senior team members, size of the team, is someone working full time on this or only part time etc)

-

How do you create goals and strategies for the team and the work processes?

-

How often does the team meet face-to-face?

-

### E-leadership/virtual teams

How is e-leadership/distant leadership being used by your team leader?

-

In what way to your team use e-leadership?

-

How do you feel e-leadership is working for:

- motivating you?
- how is engagement maintained in your team?
- how do you create trust in your team?

What kind of relationships do you have to each other in your team?

-

In what way do you feel that the shared goal is supposed to be the common denominator in everything you do, and in what way does the team leader make sure of this?

-

How are you working in an efficient way during meetings?

-

What do you do to make the work easier for the virtual team?

-

## **Communication**

What is communication for you?

-

From your opinion, what is efficient communication?

-

Can you mention some similarities/differences with communication online and face-to-face?

-

What tools for communication is being used by your team?

-