



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

# *The Crux of Virtual Leadership*

*Understanding how Virtual Leadership is Exercised in Practice by Examining a  
Case Study in a Global Organizational Context*

Master's Programme in Managing People, Knowledge and Change

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## **Abstract**

**Title:** The Crux of Virtual Leadership: Understanding how Virtual Leadership is Exercised in Practice by Examining a Case Study in a Global Organizational Context

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**Keywords:** ‘Leadership’, ‘Virtual Teams’, ‘Virtual Leadership’, ‘Organizational Culture’, ‘Decentralization’, ‘E-leadership’, ‘Autonomy’.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research is to contribute with a deeper understanding of how virtual leadership efforts are exercised in practice within a global organizational context. Moreover, the study also aims to contribute with theoretical insight on the virtual leadership phenomenon, as well as enhance the understanding of how it can be exercised by practitioners.

**Methodology:** This study is a case study adopting a qualitative method following a multi-paradigmatic approach, shifting between the interpretative- and the critical approach. The data collection was made through in-depth semi-structured interviews and document analysis. We have used an abductive approach, which has allowed us to go back and forth between theory and empirical findings when assimilating new disclosures.

**Contributions:** This study contributes to the literature with a detailed description of how virtual leadership is exercised in practice in a global organizational context. More specifically, through illustrating that popular leadership ideals are misaligned with the virtual leadership efforts practiced at our case company Globe-T.

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Enjoy the reading!

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## Table of Contents

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RATIONALE	7
1.2 PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTION	8
1.3 CASE COMPANY	9
1.4 DISPOSITION	10
<b>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 LEADERSHIP DISCOURSE	12
2.1.1 THE DOMINANT LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVES	13
2.2 VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP	15
2.2.1 VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP IN VIRTUAL TEAMS	15
2.2.2 MANAGING VIRTUAL TEAMS	16
2.3 CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON LEADERSHIP	18
<b>3. METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>20</b>
3.1 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND PHILOSOPHY GROUNDING	20
3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN	21
3.3.1 SAMPLING	22
3.3.3 DOCUMENT STUDY	24
3.4 DATA ANALYSIS	25
3.5.2 DOCUMENT ANALYSIS	27
3.7 TRUSTWORTHINESS	28
3.7.1 CREDIBILITY	29
3.7.2 TRANSFERABILITY	30
3.7.3 DEPENDABILITY	30
3.7.4 CONFIRMABILITY	31
3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	31
<b>4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS &amp; CASE ANALYSIS</b>	<b>33</b>
4.1 GLOBAL ORGANIZATION WITH LOCAL PRESENCE	33
4.1.1 THE GLOBALIZATION'S IMPACT ON THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND CULTURE	34
4.1.2 THE CONSEQUENCES OF AN OPEN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE	37
4.2 LEADERSHIP AND ITS INTERPLAY WITH AUTONOMY	39
4.2.1 AN ENCOURAGING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE	39
4.2.2 THE MANAGER'S VIEW ON LEADERSHIP	41
4.3 THE CRUX OF PERFORMING LEADERSHIP IN A VIRTUAL CONTEXT	43
4.3.1 THE HARDSHIPS OF ESTABLISHING LEADERSHIP VIRTUALLY	44
4.3.2 VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP BRINGS STANDARDIZATION AND ROUTINES	47
4.4 THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT UNDERMINING THE DESIRABLE LEADERSHIP	50
4.5 SUMMARY OF OUR FINDINGS	53

<b>5. DISCUSSION</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>5.1 STRATEGY RESULTING IN A BROAD AND OPEN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>5.2.1 THE IDEAL: EMOTIONAL- AND RELATIONSHIP ORIENTED LEADERSHIP</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>5.2.2 THE REALITY: INSTRUMENTALITY BROUGHT BY FRUSTRATION</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>5.2.3 THE RISK OF UNDERMINING WHAT GLOBE-T VALUES</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>5.3 THE PERSISTENCE OF TALKING ABOUT LEADERSHIP VIRTUALLY</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>5.3.1 POPULAR LEADERSHIP DISCOURSE</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>5.4 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>6. CONCLUSION</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>6.1 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>6.2 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>6.3 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>6.4 FURTHER RESEARCH</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>7. REFERENCES</b>	<b>74</b>

## 1. Introduction

During the past decade, a new type of leadership has emerged due to the explosive growth of virtual teams (Paulus, Kohn, & Dzindolet, 2011; Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017). The growth of virtual teams is a result of globalization, digitalization, distributed knowledge, organizations' need for rapid product development and improved networking technologies that reinforce virtual collaborations (Ilgen et al., 2005; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Mathieu et al., 2008). With increased globalization, more organizations have expanded globally or started to outsource parts of their business operations (Webster & Staples, 2006). Furthermore, the development of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and the use of digital tools, has made it possible for employees to work anytime from anywhere, without meeting physically. New forms of virtual communication methods (Blomquist & Röding, 2010) have led to increased development of so-called virtual teams (Martins, Gilson & Maynard, 2004). Virtual teams are defined as “teams whose members use technology to varying degrees in working across locational, temporal, and relational boundaries to accomplish an interdependent task” (Martins, Gilson & Maynard, 2004, p. 808).

Organizations have been quick to adapt to the new global ways of working. However, technological development has challenged the nature of leadership (Kayworth & Leidner, 2001), as it questions how leadership is exercised in virtual contexts (Weisband, 2008). As a result, new forms of leadership have emerged in contemporary literature (Martins, Gilson & Maynard, 2004), namely, e-leadership (Darics, 2020), remote leadership (Watkins, 2007) and virtual leadership (Schmidt, 2014). As digitalization is changing the way of working, one can wonder how virtual leadership is exercised in practice. Contemporary literature proposes that there is not enough research focusing on the ways that digitalization impacts leadership (Purvanova & Bono, 2009), and that there is lack of evidence on how the context of virtual communication affects managers' performance. Therefore, we believe it is of importance to study leadership in a virtual context, as managers in virtual settings are faced with new challenges in conducting their leadership processes through technical tools (Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). Based on a case in a global organization, where virtual leadership is considered necessary, we observed some particular challenges to the possibility to accomplish virtual

leadership effectively. These challenges further motivate our study on virtual leadership in-depth. Our ambition is to explore the phenomenon of virtual leadership and contribute with an understanding of how leadership takes place in practice, as well as theoretical insights on the virtual leadership topic as a whole.

## **1.1 Problem Statement and Rationale**

Leading from a distance is not a new phenomenon, and the literature on the topic is vast (Star & Ruhleder, 1996; Clark & Fujimoto, 1991; DeSanctis & Monge 1999; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991; Manz & Sims 1987). Surprisingly, there is not much written about the leadership phenomenon in a virtual context. It was not until the beginning of the 21st century that the field begun to receive academic attention (Avolio, & Kahai, 2003; Avolio, et al., 2013; Bell & Kozlowski, 2002) and the reason for this could be the increased growth of virtual teams during this period (Martins, Gilson & Maynard, 2004; Webster & Staples 2006). Furthermore, research has emphasized that there is still much to learn about virtual teams and how physical distance affects managers and employees (Webster & Staples 2006; Purvanova & Bono, 2009).

While studying contemporary literature on virtual leadership, we acknowledged different perspectives on the phenomenon. However, most research focuses on comparing virtual teams with traditional ones, often focusing on the problems the physical distance creates between the managers and team members (Antonakis & Atwater 2002; Neufeld et al., 2010; Wang et al. 2009). Moreover, research in the area is also characterized by questionnaire- and statistical studies, exploring whether distance affects the relationship between managers and employees (Warkentin, Sayeed, & Hightower, 1997; Webster & Staples 2006; Wang et al. 2009). The virtual teams that have been studied have, to a greater extent, been conducted on temporary- or student groups, while in-depth studies focusing on virtual leadership in practice within global organizations are considered to be lacking (Seetharaman & Cranefield, 2019; Straus, 1997).

We believe that in contemporary leadership research, there has not been sufficiently in-depth qualitative research on how virtual leadership is exercised in practice, resulting in unexplored areas, such as potential challenges and complexities of exercising virtual leadership in practice.

Contemporary research put much emphasis on the managers' perspective and different leadership styles (Kayworth & Leidner, 2001; Malhotra, Majchrzak & Rosen, 2007; Kelley, 2005) rather than the leadership performance in a contextual practice. We stress that leadership exercised in a virtual context is of importance for contemporary organizations due to digitalization. Therefore, the need for studying virtual leadership in a more practical setting is necessary to understand the phenomenon better. For this reason, we propose to further study the managers' practical actions from a virtual contextual perspective at a case organization, by adopting a more descriptive view and critical approach to the topic. Hence, we consider that by viewing leadership from a more holistic point of view, and studying how managers talk and convey leadership in practice virtually, we will receive an in-depth understanding of the virtual leadership phenomenon. In light of the preceding problematization and the rise of virtual teams globally, we feel our adopted research direction is justified by conducting a study on a global case company.

## **1.2 Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of our study is to contribute to the research and the understanding of how virtual leadership is exercised in practice by examining virtual leadership in a global context. We seek to not only address the need for further investigation in the area but also to bring an enhanced understanding of how practitioners can exercise virtual leadership in practice. Moreover, we wish to contribute with theoretical insights which will help the development of further ideas and studies of how virtual leadership is exercised. Based on the purpose, our aim is that this study will reinforce a reflexive approach and in-depth insights into the topic, and answering the following research question:

*How is virtual leadership efforts exercised in a global organizational context?*

In order to fulfil our aim and answer our research question, we will explore how our case company, Globe-T, is exercising virtual leadership in practice in a global organizational context. Globe-T is a large and innovative organization that actively exercises virtual



leadership. Thus, Globe-T is an interesting case company to apply to the existing literature on the virtual leadership phenomenon given their aim to find innovative and new working methods in the area of digitalization.

### **1.3 Case Company**

The case company used for this research is a large multinational organization, with their headquarter in Sweden, which will be referred to as Globe-T in this study. Globe-T is a knowledge-intensive firm that operates within the business-to-business sector, and is currently located in 50 countries and has around 24,000 employees globally. Today, Globe-T is divided into four business areas which are divided into multiple business units and holds a leading position within the industry. The organization is characterized by a high level of decentralization, meaning that responsibility, planning and decision-making are being delegated away from the corporate group to the different business areas. Moreover, business areas are working independently from each other and employees at all levels are encouraged to take on responsibility, and the organization is working proactively to make their employees grow and develop within the global business. Over the past decades, the organization has been acquiring many organizations around the globe, which has left teams being spread globally and making them engaging in virtual team meetings regularly. In light of the increased globalization and current development within digitalization, Globe-T is now putting considerable efforts in managing business operations and teams virtually instead of meeting physically.

## 1.4 Disposition

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

**Chapter 2:** The chapter will outline the literature review and present previous research within the topics of leadership, virtual leadership and managing virtual teams. In addition to this, the chapter also includes one critical part of leadership.

**Chapter 3:** In the chapter, our methodology and study approach are presented. By showing how our qualitative in-depth interviews have been conducted, we intend to give the reader a thorough insight on how our empirical collection was performed. After that, we continue by explaining how we analyzed the material, as well as the limitations and trustworthiness of the study.

**Chapter 4:** The empirical data is presented using a narrative that starts with Globe-T's history of acquisition and growth strategy that aims to expand around the globe. We then present how Globe-T's strategies have made an impact on their organizational structure, and that organizational culture concentration on responsibility and autonomy. Moreover, after the background history, the leadership discourse at Globe-T is presented, and that the leadership discourse interplays with the organizational culture, followed by how the managers talk about leadership. After that, we look over how the manager's leadership ideals are conveyed in a virtual context and the hardship of establishing these leadership ideals virtually. The chapter is concluded by reflection upon how the performed virtual leadership brings instrumentality which could undermine the desirable leadership. In addition to this, the chapter also provides a summary of our empirical findings.

**Chapter 5:** In this chapter, we analyze and discuss our empirical findings in-depth with the help of existing literature, in order to develop a more profound understanding of the phenomenon of virtual leadership and answer our research question. We base the chapter and structure of discussion on a new question brought up during the data analysis chapter.

**Chapter 6:** In the sixth and final chapter, we make concluding remarks where we highlight our empirical results from a broader perspective and study our findings in relation to the research background description. The chapter also provides some practical contributions that may be of interest to the research company, as well as our thoughts for future researchers to address the virtual leadership topic.

## **2. Literature Review**

In the following section, we present an overview of the main themes in contemporary leadership literature and bring a theoretical background to our empirical analysis and discussion. Furthermore, the literature on organizational culture will also be presented in order for us to discuss the cultural perspective on leadership. We aim to provide a broad theoretical background that will provide us with insights so we can view the virtual leadership phenomenon through different perspectives. First, we will present an overview of the leadership research in contemporary literature and outline dominant leadership approaches. Secondly, we will continue to elaborate on leadership within virtual settings, namely by exploring virtual leadership, and how to manage virtual teams. Finally, we will conclude the literature review by expressing critical reflections on leadership and virtual leadership as a lens of understanding and investigate leadership discourses in management research.

### **2.1 Leadership Discourse**

The topic of leadership has been studied on a large scale for many years, and the different definitions of leadership are multiple, and the meaning of it differs depending on what definition that is chosen (Ahmed, Nawaz & Khan, 2016). However, we will base our study on the definition by Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson (2017), stating that leadership is about “influencing ideas, meanings, understandings and identities of others within an asymmetrical (unequal) relationship context” (p. 3). The definition points out that leadership is exerted between individuals in an unequal relationship, emphasizing influencing meanings and ideas. Alvesson and Ydén (2000) further elaborate on the definition by stressing that leadership is based on employees following the leader which automatically entails that the leader exercises some kind of power over the ones following them, referred to as followers. Grint (2005) also emphasizes that leadership is exercised between people and that “leadership is necessarily a relational not a possessive phenomenon for the individual ‘leader’ without followers is demonstrably not a leader at all.” (p. 2). However, the distinction between leaders and

followers is often not explicitly expressed, causing the term ‘leadership’ to be somewhat misunderstood (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

### **2.1.1 The Dominant Leadership Perspectives**

In today’s popular management literature, it is argued that leadership can be a powerful and essential tool for achieving organizational success (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Gil et al., 2011). However, leadership research expresses that there are no perfect ways to exercise leadership (Sandahl, Falkenström & von Knorring, 2010; Barker 1997; Collison & Tourish 2015; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2010). According to Harrison (2018), there is no universal confirmed theory on it either, which can be explained by Alvesson and Sköldbbergs’ (2009) argument that the world can be interpreted differently depending on what context you choose to study. Nevertheless, three dominant perspectives on leadership exist in contemporary literature, namely: classic leadership, symbolic leadership and relation-oriented leadership (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The classic perspective focuses on the leadership approaches of trait, style and situational, which in general are characterized by formality, hierarchy and management as a mode of organizing (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The symbolic leadership, on the other hand, includes charismatic-, transformational- and authentic leadership styles, which put the focus on influencing meaning and values as well as inspiring identification and a sense of purpose (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The third dominant perspective, the relationship-oriented leadership, focuses on coaching and values the happiness and wellbeing of employees as it believes this is resulting in higher performance (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

Yukl and Van Fleet (1992) argue that these dominating leadership perspectives focus more on leaders’ performance and the actions the leaders perform towards their followers. However, some researchers argue that leadership is part of social processes, rather than created in a social vacuum, and therefore, one cannot understand leadership unless the followers’ interpretations are recognized as well (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010; Meindl, 1995). As the situational leadership approach states, the appropriate leadership style to address depends on contextual

matters that the leader is likely to come across (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). A situational leader is thus a leader who is flexible and can adapt his or her leadership style quickly according to how employees perform and how the situation changes, enabling them to give their employees the correct support and meaning (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). According to Hersey and Blanchard (1982), the different leadership styles that could be addressed within situational leadership are characterized by governance, coaching, support and delegation. One of the ideas behind situational leadership is to promote the development of employees by creating high levels of independence (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). However, as the situational leadership emphasizes the leader's actions and the employee behaviour, the relationship between the two is not in focus. The leaders' actions and how followers relate to the actions are fundamental, and different conceptions that are linked to individual functions and cultures could sometimes play a more significant role than the common attitudes theorists seek to attain in the dominant leadership theories (Alvesson & Björkman, 1992). For example, one must have an understanding of aspects such as behaviour, social relations and the organizational-, cultural- and social context in order to grasp how employees interpret and relate to the leader and vice versa (Alvesson & Ydén, 2000).

Furthermore, leadership is argued to be closely associated with the organizational culture (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010; Bass & Avolio, 1993) since the culture, like leadership, "influence the way employees think, feel, and act toward others, both inside and outside the organization" (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017, pp. 150–151). Moreover, culture accommodates stability and is made up of established norms, values and beliefs and provides predictability to the employees (Schein, 2010). However, while the organizational cultures establish directions on how people should think, feel and act, it is the leaders that mediate the culture to the followers. The culture influences the leaders' behaviour and actions (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson (2017), which in turn means that "effective leaders are role models for corporate values: they set an example." (Gill, 2002, p.313). However, if the leaders interpret and value the organizational culture differently, sub-cultures and cultural fragmentation can arise (Schein, 2010). According to Sackmann (1992), there is a symbiosis between organizational- and subcultures as they usually coexist, meaning that there could be shared values by everyone in the organization but also those that are different from group to group.

Moreover, sub-cultures can create a sense of community for team members which is based on affiliation and distinction with each other (Schein, 2010). In global organizations, where teams are globally dispersed, it is crucial for managers to build a sense of a community in order for team members operating virtually to feel that they are a part of a team (Lamson, 2018). In virtual teams, sub-cultures can carry as a way for the team and the leader to feel a cohesion in a team, and the manager can establish the cohesion by creating a context on *what*, *why* and *who* they are as a team. The context can help the team members understand the overall mission of the team and the individual work they are responsible for, as well as helping to direct people that come from different cultures (Lamson, 2018). The sense of community can be further built up by the manager using different forms of intentional communications such as emails, chat messages and video or phone calls to regularly get in touch and update each other (Lamson, 2018).

## **2.2 Virtual Leadership**

In our case organization, managers are part of virtual teams. Dulebohn and Hoch (2017), defines virtual teams as: “A virtual team is a work arrangement where team members are geographically dispersed, have limited face-to-face contact, and work interdependently through the use of electronic communication media to achieve common goals” (p. 569). In general, teams working remotely are regarded to have a high degree of autonomy (Zigurs, 2003), making the coordination even more complicated in virtual teams. In the following section, we will explore virtual leadership.

### **2.2.1 Virtual Leadership in Virtual Teams**

A significant part of the daily work routine of leaders is today done via the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) which refers to the use of computers to store, regain and transfer communication and information (Darics, 2020). Virtual leaders rely on ICTs and, thus, need to adjust to the virtual environment and find tools to tackle any communication-

coordination-, and knowledge-diffusion challenges (Savolainen, 2013). Therefore, virtual teams challenge traditional business models and existing tools of management (Colfax, Santos & Diego, 2009). Avolio and Kahai (2003) also argue that information flows through virtual communication tools can be harder to understand than the ones happening face to face. The challenges brought by the virtual settings change some of the fundamental aspects of how leaders and followers interact and associate with each other within the organization (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). Evidently, bringing a need to adjust the nature of leadership significantly (Avolio & Kahai, 2003; Gallenkamp et al., 2011). For example, Zigurs (2003) argues that virtual leaders must learn how to use clear expressiveness and interactivity among the various technology forms in order to make their presence as a leader known positively and to be able to influence the employees and their work progresses as desired. However, virtual meetings are argued to be challenging to manage (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Connaughton & Daly, 2005; Berry, 2011; Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017) due to the high level of complexity surrounding the coordination (Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). For example, practical challenges virtual environments bring such as language barriers, cultures and time zones (Zigurs, 2003; Kayworth & Leidner, 2001). Leading virtually is a new working situation, which calls for more efforts to incorporate both leadership and management operations for the manager, such as directing while creating a trusting and collaborative working environment (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Brewer, 2015; Ejiwale, 2012; Fay & Kline, 2011; Hambley, O'Neil, & Kline, 2007).

### **2.2.2 Managing Virtual Teams**

Snellman (2013), Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) argue that it is more difficult to manage virtual teams than co-located teams. The limited physical meetings affect the leader's influence on the members, and information about the team status, which can affect the team dynamic (Zigurs, 2003). Furthermore, the physical distance between the manager and the employees can create a mystique where the manager can be perceived in a greater light and more as a leader than the manager might be (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Furthermore, trust plays a crucial role in virtual teams, and especially mutual trust, between managers and employees and with colleagues (Grosse, 2002; Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998). Trust is established when team



members repeatedly follow expectations and deliver results and by interacting with other members (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). Langfred (2007) states that a team with low trust can impact the team structures since the individual autonomy and task independence is lowered when the manager cannot trust the employees. However creating trust, motivation and team cohesion in virtual organizations is more complicated than in traditional teams, as it is difficult to reach the identification phase when the communication channels to some extent hinder the free flow of communication between the leaders and employees (Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). The shorter time the members have been part of the same team, the harder it is to create personal ties and thus a stable relationship (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). However, according to Zaccaro and Bader (2003), a short existence of relationships can be compensated by more meetings that are not solely work-related. From both a leader and a follower perspective, these physical meetings are essential as they not only smooth out the differences between the parties, but also increase trust and, therefore, create an excellent collaborative climate for the team (Kollock, 1998; Child, 2001). Further ways of creating conditions for maintaining working conditions remotely is to match the team members by recruiting people who can manage good relationships with people from different cultures (Child, 2001).

Managers that are in different geographic locations than their employees often provide them with an opportunity to feel autonomous or self-managing (Manz & Sims, 1987) which makes it even more important that individuals can work independently (Child, 2005). When receiving that much responsibility and information, it is crucial for the employees to understand and to respond to their task and act consequently upon it (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). In addition to being independent, it is also crucial that individuals try to collaborate with their colleagues who are at a distance (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). However, this can lead to a particular concern by the employee, as there is a risk that the work will not be visible to managers which can result in reduced recognition through, for example, delegation (Child, 2005). In a virtual organization, the view of traditional leadership can be rethought and shifted from a hierarchical leadership structure towards a flatter structure and use a shared leadership approach (Ensley, Hmieleski & Pearce, 2006; Gronn, 2002). Shared leadership refers to a team process where the leadership is allocated between team members in every level of the organization rather than focus on a one delegated leader (Weisband, 2008). Shared leadership constrains the relationships of individual

trust and individual autonomy with satisfaction and a collaborative team environment (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017; Robert, 2013).

## **2.3 Critical Reflections on Leadership**

While contemporary research usually portrays leadership as something good and leaders as engaged and motivational persons, some researchers take on a more critical view (Hogg, 2001; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010; Collison & Tourish, 2015). Collison and Tourish (2015) believe that mainstream studies on leadership have given people a romanticized image of leaders as well as an image that underestimates the hidden aspects of leadership. People carry ideas about what constitutes good leadership, and when people identify a person as a leader, that person is viewed as a real leader and becomes more likely to take on a superior position (Hogg, 2001). How people perceive leadership is not only a result of the leader's supposedly natural qualities but also a question of the supervisor's thought patterns and culturally moulded image or notion of leaders and leadership (Hogg, 2001). The creation of an ideal leader is, therefore based on the general population, contributing to the development of the normative leadership (Barker, 1997).

Moreover, some people describe themselves as natural leaders, arguing they always had leadership attributes which have guided them into management and to take advantage of these competencies during their lives (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). The identification as a natural leader can be a result of social identity theory which argues that individuals tend to categorize themselves into different social groups, and this kind of self-image and categorization is part of the process by which we try to place ourselves in the world (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The self-categorization governs to some extent interpretation, understanding, attitudes, feelings and behaviour towards what is considered to be prototypical for the category we mean to belong to (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). However, the glorified view of leadership can be hard to live up to, since it is difficult to maintain a coherent view of what you as a leader stands for and what you accomplish, which can cause frustration (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010).

Taking on a critical approach towards the distinctiveness of virtual teams, Savolainen (2013) claims that virtual leadership is established on the same character features as traditional leadership and leadership goals. Additionally, Avolio and Kahai (2003), and Trivedi and Desai (2012), argue that some fundamentals of leadership, such as motivation, trust-creation, inspiration and vision creation, will likely always remain the same, even in a virtual context. However, according to Goldratt (1997), virtual leadership is a complex phenomenon due to virtual managers dealing with conflicts regularly. In knowledge-intensive firms, managers exercising virtual leadership sometimes need to consult with the employees for resources and specialist advice which creates ambiguous and insecure realities of them as leaders, and this insecure reality is argued to be even more visible in virtual contexts if the manager and employees have not created a close relationship with each other (Goldratt, 1997). These situations can lead to a dysfunctional environment that can form conflicts around the power distribution, causing the leadership to potentially be fatigued (Goldratt, 1997). According to Alvesson and Sköldböck, (2017) in these kinds of conflicts, people tend to find instruments to cope with the disagreements, for example, communication frameworks as in order to effectively communicate their messages through technology (Eissa et al., 2012).

Furthermore, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2010) argue that leadership is talked about in a slightly wrong way, and possibly even as an empty but charming rewrite of managerial administrative tasks. The need for leadership should not be taken for granted and, some researchers point out that there may be conditions in the organization that reduce the importance of leadership (Kerr & Jermier, 1978). For example, when employees are professional and driven by an inner self-motivation, they may not need structured guidelines provided by managers, instead of personal- and relationship-oriented support (Kerr & Jermier, 1978) working as a substitute for leadership. Nonetheless, if the employees have supportive colleagues or networks, this can provide enough support which minimizes the need for leaders to provide the guidance mentioned above (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). However, leaders have an essential role in creating the conditions for excellent performance, for example, through the functioning of infrastructure (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010).

### **3. Methodology**

In the following sections, we phrase how we addressed our research question and conducted our study. In order for the readers to comprehend and evaluate how we got to our findings, we elaborate in detail on the chosen qualitative methods, philosophical grounding and research design that were assigned to our study. Moreover, we will present how we proceeded with our data collection and our approach for analysis and how it was operationalized. Finally, the chapter discusses the limitations and trustworthiness of our conducted research and how we have worked with reflexivity and quality considerations.

#### **3.1 Qualitative Research and Philosophy Grounding**

The study follows a qualitative method, in order to go in-depth and be able to understand the phenomenon of virtual leadership and answer our research question (Bryman, 2016). The study applies the interpretative paradigm, which allows us to achieve a deeper insight of the managers' view of their everyday work life and understanding of the phenomenon of virtual leadership rather than verifying our existing assumptions (Prasad, 2018). From the ontological perspective, the study views the world based on social constructionism (Wilson, 2014), meaning that the reality is socially constructed and understood through acts of interpretation and people construct the realities based on norms, experiences, values and identity (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). However, Chalmers (1999) emphasizes that realities are context-based and can change over time, which we have considered when writing this study. The ontological perspective allows for ambiguity regarding our interpretive capabilities and let us construct the study clearer (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). To understand the meaning and the subjective truths, we study the interviewees' subjective realities by analyzing their image of the world through discourse and language (Prasad, 2018). More specifically, we utilize the hermeneutic tradition to deepen the understanding of virtual leadership by investigating Globe-T managers' perceptions of virtual leadership and its context (Prasad, 2018). The hermeneutic tradition helped us compare and explain the phenomenon of virtual leadership through interpretation (Laverly, 2003). However, as different parts of the material can only be understood in relation

to its contexts (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), we justify our interpretations by looking through different perspectives as well as the material as a whole (Prasad, 2018). As such, this allows us to find hidden meanings by reading between the lines in the material and create our interpretations (Prasad, 2005).

This study also adopts the critical tradition as we challenge the assumptions and mainstream knowledge of the phenomenon (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). As elaborated on above, the interpretive tradition interprets the world as socially constructed, and the critical approach further evolves this view more sceptically by believing that these social constructions are mediated by power relations, dominations and are criticizing and questioning the social order (Prasad, 2018). In this study, the power and control structures are influencing the managers' understandings of their roles and contexts (Prasad, 2018). The critical approach is a natural part of our study as the virtual environment is questioning the mainstream impressions of leadership at Globe-T and discovering new perspectives of virtual leadership. In the beginning, we use an interpretative approach to the study, but as the analysis proceeds, we take more of a critical stance.

### **3.2 Research Design**

We have chosen to conduct a single case study at Globe-T to investigate how leadership plays out and is understood in a virtual environment. The company name 'Globe-T' and the interviewees in this study are pseudonyms, in order to anonymize them. Our ambition with this case study is to understand how leadership is practised virtually and challenge the mainstream leadership view. A case study will allow us to develop a deep understanding of the context of leadership and processes in which Globe-T is embedded (Yin, 2003; Bryman & Bell, 2015).

An abductive approach will be used in order for us to be able to understand the significance and relevance of virtual leadership in our case company and provide us with new steps and adding new components to the data (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). By adopting an abductive approach, we can critically view the empirical material, and encourage problematization and

theoretical insights (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) by moving between theory and our empirical findings. During the abductive process, our empirical material gradually develops, and the conceptual theory is corrected and refined to fit better the empirical material (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In line with this approach, our research follows a processual structure where there are no fixed design or research questions from the beginning (Merriam 2002). We could, therefore, adopt an openness to unexpected results and let the empirical material guide us from an early stage (Alvesson & Kärreman 2011). We endeavour to stay reflexive and actively interpret the collected data with an awareness of patterns instead of an absolute and fixed truth (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

### **3.3 Data Collection Methods**

We collect empirical material data using semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The choice of semi-structured interviews is based on the ability to modify and move away from questions that interviewees perceive differently than we anticipated at first (Patton, 2002), and allow interpretation of meaning (Kvale, 1996). In addition to the interviews, some documents are also analyzed (Bowen, 2009), in particular, several control documents by the organization and documents that elaborate on managers and employee routines and everyday work. The mix of collected documents and interviews allows us to study the phenomenon in a deeper context further.

#### **3.3.1 Sampling**

The sampling of interviewees was made by our contact person at Globe-T, which can be referred to as a sample of comfort (Alvehus, 2014). A list of suggested interviewees was put together by the contact person, and we sent out emails to each of them, asking if they were willing to participate in the study. As agreed on with the organization, the managers that were contacted shared an equal division of seniority and were part of virtual teams. However, the number of team members, nationalities and geographical locations differed within the teams. As a result, 10 out of 21 contacted managers chose to participate in our study, who became the primary resource of data in this study.

### 3.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Before conducting the interviews, we created an interview guide based on the thematizing concept of Kvale and Brinkmann (2015). We chose to adapt this concept since thematizing is an essential step of interview processes as the thoroughness of interviews will have a significant impact on the analysis (Kvale, 1996). Following this concept, the questions on the guide were developed using themes, creating a funnel shaped guide. Furthermore, the guide was constructed with open-ended questions to give interviewees room to answer the questions based on what they considered to be of significance and by using their own words (Patton, 2002). Additionally, the guide followed a dynamic aspect of “*what*” and “*how*” questions that aimed to give room for follow-up questions and to encourage the interviewees to open up (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015). Once the interview guide was finalized, a pilot interview was conducted in order to test how the interview guide and questions were perceived and how the interviewees acted on the questions (Dalen, 2008). The pilot interview resulted in one question being modified, and two questions were added in order to get more in-depth information about the managers’ previous experiences.

As the first data collection, we used semi-structured interviews. By using semi-structured interviews, the interviews developed into natural conversations at the same time as it followed a clear thread and all chosen themes were elaborated on. The objective with semi-structured interviews was to have an “open attitude” (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.41) to what the interviewees chose to express and direct the conversation based on it. The interviews were held based on the interviewee’s preferences, which allowed them to choose a setting they felt comfortable with. By doing this, the setting “should encourage the interviewees to describe their points of view on their lives and worlds” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p.154). Two of the interviews were held physically at the headquarter, and eight were held online with the use of Microsoft Teams (Teams). The employees at Globe-T use Microsoft Teams on a regular everyday basis which strengthened their comfortability. However, as Bryman and Bell (2015) argue that telephone interviews are of great use when asking sensitive questions since the interviewees might feel more comfortable answering these kinds of questions without the interviewer being physically present, we consider our method to be strengthening our purpose of examining virtual meetings. To minimize the risk of missing out of important aspects and

follow-up questions, both of us participated in the interviews. However, in order to not confuse the interviewees in the virtual calls, only one of us asked questions and the other engaged in interpretative listening and paying attention to the context, which is an essential aspect of interviews according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2015). Whenever suitable, the conversation was deepened through follow-up questions in order to go in-depth and get the full interpretation of the interviewees. With the permission of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded which was considered more relaxed for the interviewer because all focus were then placed on what the interviewees said. However, a recording of the interview may inhibit the interviewees' honesty in the responses, which was taken into account when interpreting the material (Tjora, 2012). Each interview lasted around 45-60 minutes and was held in Swedish or English depending on the interviewee's choice. All interviews were anonymized and treated with confidentiality which enabled an open and honest conversation, thus increased the credibility of the data (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). After the interviews, we sat down and listened to the material to critically reflect upon the quality of their interview skills and to create improvement as interviewers for the next interview such as adjusting potential errors in the order of questions or how follow-up questions were said (Patton, 2002). Additionally, we transcribed all interviews separately in the original language continuously as the interviews were held.

### **3.3.3 Document Study**

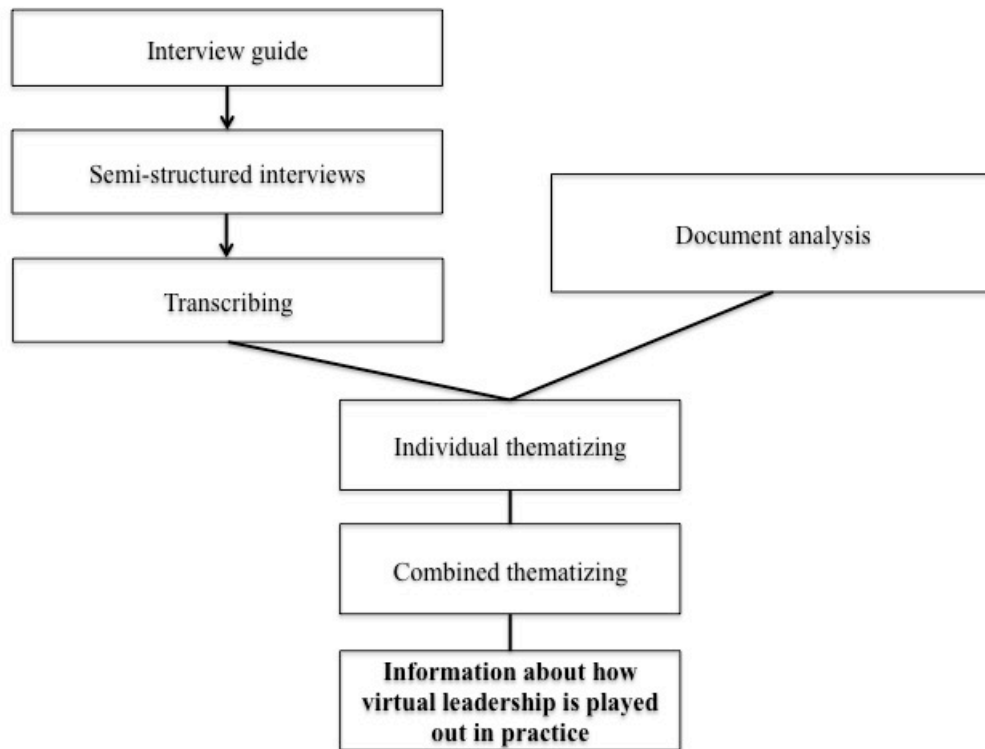
As the second data collection method, we use document analysis, which is based on documents provided by the organization and some online information. The document analysis brings value as it provides us with a context and additional background information about the organization (Bowen, 2009). The documents provided by the organization are internal documents, for example, leadership guidelets, training checkboxes and policies, which provides the study with information on the visions and ways of working of the company. The online information gives us background history, annual report, the rhetoric style and an indication of the appearance Globe-T wants to send out. Following Bowen (2009) the authenticity and usefulness of the documents were first determined before used, meaning that we critically reflected on the



purpose of each document, why the company produced the documents and to whom they were intended for.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The collected data material was analyzed with inspiration from Alvesson and Kärreman's (2007) reflexive approach of constructing a 'gap', which means that all interesting aspects of the topic in our material were identified and compared to previous literature in the extent possible until an interesting approach was found. In our case, this happened when we found the lack of sufficient information on how virtual leadership is exercised in practice. Moreover, according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), the analysis already took place during the interview process and therefore we chose to transcribe and sort the material at an early stage to create an initial overview. We also followed the thoughts of Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) arguing that, when analyzing the data, it is essential to go beyond easily recognizable patterns in the data and question the dominant conceptions, established assumptions, categorizations and reasoning of things that we perceive today.



*Figure. 1: Data collection and data analysis method*

The data collection started with us separately viewing the data by looking at the material as a holistic text (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011) and spending time with it to familiarize us with it (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The decision of separately analyzing the data at first was made to enable us to have open-minds, avoid interfering with each other's interpretations (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018) and challenge each other's ideas which enabled reflexivity through the analysis. During the interviews and while reading the transcribed material, we thought about *what* and *how* statements were said (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). We discovered the interviewee's social realities by following an interpretive practice in order to understand *what* was happening and the circumstances of it, and further *how* it took place. Moreover, this enabled us to get a greater understanding of why situations are occurring (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). In line with the hermeneutic approach we, therefore, moved back and forth between the data material as a whole and parts of the material when analyzing it separately,

which gained us insights and allowed us to see patterns of what the interviewees said and what we interpreted between the lines (Prasad, 2005). In addition, Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) suggest to analyze and discover themes by looking into the collisions between the empirical data and theoretical premise to query existing theories and frameworks. Thus, we conducted an initial separate thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and divided the unstructured empirical data into themes which enabled us to sort the data into different discourses that became noticeable in the material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

After viewing the material separately, we sat together and critically viewed the themes we identified and discussed and tried to find unexpected empirical insights in the material and collisions between the empirical data and theoretical premise to query existing theories and frameworks (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). We problematized and systematically questioned the value of existing concepts and theories (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011) and summarized these themes together in a Microsoft Excel document. The document was structured so that we could create a clear overview of the material and sort out irrelevant material. To further interpretive the themes, we needed to be self-critical and reflexive on our own interpretations (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). Moreover, we carefully compared the interviewees' statement with the general leadership discourse, studying the meaning, experience and beliefs, and critically examined whether they were statements of a political act, impression management or a result of identity work (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011).

### **3.5.2 Document Analysis**

Our document analysis is based on both publicly accessible documents from Globe-T's website, such as their sustainability rapport and annual rapport, as well as internal documents such as leadership training documents provided by our contact person. The document analysis served our study with additional sources of empirical data, which allowed us to review and contextualize the data findings that were found during the interviews (Bowen, 2009). Thus, the document data analysis was rather data selection than data collection, where the documents were handpicked to confirm the findings from the interviews (Bowen, 2009).

### **3.6 Limitations**

Our research is bound to certain limitations. First of all, qualitative case studies are often argued to have been highly context- specific and thus can limit the scope of the findings restricted (Yin, 2013). Our study only contains ten interviews and is conducted at one specific organization, and it is therefore uncertain if the empirical data can be generalized to other organizations or situations. Moreover, the research is also conducted during the international outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, which caused fewer interviewees to be available for interviews. However, the situation put an enormous focus on the use of technology in virtual teams, and the topic is therefore highly relevant for the organization, which led to the organization wanting to participate. A second limitation is that our research solely took place on interviewing managers that are working at a strategic level. Due to this, we acknowledge that if interviews with employees in lower positions had been conducted, it might have resulted in a different outcome. Similarly, if the number of interviews would have been increased. Nevertheless, we find our empirical data to be reliable and credible as all interviewees chose to talk openly about the challenges and conflicts the experience as virtual leaders.

### **3.7 Trustworthiness**

In contrast to quantitative studies, where the reliability and validity of data are possible to measure, qualitative studies and its quality needs to be evaluated according to other criteria (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose two alternative criteria for assessing a qualitative study, namely trustworthiness and authenticity and express that the criteria for qualitative studies where there is no absolute truth about social reality. Furthermore, the criteria of trustworthiness hold four sub-criteria, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In our study the criteria of trustworthiness and its four sub-criteria is elaborated on according to the definitions by Guba and Lincoln (1994).

### 3.7.1 Credibility

In qualitative studies, where there are multiple social realities, the significance of the trustworthiness criteria of credibility is high, since it is in the feasibility or credibility at the specific moment, the researcher arrives at the acceptability of others is determined (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In order to ensure a high level of credibility, we took on a series of actions in our study. First of all, we did not give the interview questions to the interviewees in advance to avoid them practising on how to answer our questions and to adjust their answers based on what is considered an ideal answer. However, since the interviewees already knew the topic of virtual leadership beforehand, the topic was brought up quickly by them. The credibility of the answers might, therefore, have affected due to the interviewees being aware of, and shaping, the questions based on what they thought was the best.

Secondly, according to Tracy (2010) different data collection methods increase credibility, and therefore, different sources of data are often combined for triangulation in qualitative studies. Triangulation entails using multiple collection methods, such as interviews, observations and document studies, in order to cross-check findings (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In our study, interviews and documents were combined in triangulation with the aim to be aware and critically identify threats to trustworthiness such as our own bias and the interviewees biases (Bowen, 2009). Considering that we have been participants in the context of the study, and are familiar with the research subjects we have carefully acknowledged self-bias to avoid getting stuck in a fixed position (Alvesson & Sköldbörg, 2009). We have therefore been careful when interpreting our material, to assure that we do not overlook our data that does not conform to our own bias. However, by triangulation of data, an awareness of our own subjectivity, the credibility of this study was ensured.

Thirdly, we engage in source criticism which refers to the increment of credibility of qualitative research (Alvesson & Sköldbörg (2009) and is the evaluation of information and its source (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017). In qualitative research with interviews as the primary data collection method, the reliability of the interviews are generally lower than it appears due to the fact that we are enforced to rely on the social world of the interviewees and their recount of the topic (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017). In order to achieve a high level of credibility and avoid

a lack of source critique, we aimed for evaluating and reflecting on all interviews, viewed the source relevance, source topical as well as rejected misinterpreted questions if necessary (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017). However, most questions were interpreted in a similar way by the interviewees which provided our research with homogeneous data. The questions that were misinterpreted were deleted.

### **3.7.2 Transferability**

Transferability refers to how well the study can be generalized, and if the studied context fits into other similar contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, as our case study focuses on understanding how virtual leadership is exercised in practice at Globe-T, we do not aim to obtain generalization (Yin, 2013). However, we provide background in the empirical chapter for other researchers to estimate if our findings can be applicable and usable in different contexts.

### **3.7.3 Dependability**

Dependability refers to how well the study is documented so that others researchers could be able to take care of the collected data and, according to the stated analytical guidelines, arrive at approximately the same results as we did in our own analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). During our study, one of our significant efforts to create a good research quality was to place considerable focus on working systematically. We planned and discussed our study in advance to reduce the risks of us working in different ways or to perceive our purpose differently (Tjora, 2012). We have carefully described and documented all steps of our analysis method, as a basis and support for the replicability for others to repeat the study (Trost, 2010; Yin, 2013; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Whether or not the study is replicable is difficult for us to say because a qualitative study is often linked to social conditions and does not aim to be generalizable. For this reason, we described the environment and context. Moreover, in qualitative studies, problems can arise because social environments are not constant but time-

specific, which can be problematic if the study were to be repeated in ten years as the social environment is likely to change and thus affect the study result (Tjora, 2012).

### **3.7.4 Confirmability**

Qualitative research is also bound to limitations of subjectivity, meaning that the researchers are unconsciously unable to act completely objective and symmetric when interpreting and viewing the empirical data (Tjora, 2012). Since the interpretation of the data in this study is a subjective act and takes place from our point of view, the subjectivity of us as researchers will become a part of the research and the quality aspect. However, by being aware of the potential skewness, we could get to the greatest extent possible, minimize our own influence and avert placing our own opinions onto the interpretation during the data analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1981;1982). However, one of us is employed by Globe-T, which is causing our attitudes, values and subjectivity to be in an internal relation to the organization, as we were part of the same reality being studied. Thus, this affected how we analyzed and interpreted the material. Therefore, it was essential for us to pay attention to skewness to avoid that prior knowledge would affect the study and that only the focus on what and how the interviewees said during the interviews (Trost, 2010). We have also continually questioned each other's ideas and reflections and gone back to the transcriptions to ensure that the right interpretations were made.

### **3.8 Ethical Considerations**

During this study, we have considered a universal ethical stance and ensuring that all of the interviewees' ethical principles were kept unbreached (Erikson, 1967). Firstly, before each interview was held we gave the interviewees a brief introduction of us and the studies purpose. We further informed them of their right to withdraw their participation in the study at any time and that all data will be kept anonymous and confidential. We got the interviewees' verbal consent to participate in the research and to record the interviews. Once the interviews were

completed, we debriefed the interviewees' answers, and they were asked if they would like to receive the result once it was finished. Moreover, materials that risked revealing the respondents' true identity were removed during transcription (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).



## 4. Empirical Findings & Case Analysis

The following chapter will present our empirical data that has been governed by our aim, research questions and literature review along with our interpretive and critical stance. The empirical data will be outlined in four themes. The first theme will provide a background story of Globe-T's by presenting why the organizations stand out with their global growth strategy, global presence, decentralized strategy and strive to achieve autonomy. The background story of Globe-T enables the reader to understand better the context that our case organization operates in, and thus provide a further understanding of the analysis. Secondly, we will elaborate on the leadership's interplay with autonomy and the manager's view on leadership elements, and elaborate on how the managers exercise virtual leadership in practice. Moreover, we investigate some challenges of virtual leadership brought by our empirical material. The chapter will be concluded by a chapter summary, which will allow us to understand further the challenges of virtual leadership and its effect on desirable outcomes.



### 4.1 Global Organization with Local Presence



The most immediate theme that surfaced from our interviews was the globalization of Globe-T. Throughout our data collection, we understood that Globe-T is conducting a large number of acquisitions as a part of their growth strategy. By the acquisition, they are expanding all over the world and strategically increasing their global footprint. In several control documents and

reports, the history of Globe-T was explicitly described as a series of acquisitions, which is expressed to be the reason for the strong global position:

*“(Globe-T) certainly has a long history of acquisitions, [...]. These could be acquisitions that enable us to access new solutions, new customer categories or new geographies, and then strengthen an already existing position.” - CEO*

The growth strategy is allowing the organization to spread globally and enter new geographies and segments by acquisitions, which enables them to be close to customers and local businesses. One manager emphasizes the benefits of the strategy through:

*“Our employees are spread all over the world to support businesses wherever they are.” - Daniel*

The fact that the managers talk about being close and having a local presence towards customers and the business may not be a surprise, as it is also expressed in various documents presented by the organization. In the Annual Report, the CEO of Globe-T expresses that it is a conscious part of the strategy also to recruit locally:

*“We want to recruit locally where we are because our employees must understand local developments to be best able to do business there.” – CEO*

#### **4.1.1 The Globalization’s Impact on the Organizational Structure and Culture**

Our interviewees indicated that the strategy of Globe-T is resulting in a decentralized structure, meaning that responsibility and decision-making are delegated downwards in the organization leaving managers with greater independence. At a strategic level, the decentralization is expressed to be an advantage as it allows Globe-T to coordinate operations, adapt to local markets and make quick changes strategically:

*“With our decentralized organization, we can adapt quickly and make changes – for example, in choosing where to locate our production.” - CEO*

The statement by the CEO only seems to focus on the strategic benefits of choosing production sites and not how local businesses can adapt operationally. However, during the interviews, the managers also tended to talk about the organizational structure in terms of decentralization and confirmed the thoughts by the CEO. However, the manager tended to put more emphasis on operational matters, as most managers expressed that they value the decentralized structure as it allows them to adapt and pay regards to local situations. The adaptation to specific contexts was for example stated through:

*“There is a high level of decentralization in the business. You get a lot of responsibility and work quite independently, which allows you to adapt to the situations that occur. It almost feels like you are running your own company, even though you belong to a corporate group. You have quite a lot of responsibility on your shoulders, but also quite a lot of freedom to act. This, in turn, creates a very high level of commitment.” - Lisa*

The decentralized structure was further elaborated on by Lucas:

*"It is a decentralized model, which I like. So, we're given autonomy to perform and we're not told by the CEO what to do or how to do it. So, we can do what fits our business the best, and that's a really good thing." - Lucas*

The decentralized model, as a result of Globe-T's global expansion, seems to give rise to an open organizational culture. Thus, our interpretation during the interviews is that the organization is putting a focus on cooperating the independent working units with the use of a broad but loosely composed organizational culture, characterized by some levels of freedom and autonomy. The description supported the organizational culture with elements of autonomy in the Annual Report:

*“(Globe-T) is characterized by a far-reaching delegation of responsibilities and powers and encourages rapid decisions. (Globe-T) has a culture that promotes commitment, responsibility, good ethics in business relationships, and positive interaction with the community.” - CEO*

The statement portrays the organizational culture as open, where the employees are encouraged to take on responsibility and interact with people throughout the organization to pursue business ethically and effectively. However, this is stated in a public document and can, therefore, only be considered expressing the organizational culture that the management wants to portray externally. Looking deeper into the organizational culture, we identified that the interviewees also similarly described the culture, however through a more personal perspective:

*“I love the culture. I would say it is very encouraging and helpful. You can reach out to anyone, and they will help you. Everybody is skilled within their expertise, which makes a very dynamic environment.” - Lucas*

In general, the managers positively described the corporate culture, emphasizing openness and international environment. Another manager highlighted this through:

*“I think it is a nice culture with incredible openness and helpfulness. It is a very good atmosphere, an extremely good atmosphere, with high commitment and a high degree of decentralization in the business.” - Lisa*

The statements yet again bring up the high commitment and openness that was expressed by the CEO. The overall impression is however, that the managers emphasize the atmosphere, describing it as helpful and with high interaction within the different business areas. Thus, we can identify a similarity between the managers' own perceptions and the externally described organizational culture by the CEO, which could indicate that the cultural vision is, to some extent, embodied by people. Hence, there seems to be conformity between the spoken culture and the culture that exists in practice, for example, the emphasis on positive interactions and

helpfulness within the community. Furthermore, through our interviews, it became apparent that freedom and responsibility are attributes that are of importance for both the organization and the managers. It was striking for us to see that almost all answers during the interviews touched upon these attributes in various ways, which let us believe that there is a cultural dynamic that is built upon businesses with some level of freedom and autonomy.

#### **4.1.2 The Consequences of an Open Organizational Culture**

We can see elements of autonomy in several statements by managers throughout the interviews. However, even though the self-dependency and responsibility seem to be an essential perspective of the open organizational culture, the level of autonomy and organizational culture does not seem to be the same at all units.

*“There are respective cultures in different business areas. The decision-making process goes much faster in some business areas than others. You learn gradually about how other business areas work with the informal and formal networks that the organization has.”- Simon*

As expressed before, Globe-T is characterized by a high level of decentralization and is frequently acquiring new companies, which means that units and teams are part of different contexts. As a consequence, the organizational elements of autonomy are expressed slightly differently throughout the organization. One of the most prominent examples of this was when the managers talked about the hardships of establishing the organizational culture at newly acquired organizations. Conversations about the acquisitions with the managers at Globe-T were enshrouded by a pessimistic overtone, whereby individuals felt it is harder to convey the organizational culture to the new members:

*“It sounds simple, but it is a very strong cultural change for many new employees, and it usually takes some time before they are brought into the culture.” - Kim*

Our interpretation is that it is difficult for new employees to adapt to new norms and organizational culture. Moreover, one manager, who previously worked for an acquired organization, referred to Globe-T's organizational culture as being non-transparent:

*“I started off in (name of department) only, and they just had been acquired the year before, and actually (Globe-T) was not very transparent to me. I was really only focused on the work we did at (name of department) at the time. When starting working with (another department) too, it was some kind of shock for me, they didn't work in the same way. It took some time, but now I feel comfortable.” - Daniel*

The trouble of conveying the organizational culture, makes us believe that the organizational structure and strategy is causing a slightly fragmented culture. The organizational culture does not seem to be strict, causing norms are open for interpretation for the managers which resulting in some fragmented elements in the culture. Furthermore, the presence of these incongruent cultures that are manifested within the different teams of Globe-T is in our interpretation, causing team- and sub-cultures:

*“Well, it becomes more difficult to understand the whole picture, which makes it easier to create a certain culture within the team. A culture within the team where we give 100 percent and not think about anyone else. This is what the challenge always is like. Partly to correct the thinking so that it is in line with the strategy of the company, but then also keep the team united between those who are working remotely.” - Lisa*

From the above-outlined analysis, it is possible to understand that the organizational culture seems to be very generous, making the managers possible to guide and steer the members in their own choosing, and enabling the managers to establish relationships with the team members. In turn, this also makes it easier for employees to follow the path the manager chooses. Consequently, our interpretation is that the broad overall organizational culture gives room to sub-cultures. However, our interpretation of the interviews is that the sub-cultures do

not seem to contradict with the organizational culture as long as they align and are carried out under the framework of the broad organizational culture.

## 4.2 Leadership and its Interplay with Autonomy

A second theme we identified in our data analysis was that the organizational culture and sub-cultures at Globe-T contribute to leadership that focuses on autonomy and responsibility.



### 4.2.1 An Encouraging Organizational Culture

Throughout the data analysis, it became apparent that Globe-T’s focus on autonomy is brought to them by the sub-cultures and loosely compound organizational culture. Based on the cultures, the managers give the possibility to steer and guide the employees in their own way within their team:

*“I have responsibility for an entire business, the entire value chain. We have a board that we report to, but otherwise, I run everything myself.” - Joseph*

Moreover, the managers’ opportunities to act independently establish possibilities for them to identify themselves as leaders since they are allowed to exercise leadership in their own way. During our interviews, many of the managers talked in a way which made us believe that they identified themselves with the leader position. One manager called Lisa expressed for example; *“I’m the CEO of this function”*, even though Lisa is not a CEO and has more operational responsibility in one of the business areas. The identification with the leader role was also expressed through two other managers during the interview:

*“My functional title is general manager [...] so, I manage from a leadership perspective, I manage the whole business.” – Lucas*

*“Obviously, I am a leader. I mean I’m on the Board of Directors and have staff around me. Clearly, I am a leader.”- Charles*

From our perspective, leadership appears to be central and important within the organization as the managers have created an identification with the leader position, which the open culture encourages them to take on. Leadership is therefore given a meaningful part within the manager's work, and therefore also the organization as a whole.

Furthermore, the open culture and self-dependence at Globe-T are also expressed to be attracting people that want to take on responsibility and work independently:

*“We’re a very flat structure. So, you need to want to take on a new responsibility [...] I think that everybody that I work with wants to take on responsibility, they all want to feel as if they’re growing. I do not want to come into a job and think ‘oh, I am doing this again and again and again.” - John*

However, the organization also seems to put strategic efforts on the personal development of employees, making us yet again believe leadership is viewed as a central and important part of the organization. In the annual report, the CEO of Globe-T highlights the specific importance of keeping talents motivated, and he specifically mentions leadership training:

*“Over time, we also need to keep our current talents motivated. The employees are [Globe-T], and they are the ones who ensure that we continue to develop. We want them to stay at the company for a long time and therefore work with internal training in such areas as leadership, specialist courses and training within the scope of our training programs, and we let people develop with new responsibilities.” – CEO*



From outlined above analysis, it is possible to understand that leadership becomes increasingly important as the varied cultures, organizational strategy and the decentralized structure frames the leadership in a context that emphasizes autonomy and responsibility. Our interpretation is thus that the cultures play a significant part in the organizational leadership discourse, as it values leadership highly and favours a leadership that is built upon responsibility and autonomy. To summarize, the leadership discourse brought by the cultures show that Globe-T views leadership as taking on and delegating responsibility.

#### 4.2.2 The Manager's View on Leadership

Looking further into leadership from the manager's perspective rather than the organization's view, it became apparent that the managers primarily focus on relationship- and people-oriented attributes. During our data analysis, we identified several elements that the managers expressed as valuable.

First of all, the interviewees highlighted the importance of establishing close relationships with their team members, contributing to better collaborations. Simon pointed out that establishing relationships is especially important with new team members:

*“They (new employees) certainly need to get a bit more attention at the beginning in terms of closer **collaboration**. So, you **get to know each other**, they understand my leadership style, they can find out how far they can go autonomously and when they should come back to me and ask for advice and things like that.” - Simon*

Managers emphasize a need to allow the employee to take on responsibility and act somewhat autonomously, allowing the employees to explore their role in the team and create better collaborations. Daniel further elaborated on autonomy by suggesting that trustworthiness within the team is an important aspect of the relationship creation and team spirit:

*"Leadership, to me, is leading by example, certainly. Also having a **trustworthy relationship** with each other, have a **team spirit** and foster a good team spirit as a leader and give the people the **freedom** to do their job." - Daniel*

Moreover, a majority of the managers emphasized that they want to look out for the members and enable them to grow at the same time as they give them freedom. It also seems that the managers focus on the development of team members by giving them the right tools and guide them towards a common goal:

*"Leadership is being responsible for my team, **looking out for them**, that they get work satisfaction for the work that they are being asked to undertake. [...] I will be **looking out for them** [...] and just trying to be fair and, and giving them the room to be able to **develop** themselves and **grow**." - John*

*"Leadership means to **develop a team**, to get the organization going in one and the same direction towards common goals with the same priorities or aligned priorities, [...] help the employee to **develop**, both within the framework of their role but also take on other new roles and feel **motivated** and in some way give power to the organization." - Lisa*

Our interpretation is that the leader is the one who needs to pave the way for the employees by steering the employees in the right direction. However, a part of the learning process was highlighted by another manager, stating that an important part of autonomy is letting employees to make mistakes:

*"Give the employees **responsibility** and do not pick on details, instead **let them make mistakes**." - Kim*

As the statement shows, an essential part of the employee's development is that the manager allows them to be self-dependent and let them make mistakes. It is emphasized that by letting employees make mistakes, they can learn from it and grow as professionals. Another essential

part of the leadership is to lead by example and not only talk about it. One manager underlined this through:

*"I believe that you have to **show** leadership; you can not only talk about it. You show it and **inspire** them by taking on **responsibility**, you communicate in a certain way, you have **empathy** and try to talk to people."* - Charles

Thus, we conclude a leadership discourse characterized by relationship- and people orientation. The managers emphasized leadership as empathy, inspiration, trust, development, collaboration, and team spirits. Interestingly, these attributes are more relational, putting focus on emotions and inspiration, rather than on strategic leadership.

### 4.3 The Crux of Performing Leadership in a Virtual Context



Moving onto our third theme, we have acknowledged that the leadership discourse, promoted by the managers, is characterized by emotional-, inspirational- and relational spirits. However, during our interviews, it became evident that leadership as such can be inconvenient and difficult to establish in a virtual environment. One of the interviewees underlined this dilemma:

*"The crux of leadership at a distance is that you do not have the whole image clear."*- Joseph

### 4.3.1 The Hardships of Establishing Leadership Virtually

In general, our interviewees explained that they primarily engage in virtual team meetings using voice- and video calls as well as e-mail and chat. The reason for engaging in virtual meetings is that the dispersed teams are only brought together physically two to four times a year. In line with the managers' relationship orientation, it seems that they thus value physical meetings highly:

*“You should not underestimate the importance of a certain closeness. Because if you have someone moving in the same house or within the same walls as you do, you will be able to read the person in a completely different way: mood, attitude, facial expressions and energy.” - Lisa*

In order to understand and get to know each other within a team, Lisa stresses that it is essential to read each others' body language, mood, attitudes, facial expressions and people's energy levels. However, as the statement shows, our interpretation during the interviews was that the managers are not fully able to recognize these distinctions virtually. One of the interviewees further elaborated:

*“The disadvantages are that you miss a lot of nuances, it gets pretty black and white and you miss the talk before and after the meeting. The talk where people tell you what they really think.” – Kim*

The impression of our interviewees is that most virtual team meetings are lacking in nuances and becoming rather shallow, leaving no time for small talk due to the meetings being short and concise. Moreover, it can also be viewed as they believe nuances are added to the conversation by means of small-talk, which is argued to be hard to grasp virtually.

Another manager explains that virtual communication could hinder creativity:

*“I do believe it is important to say that everything cannot always be done via phone. I am all in favor of it, but the daily noise and creativity get lost. I don’t think you can get creative over a phone or a video call. Creativity comes when you sit together and brainstorm.” - Charles*

The statement indicates that all work processes are not able to be conducted in a virtual setting. The fact that creativity is expressed to be hard to perform virtually could, in our interpretation, be traced back to the impossibility to show all means of expressions verbally. For example, expressions, body language, mimics and small-talk are argued to be harder to perceive even though using video calls. One manager confirms our interpretation by saying:

*“I mean, obviously, since you are not meeting in person, you will miss out on a lot of facial expressions. For example, if a person feels good, or if a person is very sad. You’re unable to see that. So you have to be very sensitive about listening to the voice. And you also have to be insistent to ask questions, ‘Are you really well?’ ‘Do we need to talk about something?’ And so forth.” - Paul*

The statement by Paul also stresses that it is harder to understand the employees’ feelings, which is affecting their relationship as it makes it harder for the manager to look out for the employees. Furthermore, in a virtual context, it is difficult to show your presence of support as a manager. One manager expressed:

*“I had a situation about this, not so long ago, where one of my employees was experiencing pressure from people down in the organization about (reason of pressure). In that case, I needed to help her understand what reasoning she should use. But for me, it is obvious that if she succeeded with that (correct reasoning) before, the people wouldn’t have even asked her the question, and she wouldn’t need to talk to me.” - Joseph*

It seems that Joseph gave the employee the responsibility to act, but when the employee was faced with a problem, she chose to ask him for support. Joseph seems to be supportive and helpful in how to act in that specific situation by giving advice. However, the overall

impression during the interview was that he thought the need to support the employee made him frustrated since he believed the employee should be able to handle it on her own. During the interview, he also emphasized that it is challenging to support employees in matters such as the one above, as he needs to invest time in understanding the situation before being able to help the individual employee. Moreover, having an ‘open-door policy’ was mentioned multiple times during the interviews while talking about supporting their team members, which could indicate that the managers want to show support. However, all managers expressed that it is challenging to communicate the support of an ‘open-door policy’ in a virtual context as no physical presence exists. For us, it appears managers experience difficulties to be supportive to the extent necessary in virtual environments since they are not present physically and can therefore not experience and interpret the situation themselves.

Another manager elaborated on the difficulties to be supportive and emphasized that the organizational structure and number of direct reports also are contributing to the pressure. For example, Lisa expresses a wish to adopt a more hierarchical structure with fewer reports in order to be supportive. She also stressed that the decentralized structure is making her more involved in more administrative tasks, as well as decision making being slow and synergies to be hard to find:

*“It would have been much easier to reorganize a little more hierarchically with fewer direct reports because I do not have the time to talk to everyone due to all administrative tasks. It is also very difficult to find synergies when everyone should be updated all over the business. I think we lose speed quite a bit just for the purpose of reporting with too many direct reports as it looks now.” - Lisa*

Lucas also expresses this wish of having fewer direct reports:

*“So I think I have about 11 direct reports currently, which is not ideal. That's not typical. Typically it would be maybe five.” - Lucas*

The managers seem to express frustration as they are not able to give the employees the emotional support they need. Moreover, we can see three reasons why they cannot be supportive to the extent they want in the data analysis. Firstly, virtual meetings seem to be lacking in nuances and leaving no time for small talk, causing not all aspects of the conversation visible for the respective parts. Evidentially, making it more difficult for the managers to give the correct support. Secondly, the virtual team and distance seem to bring an inability to understand situations properly, resulting in weaker and more time-consuming support of the managers. Thirdly, the managers express that they have too many direct reports, and therefore, not have the time to express their support fully.

In conclusion, it seems that managers have a difficult time establishing the supportive and emotional relationships they want when they communicate primarily via digital tools. The interpretation is based on the expressed attributes in the previous section, such as support, collaboration and inspiration. Consequently, making it harder to exercise the leadership they want to, as the emotional- and relationship-oriented aspects are hindered in a virtual context. We consider that the discrepancy between the leadership discourse that is expressed as desirable, and the leadership that is performed virtually could cause the manager some level of frustration as their leadership is hindered.

#### **4.3.2 Virtual Leadership Brings Standardization and Routines**

In a virtual environment, it seems that frustration can be caused by not being capable of understanding the nuances of team members, and therefore not being able to practice the desired leadership. In a virtual context, it puts a lot of emphasis on verbal communication since actions and nuances can not be seen. Paul elaborated on the importance to be thorough when communicating messages to others in order to avoid misinterpretation:

*“If you do not know someone, you might need to ask some more questions in order to understand something. Otherwise things could be misunderstood. That is why you obviously need to articulate and explain things more thoroughly virtually.” - Paul*

One manager elaborates on creating frameworks and directions as a tool for organizing and to overcome misinterpretations caused by people's different working styles and perceptions throughout the organization:

*“All individuals are different, and they all work in different ways. Therefore, it is even more important in a virtual team to establish some sort of framework and directions.”*  
- Simon

The impression is that virtual communication is taking on a more strategic and structured stance, in order to avoid unnecessary misinterpretations and to counteract the frustration caused by them losing the grip of their relationship-oriented focus. Being a global organization and operating in a virtual context also brings practical challenges of working with different languages, national cultures and different time zones. One manager coped the practical challenge of different time zones by structuring her way of communicating with her team members:

*“I had a situation earlier this year when I had to communicate the same information to everyone at the same time. It was that kind of information that I really wanted to tell everyone at the same time over the phone but knew I would not be able to do that due to different time zones. What I did was that I wrote an email to everyone at the same time instead. [...] You have to try to find ways, it would have been great if you could gather everyone physically to talk about things, but it doesn't always work..”* - Maria

Like other managers, the situation caused Maria to take on a more structured form of communication in order for her team members to get the same information and clear message. Furthermore, some of the managers explain that they have initiated casual talks with the whole team regularly to keep each other updated even though they are globally dispersed and not being able to perceive the daily noise. The feeling of the managers is, thus, that the managers initiate these kinds of calls in order to gain desired nuances and a more relaxed relationship with its team members. However, judging by our interviews, these calls seem to be routine-



based and structured rather than spontaneous. One example of the casual talks is virtual coffee-breaks expressed by one manager:

*“We do what we call it - a coffee break over Teams. We get coffee, and we take a few minutes chatting about other things than work. Asking about weekend plans, and you know, putting the work aside for a few minutes.” – Simon*

However, during the interview, Simon expressed that not all his team members attend these calls regularly, depending on their workload at that specific moment. The impression is that the team members have high workloads, and therefore do not prioritize engaging in casual talk in the same way as they would if they were held physically. Another manager further discussed that the workload is causing them needing to plan meetings in their calendar in order for them to keep in contact:

*“I support my team members by prioritizing them when they call, but also to plan in calls so you have it on a regular basis, because we are really busy and therefore it can be good to have it planned in our calendars.” - Joseph*

Maria gave another example of standardization in the virtual environment, however, emphasizing formalization:

*“We have at least one team meeting a month - a telephone meeting. In general, all team members prepare an agenda on matters that they want to talk about, things they may need my approval for or need to discuss. Their contribution is important in order for us as a team to reach our goals. They prepare the material for me in advance, including all documents [...] The meetings usually take about two hours where we go through everything from start to finish, and I obviously add things I find important. So yes, I guess so they are reasonably formalized, and that is good, of course, because it is easy to follow up and it is also easy to go back to what we were discussing.” – Maria*

Our overall impression is the managers that the experience of lacking nuances during virtual meetings is constructing a reliance where the managers believe instrumentality is necessary in order to develop the nuances they are looking for. In other words, it seems like the need for closer and more nuanced relationships virtually are developing a sense of urgency to act in a structured way by focusing on details, standardization and formalization. We can see some elements of the managers trying to be supportive and encouraging in the virtual teams, for example, in the latter statement by Maria where she focuses on all team members contributing to the meetings. However, virtually this support is taking place in a standardized manner.

#### 4.4 The Virtual Environment Undermining the Desirable Leadership

As our fourth theme, and final empirical finding we concluded that the routines and standardization in the virtual environment at Globe-T, is undermining the leadership the managers want to perform.



Expressed in the chapter mentioned above, the frustration of not being able to establish an emotional- and relationship-oriented leadership approach to the extent they want to in virtual environments, is making the managers engage in more routines and standardized working methods. However, the elements of instrumentality brought by structured working methods are, in our opinion, somewhat contradicting the managers' view of leadership and what they express as desirable. Consequently, the structured working methods seem to lean more towards managerial aspects than leadership ones, as it emphasizes directing employees rather than encouraging them to be self-dependent.

Our interviewees argue that the more managerial tasks, such as administration, has developed during the last couple of years:

*“A negative thing that has happened in the last couple of years is that the proportion of work, tasks related to administration and reporting, analyzes has increased [...] So, my administrative work task has increased a lot. Everything like this, unfortunately, goes beyond our ability to work out to customers and the market, strategically, additionally.” – Lisa*

Interestingly, throughout our empirical data, the managerial role was described in a slightly negative sense:

*"Managers manages things and goes into micro-management as well and manages a bunch of people, while a leader gives inspiration [...] and takes ideas and supports them instead of just telling people what they should be doing. A leader in that sense is a coach to his team in order to make them successful. Manager is more someone who is managing his team in order to be successful themselves." - Daniel*

*"It is a classic thing. A manager sounds more boring, you point with your whole hand and want everyone to do the same things. It is clear that it is more fun to be a leader than to be a manager." - Maria*

When looking deeper into the leadership discrepancy between leadership and management, it also seems that the managers' own realization of themselves being more involved in management rather than leadership is strengthening their frustration. Therefore, it is making it even more difficult for them to practice leadership as they desire, since engaging in structured and managerial tasks risks destabilizing trust, responsibility, development and leadership activities. Since virtual meetings are expressed to be lacking in several ways, for example, in nuances and emotional manners, it is harder, or possibly even unmanageable, to achieve close relationships and trustworthiness within the team. Furthermore, our interviews also gave the

impression that the managers want to trust their employees in their work and responsibilities. However, when not being able to trust them, it seems like they feel the need to perform micro-management:

*“I think it’s, you know, as a leader you have a good relationship with them (employees), you know, you have professional people that you can fully trust to get their stuff done. Then you don’t have to micromanage. It is certainly a problem if you need to do micro-management over distance. It is not possible.” - Daniel*

Another manager expressed the similar:

*Well, they, whenever they have, whenever they need support, they come to me. Otherwise, you know, we are 16 people and I’m definitely anything but a micro-manager. I leave the room to do their job. They know what the goals are and what needs to be done. And whenever they run into obstacles, they come to me, approach me and then we discuss options whenever they need advice or coaching they come and ask for it.” - Simon*

When the managers cannot trust their employees to do their work, it seems like they feel the need to be more involved and manage the working processes of the employees to a more considerable extent by micro-management. Moreover, if performing micro-management, the managers do not allow the employees to act independently, which can be seen as disrupting the autonomy. Therefore, also the desirable leadership.

In conclusion, if the trust, development of employees and responsibility are destabilized, it could, in our interpretation, also evade and weaken the things the organization values the most, namely the desirable autonomy. We believe the destabilization also could undermine the organizational cultures, as the fundamental purpose of the cultures is being counteracted.

## 4.5 Summary of Our Findings

To conclude our empirical findings and our data analysis, we have during the analysis grouped our findings into four themes which will be summarized shortly in this section.

First of all, during our analysis, it became apparent that the decentralized model and strategy of Globe-T is causing the organization and managers to emphasize and value responsibility and autonomy highly. Moreover, we also interpreted that the dispersed organization is brought together by a loosely compound and open culture, making the independent working units cooperate to a certain extent. However, due to the organizational culture being inclusive and generous, the individual managers are given the possibility to establish their working methods in teams as the organizational culture is interpreted slightly differently. As a consequence, sub-cultures and cultural fragmentation have arisen in the organization.

Secondly, we identified that the fragmented organizational culture and sub-cultures at Globe-T is giving rise to a leadership focusing on autonomy and accountability. Moreover, as the cultures within the organization support the leadership, leadership is becoming an increasingly important aspect within the organization. However, when looking deeper into the managers' view on leadership, it became apparent that their leadership seems to be characterized by relationship- and people orientation, emphasizing elements such as motivation, development, trust, empathy and inspiration.

As a third theme, we noticed that the leadership discourse expressed by the manager is difficult and inconvenient to establish in a virtual environment due to the impossibility to express all means of expressions verbally. The managers expressed that the virtual meeting does not allow them to fully understand facial expressions, mimics, nuances in languages as well as being too short and concise for small-talk. In addition to this, the managers also expressed challenges to exercise and show their acts of support virtually. Consequently, the difficulties are making it more difficult for managers to exercise the leadership they want, as the emotional- and relationship-oriented aspects of the meetings are hindered in a virtual context. Moreover, we could also acknowledge that the managers' realization of the impossibility to exercise the desirable leadership is causing them to be frustrated. As a result, they are constructing a

reliance where they believe structures and formalization is necessary in order to develop the nuanced relationship they are looking for.

The fourth, and final theme, we concluded during our data analysis, was that the elements of instrumentality brought by structured working methods, seem to contradict the managers' view of desirable leadership as it focuses more on managerial aspects than emotional- and relationship aspects. When the managers realize the discrepancy themselves, their frustration rises again and therefore making it even more difficult for them to exercise the leadership they want. We also noticed that the possibility of virtual leadership risks destabilizing trust, responsibility, development as the leaders' activities are hindered. Evidentially, engaging in virtual leadership within Globe-T, therefore, risks evading and weakening the matters that the organization values the most, organizational culture and the desirable autonomy as trust and self-dependence are hindered.

The outlined analysis and empirical finding sparked the following question for discussion in our minds which will be elaborated on in the next section:

*Why are the managers at Globe-T persistent to talk about leadership virtually when they are not achieving what they wish for?*

## 5. Discussion

The analysis of our empirical material presented in the previous chapter has explored our research question of “*How is virtual leadership efforts exercised in a global organizational context?*” by first demonstrating *what* kind of leadership the manager expressed as ideal as well as *what* leadership is exercised at Globe-T in practice. Secondly, we will discuss *how* the exercised leadership seems to contradict the desirable ideal in virtual environments. The following discussion seeks to deepen and analyze the empirical findings with the help of existing literature in order to develop a more profound understanding of the phenomenon of virtual leadership. The discussion will take on a critical approach to virtual leadership, and explore the question of why the managers at Globe-T are persistent to talk about virtual leadership when acting it out is undermining their desirable outcomes.

### 5.1 Strategy Resulting in a Broad and Open Organizational Culture

In order to obtain a comprehensive and rich understanding of how virtual leadership is exercised in practice at Globe-T, we need to develop a more in-depth understanding of the context of strategy and structure regarding leadership within the organizations. In general, in our empirical material, we see that Globe-T is a global multinational organization with a growth strategy aiming to recruit locally in order to achieve local presence at the same time as utilizing the strengths of being a global organization. Based on our material, we acknowledged that Globe-T had adopted a decentralized model to be able to adapt to local markets quickly and observe contextual differences, developing an aim of autonomy and freedom in the organization as decision-making is delegated and employees are self-dependent. As Child (2005) argues, there is pressure on dispersed teams to act independently. Thus we can conclude that the decentralized model is causing the managers of Globe-T to focus on self-dependence and autonomy, which can be the reason why the organization also emphasizes it to a large extent.

As the analysis outlined, the organization focuses on cooperating the dispersed team using a loosely compound and broad organizational culture. In line with the thought of Schein (2010), the organizational culture at Globe-T accommodates norms, values and beliefs that the dispersed teams and organization share, for example, the sense of commitment, responsibility and autonomy, creating the open culture. As Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) states, our overall impression is that the open organizational culture has influenced the managers' directions on how to perform leadership, making it possible for Globe-T to establish the essential norms of the responsibility and autonomy at all levels within the organization. We base this argument on the consistency of managers emphasizing autonomy during our interviews. However, due to the organizational culture being open and broad, it opened up the possibility for the managers to interpret the values and, therefore, act upon the culture in slightly different ways throughout the organization, resulting in cultural fragmentation and the creation of sub-cultures (Schein, 2010). However, the fact that the managers contribute to sub-cultures also seemed to be a result of the dispersed managers trying to create a team spirit and community within their teams, which was expressed as desirable during our interviews. The fact correlates with Schein (2010) that stresses the sense of community is essential in dispersed teams, as well as Lamson (2018) that argue it is even more critical for teams operating virtually.

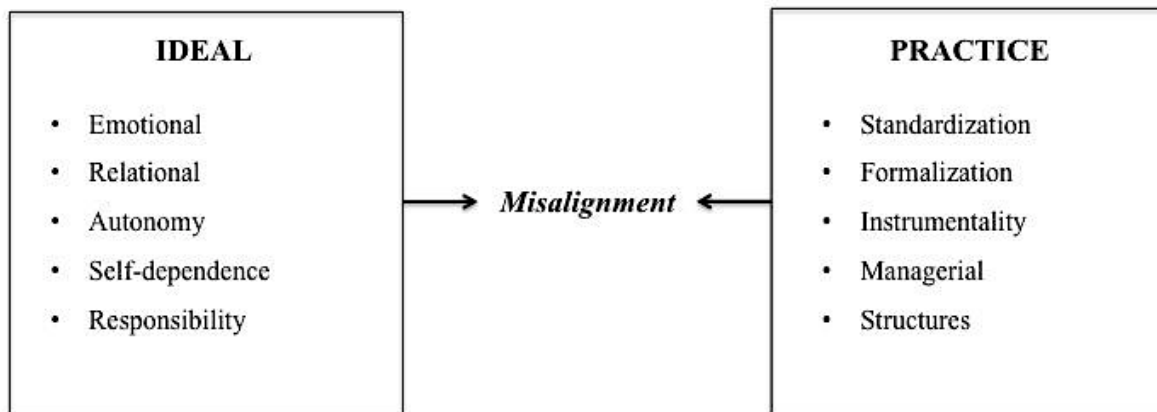
Nevertheless, it was fascinating to detect in our data material that while the sub-cultures carry slightly different views and values, the joint organizational culture focusing on autonomy and responsibility, seem to influence how the managers talk, act and feel about the organization and operations in a similar way (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017). We can, thus, notice a symbiosis and co-existence of the organizational- and sub-cultures, which according to Sackmann (1992), develops when meaning and beliefs are shared within an organization at the same time as different groups have some separate values as well. Moreover, the culture seems to influence a leadership focusing on autonomy and responsibility, which according to Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) is guiding the leaders' actions and their behaviour, eventually causing the leadership to be of significant importance in the organization.



## 5.2 Conflicting Concerns at Globe-T

Concerning virtual leadership at Globe-T, we claim that, based on our analysis, there exists a misalignment between the ideal leadership expressed by the managers and the leadership exercised in contextual practice. As outlined in the empirical analysis, the elements of instrumentality brought by structured working methods, in reality, is contradicting the managers' view of leadership and what they express they want to achieve as leaders. As *figure 2* illustrates, we acknowledged during our interviews, that the ideal leadership discourse promoted by the managers is characterized by emotional-, inspirational- and relational spirits.

However, it also became evident that the managers' actions in virtual reality are misaligned with the managers' ideal view. In order to understand the misalignment more in-depth, the following sections will elaborate on the two conflicting concerns: *leadership ideal* and *virtual leadership in practice*.



*Figure 2: Misalignment with leadership ideals and leadership practice*

### 5.2.1 The Ideal: Emotional- and Relationship Oriented Leadership

In our case study, it appeared that the managers shared a relatively unified understanding of the leadership they want to perform. The managers described the ideal leadership discourse as relational- and emotional, revealing that they value and view leadership aspects much like the ones expressed in popular leadership literature (c.f Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2010; Harrison, 2018). Alignments can be seen between the literature and the values that were expressed as ideal by the managers in the data material: *responsibility, motivation, spirit, empathy, inspiration, learning and getting to know each other*. In *figure 2*, the ideals are illustrated as emotional, relational, autonomy, self-dependence and responsibility. For example, the values are supported by the definition of leadership by Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017), that describes leadership as “exerting influence on understandings and meanings” (p.3). Therefore, we consider the managers of Globe-T to be very knowledgeable about the leadership topic and their role as leaders, which indicates that the socially constructed leadership discourse influences them to a great extent.

As the managers emphasize emotions and relationships, we can derive a similarity to the dominant leadership perspective of relation-oriented leadership, which encourage coaching and inspiration (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The fact that the managers highlighted that they want to achieve a trustworthy relationship with their respective team members also confirms the position within the leadership perspective. However, the expressed relation-creation focus correlates with Grint (2005) that stresses that leadership is a function of a community and not a result derived from one single individual. With the argument of Grint (2005), we thus recognize the limitations of categorizing the managers’ expressed leadership efforts as relationship-oriented, as the leadership perspective is argued to only focus on the manager’s actions towards employees rather than the perceptions of their followers (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). On the contrary, we view leadership as a social process within the organization (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010), as the managers emphasize elements that need to be received and accepted not only by themselves. For example, the process of getting to know each other, and the learning process which includes interaction between the manager and employee. With the social process in mind, our empirical gathering instead highlights the

situational leadership approach as a better fit for the managers at Globe-T instead of the relation-oriented one as expressed above. We base this argument on the fact that the situational approach considers the adaptability of leaders to contextual matters (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982) since employees and manager at Globe-T are influenced by different contexts of governance, coaching, support and delegation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). Moreover, as self-dependence is viewed as an ideal element within the organization, this aligned with the situational approach to leadership which is promoting the development of employees by independence (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). However, in our data analysis, we could identify several occasions when the managers experienced difficulties in understanding the context and situation of their employees, making it slightly complicated to act as a situational leader. Moreover, when they engage in managerial tasks they perform acts much like the ones expressed in the classical leadership approach (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017).

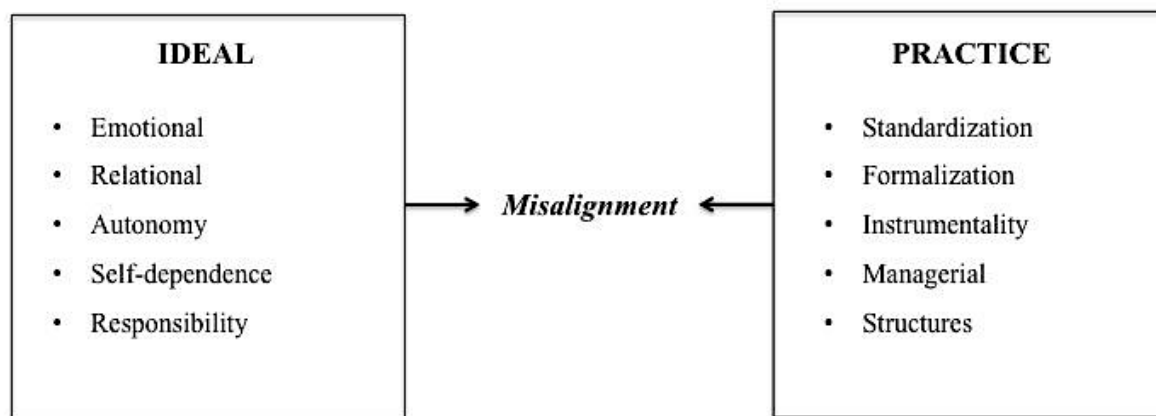
At Globe-T, the managers also advocate for autonomy and express that they want to give the employees the freedom to work independently, making responsibility of employees an ideal element. However, in order to accomplish autonomy, trust needs to be established between managers, employees and team members (Grosse, 2002: Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998). As expressed in the previous chapter, the autonomy expressed by the managers is a part of the organizational culture, which promotes responsibility, commitment and good business ethics as desirable values externally. Furthermore, as expressed in the empirical analysis, the culture also influences and guides the managers' leadership efforts as well (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017), making them, like the culture, to portray autonomy and responsibility as ideal. However, the leader's view of ideal attributes are not simply a result of the organizational culture, Barker (1997) also argues that the general population is creating the image of an ideal leader. As expressed above, the managers share a united view of leadership closely linked to popular research, which indicates that the moulded image of an ideal leader in the society and research is influencing them (Barker, 1997). Moreover, the moulded image of an ideal leader is facilitating the leaders a possibility to identify themselves and act in a similar matter (Hogg, 2001).

We, thus, consider the affirmed ideal expressed by the managers to be highly context and case-specific, since the organization is operating in a global context and is holding a unique and

leading position within the industry. Moreover, we do not expect the same leadership ideals to be expressed in other studies and organization, and therefore, should the ideal not be generalized (cf. Yin, 2013).

### 5.2.2 The Reality: Instrumentality Brought by Frustration

In comparison to the leadership ideal, we identified that the leadership practised virtually at Globe-T is focusing on standardization and formalization rather than emotional- and relationship-oriented elements. Consequently, causing a misalignment between *ideal* and *practice*.



*Figure 2: Misalignment with leadership ideals and practice in a virtual context*

Reflecting on our empirical material, we derived that the leadership promoted as the ideal is inconvenient and challenging to establish in a virtual environment at Globe-T. One of the most immediate hardships detected was the inability to understand what kind of support employees needed and for the managers to express the actions to the employees. According to Zigurs (2003) the ability to use precise expressiveness in virtual environments is vital in order to influence employees, which could indicate that the managers at Globe-T currently do not influence the employees in the way they desired. Therefore, making it more difficult also to

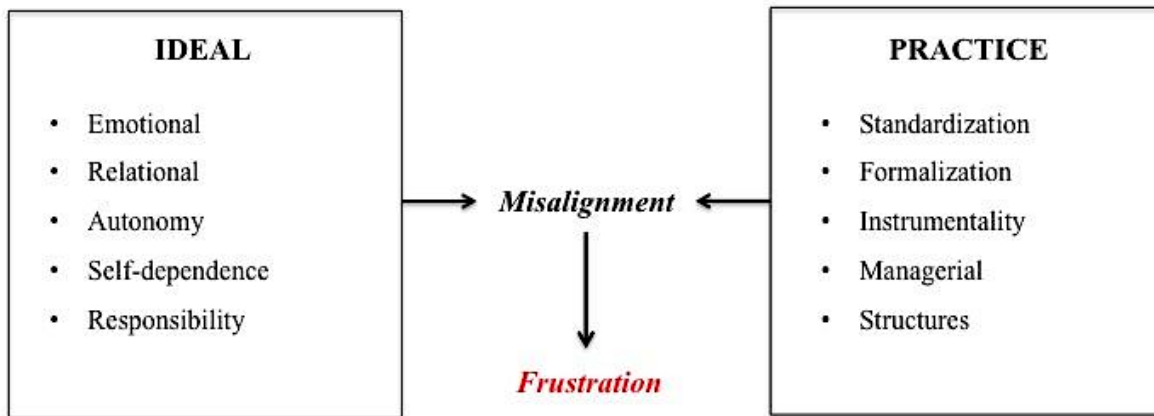
achieve the desired autonomy. Research by Zaccaro and Bader (2003) also shows that the lack of physical meetings is affecting the managers' ability to influence and get information about the team status, which is why it is even more essential that employees work independently, and autonomy is promoted in dispersed teams (Manz & Sims, 1987). We can see similar behaviour in our case, for example, when the managers are structuring virtual meetings using pre-set agendas, resulting in meetings being short and concise. However, in line with the research of Zigurs (2003), the manager experienced difficulties when exercising leadership in a virtual context, which can be argued as a result of it being more difficult to establish trust, motivation and cohesion in virtual teams due to the hindering of communication flow, that affects the team dynamic in another way than in physical meetings.

Furthermore, it became apparent in our empirical data material, that discrepancy between the leadership ideal and the leadership that is performed virtually is causing the manager some level of frustration as their leadership is hindered (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2017). In other words, we identified the managers are currently lacking the cognitive understanding of how to establish the desired trusting relationship-orientated bonds virtually. As Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2017) states, we can see that the uncertainty is causing the managers to compensate for emotional absence by focusing on instrumentality through standardization such as rules and routines (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017), by for example establishing communication frameworks (Eissa et al., 2012). Nonetheless, the formal structures and elements of instrumentality created in practice are, as seen in *figure 2*, misaligned with the ideal view of leadership expressed by the manager, and therefore also the wish to achieve autonomy.

Furthermore, the fact that the managers at Globe-T expressed an increased amount of administrative tasks is also causing the managers frustration. For example, the quotes stating that the managers are frustrated about having to engage in more administrative tasks due to a high number of direct reports in virtual teams indicates that the autonomy is to some extent weakened in the virtual environment. However, scholars argue that virtual environment calls for efforts of managers to incorporate management operations with their leadership performance in order to establish a trusting and collaborative environment (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Brewer, 2015; Ejiwale, 2012; Fay & Kline, 2011; Hambley, O'Neil, & Kline, 2007),

which is one of the ideals managers want to achieve. Moreover, it also became evident that the managers were frustrated about adopting managerial tasks, indicating that the managers identified themselves with the leadership role and not the managerial one. Nevertheless, it could also be seen as confirming the thoughts of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2010) stating that frustration arises when it is challenging to maintain a coherent view of what you as a leader stands for and what you accomplish.

In conclusion, there exists a misalignment between the leadership *ideal* and leadership exercised in *practice*, causing the managers to be frustrated (illustrated in *figure 3*), as well as to create a belief that they can compensate for the lack of emotional- and relationship-oriented leadership by instrumentality.



*Figure 3: Misalignment is causing frustration*

### 5.2.3 The Risk of Undermining what Globe-T Values

Throughout this chapter, we have discussed that the *ideal* view of leadership is misaligned with the managers' actions in *practice*. However, this section seeks to discuss the potential consequences of the misalignment we identified in our study.

First of all, when the manager engages in standardized and formalized matters in the virtual environment, they are undermining their own beliefs as emotional- and relationship-oriented leaders. As seen in our empirical data material, the managers are experiencing difficulties in extracting nuances and bonds through the virtual channels, evidentially causing them to create a reliance on instrumentality and more managerial tasks. In comparison to the argument of Avolio and Kahai (2003) and Trivedi and Desai (2012), stating that fundamentals of leadership are likely to remain the same in a virtual context, we noticed that the managers' actions at Globe-T are risking destabilizing trust and responsibility of employees. We base this argument on the fact that the employees are forced to adjust to the standardized and formalized working methods brought by the instrumentality in virtual environments, making them not being able to be self-dependent to the extent they possibly could have been in a physical atmosphere. Moreover, we can further see traces of them risking destabilizing other aspects of the leadership ideal if engaging instrumentally, for example, the development of employees as well as inspirational elements since the communication flow is hindered. However, it should be noticed that we believe that the contradictory behaviours and frustration of the managers are not conscious actions performed by them, rather subconscious behaviours provoked by the social context.

Secondly, as we can see above, the actions of managers in the virtual environment are also weakening the autonomy within the organization. It became evident in the empirical data material that the virtual context resulted in managers not having the same possibility to establish trustworthy relationships with the employees, causing them not fully to trust them. The weakened trust in the relationship affects the employees' practicability to express their ideas and to be self-dependent (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010). In the virtual environment, we also identified challenges like the ones expressed in literature for the managers in conveying clear messages to their team members, which was expressed by our managers when dealing with practical challenges such as language barriers for example (Zigurs, 2003). Moreover, when the managers at Globe-T cannot communicate in coercive ways, it can accordingly to Lamson (2018) also hinder the employees' comprehension of the team context of *what*, *why* and *who* they are as a team, and what missions they should act upon. Evidentially, the ambiguity of the context is causing the employees not being able to work as independently as

the managers' desire, which could cause a lack of trust within the team (Goldratt, 1997). Concerning Langfred's (2007) argument of low trust's impact on autonomy and task interdependencies, we believe that the autonomy within Globe-T is lowered as the virtual environment is resulting in low trust and self-dependence of employees.

The third and final consequence of the misalignment concluded from our data material, is that there exists a risk at Globe-T to undermine the organizational culture if the leadership ideals and autonomy is destabilized in the virtual environment. The organizational culture seems to co-exist in symbiosis with existing sub-cultures at Globe-T, influencing the organizational beliefs and leadership performed to be characterized by autonomy and responsibility (Sackmann, 1992). However, as the instrumentality in the teams is weakening the autonomy within the organization, the overall organizational beliefs brought by the culture is also at risk to be undermined.

In conclusion, throughout our study, we have identified several risks of Globe-T undermining aspects that they value highly and are built upon, namely leadership activities, autonomy and organization culture. Surprisingly, our empirical findings made us also acknowledge the potential risk of Globe-T undermining their business strategy due to their fundamental purpose and foundation of autonomy being challenged in the virtual environment. Moreover, we also see the possibility of the acquisition strategy of Globe-T to be undermined as the organization will not be able to incorporate the fundamental aspects and create a sense of autonomy to newly acquired companies. As leadership is considered a powerful and necessary tool for achieving organizational success (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Gil et al., 2011), and the fact that the acts of managers are argued to have a substantial effect on the organization as a whole (Gill, 2002), we wonder why Globe-T are persistent in holding on to these ideals in a new virtual terrain even though they are not achieving what they want to. In the following chapter we will discuss potential reasons for their persistence.



### **5.3 The Persistence of Talking about Leadership Virtually**

In order to provide any practical suggestions to the case company and theoretical insights on the topic, we need to explore potential reasons why the managers at Globe-T are persistent to talk about leadership in a global and virtual environment, even though it could potentially undermine fundamental aspects of their business. Here, we have identified two possible reasons for the actions, namely influences brought by popular leadership discourse and the managers' self-identification with the leadership role.

#### **5.3.1 Popular Leadership Discourse**

First of all, the empirical material suggests that the socially constructed leadership discourse is influencing the managers to act and view leadership in the way they do. As expressed in the literature review, leadership is a popular discourse (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Gil et al., 2011) in contemporary organizations, and organizations are today expected to talk about leadership as a corporate element. Furthermore, during our data analysis, it also became evident that the managers are knowledgeable about the leadership topics, which support our argument on them being influenced by the dominating leadership literature that is argued to be essential for organizational success (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Gil et al., 2011). However, we claim that the mainstream studies on leadership have, alike Collison and Tourish (2015), given people romanticized ideals on what constitutes good leadership. The leadership ideals expressed by managers at Globe-T is, in our opinion, merely a glorified view of relationship-oriented leadership that is almost impossible to live up to in a virtual environment (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010).

According to Savolainen (2013), when working in new terrains, such as a virtual environment, the emphasis is put on the manager's ability to adjust and find tools to tackle any challenges that arise. Moreover, the challenges also call for a significant adjustment of the leadership performed and its aim (Avolio & Kahai, 2003; Gallenkamp, et al., 2011). However, as seen in our study, the managers are influenced by literature to focus on being an 'ideal' leader, which

seems to make them put fewer efforts on other aspects such as the broader context (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2010), such as the new virtual environment. The argument is based on the statement by Alvesson and Ydén (2000) saying that leadership is an expression of mutual relationship in a broader context, where the organizational social-, cultural- and contextual situation is crucial to reconsider. Moreover, research also shows that contextual functions and cultures could sometimes play a more significant role than the common attitudes the dominant leadership literature seek to attain (Alvesson & Ydén, 2000). Considering Globe-T, we thus consider it to be of significant importance to relate to the foundation of autonomy and global presence of the organization (Alvesson & Björkman, 1992). However, when taking the complexity of the virtual leadership phenomena (Goldratt, 1997) in consideration, we thus recognize the difficulties Globe-T are facing when adapting to the new virtual environment. Nevertheless, deriving from our material, we can acknowledge that Globe-T is a thriving organization which holds a leading position on the market.

### **5.3.2 Managers' Self-identification: Fact, Ignorance or Imagination?**

In addition to the possibility of the managers being influenced to a great extent by the leadership discourse, we also believe one reason for the managers being persistent to talk about virtual leadership is based on the managers own self-identification with the leadership role. As seen in our empirical material, the managers are frustrated about not being able to establish the emotional- and relational bonds with the employees they want to achieve. As a result, the managers might start to question their capabilities as leaders, causing them frustration (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Moreover, our interviews outlined that the managers all identify themselves as leaders with inspirational qualities rather than directional ones, and have a negative attitude towards the managerial role in general. However, as they are putting focus on instrumentality in the virtual teams, due to the lack of control, they are contradicting their own social identity they categorize themselves within, by taking on more of a managerial role than the leadership role (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Moreover, they are also hindering what is expressed as leadership according to popular leadership literature as elaborated on above (c.f. Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2010). Their own social identity will potentially continue to

be contradicted as long as they are holding on to the leadership ideals promoted in literature in the new virtual environment.

Through our empirical analysis, we acknowledged that the managers also carry ideas about what constitutes good leadership, which according to Hogg (2001) can make people that identify themselves with the ideas to take on a superior leader position. Moreover, the distance between the managers and employees seen in our empirical material can also be seen as creating a mystique around the manager, making them be perceived in a greater light than the manager might be (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). The quote expressed in our empirical material where one of the managers named herself as the ‘CEO’ of her business unit, shows one example of the managers putting themselves in a greater light than her title entails her to do. Following the views of Alvesson and Ydén (2000), leadership also entails that leaders are exercising power over the ones following them. As we can conclude from our empirical data, the knowledge-intensive and decentralized organization that Globe-T presents is causing the manager ambiguous and insecurities of them as leaders, since they sometimes need to consult with their team members who hold expert knowledge in specific areas (Goldratt, 1997). However, the difficulties in being visible and establishing a superior position within the dispersed teams at Globe-T, seem to make the managers cope with the conflicts of power distribution (Goldratt, 1997) by emphasizing instrumentality in order for them to effectively communicate messages virtually (Eissa et al., 2012). Engaging in standardized working methods could therefore also convey their control as a leader since they are positioning themselves in a superior position towards the employees by directing in a managerial manner (Alvesson & Ydén, 2000). However, in line with our statement above, we emphasize that the actions of the managers and their self-identification with the leadership role are likely to be an unconscious act. In our opinion, this indicates that they might not be aware of, or unwilling to, change their leadership ideals.

## 5.4 Concluding Discussion

Throughout this chapter, we have discussed *what* leadership managers at Globe-T consider as ideal as well as *what* leadership they are exercising in practice. Moreover, we deepened discussion by exploring *how* the conflicting concerns at Globe-T regarding leadership are misaligned, showing that the ideal leadership expressed influenced by popular literature and society is contradicting the instrumentality brought by the managers in practice. Furthermore, the discussion brought us to the recognition of the misalignment could result in Globe-T undermining what they desire to achieve. We concluded the chapter by discussing *why* the managers seem to be persistent in talking about the virtual leadership phenomenon, namely because they are influenced by the leadership discourse as well as them identifying themselves to the leader role.

## **6. Conclusion**

With our qualitative case study, we aimed to develop a deeper understanding of how virtual leadership is exercised in practice in a global organizational context. Thereby, the purpose of our study was to address the need for further investigation in the topic, and contribute with insights to the virtual leadership literature and help future researchers. In order to demonstrate that we have met our aim and answered our research question, the following chapter will summarize our empirical contributions and practical implications, as well as illustrate our contribution to the leadership literature. To conclude our study, we will outline our suggestions on future research of the virtual leadership phenomenon.

### **6.1 Empirical Findings**

Our study identified that exercising virtual leadership in practice brings particular challenges in order to accomplish it effectively. However, with our case study at Globe-T, we were allowed to explore the challenges of virtual leadership in practice in a global organizational context built upon decentralization and focus on autonomy.

The first empirical finding identified that our case company, Globe-T, strives towards autonomy as the decentralized model and business strategy of the organization is influencing managers to promote self-dependence and responsibility within their respective teams. Moreover, as the loosely compound organizational culture at Globe-T is making room for the managers to establish their working methods within the cultural framework, it is causing the managers' actions to be an effect of the organizational culture as well as the leadership to be a significant part of the organization. However, in our study, it also became evident that the managers are influenced by the socially constructed leadership discourse, making them consider their ideal leadership as being characterized by relational- and emotional elements.

Our second finding uncovered a significant degree of misalignment between the managers' view of leadership and the leadership exercised in a virtual environment in practice at Globe-T. As the previous section outlined, the managers emphasized and desired to exercise relational-

and emotional leadership characterized by elements of autonomy and self-dependence. However, our findings identified that the desired leadership could be difficult, if not even impossible, to achieve in a virtual context, since means of expressions and emotional bonds are hindered through technology and other virtual contexts. Moreover, we could conclude that the managers' realization of the impossibility to exercise desirable leadership is causing them frustration. As a result, they are constructing a reliance where they believe structures and formalization is necessary in order to develop the nuanced relationship they are looking for.

Our third finding demonstrates that the instrumentality brought by the formalized and structured working ways of the managers is risking destabilizing the trust, responsibility, development of employees and their leadership activities. As a result, we also acknowledged the risk of Globe-T undermining the aspects they are built upon and treasure the most, the autonomy and organization culture. Moreover, the empirical findings also identified the potential risk of Globe-T undermining their business strategy due to their fundamental purpose and foundation of autonomy being challenged in the virtual environment. As a result, endanger the acquisition strategy of Globe-T to be undermined as well.

Our fourth and final finding indicates that the managers are persistent to talk about and exercise leadership in a virtual environment, even though they are risking undermining what they desire to achieve. In our study, we demonstrated that one potential reason for the managers' persistence of holding on to unachievable leadership ideals, is them being influenced by the general leadership discourse to a great extent, causing them not to realize the challenges it brings in practice. Moreover, we also acknowledge the possibility of the managers own self-identification with the leadership role in making them unable, or unwilling, to let go of the leadership ideals they desire to achieve.

Overall, based on our findings, we can say that we have met the aim of our study to develop a deeper understanding of the virtual leadership phenomenon, and answered our research question of how virtual leadership is exercised and understood in a global organization. Moreover, we have contributed with insights on how practitioners can exercise virtual leadership in a global organization, as well as identifying several challenges of exercising virtual leadership in practice. In our specific case, we can claim that our case company is

exercising leadership that is misaligned with their leadership ideals, and are in the longer run risking undermining the fundamental elements of the organization. To conclude this section, our findings contribute to a better understanding of the concept ‘virtual leadership’, and thus add to the general research area as outlined in the following chapter.

## **6.2 Theoretical Contributions**

As outlined in the problem statement and rationale of this study, there is a lack of sufficiently in-depth research on virtual leadership in global organizations (Seetharaman & Cranefield, 2019; Straus, 1997), which is of particular interest today as virtual teams are increasing rapidly (Martins, Gilson & Maynard, 2004; Webster & Staples 2006). Additionally, the existing research on virtual leadership is emphasizing the distant relationship between manager and employees (Warkentin, Sayeed & Hightower, 1997; Webster & Staples 2006; Wang et al. 2009) as well as the practical challenges brought on by the managers due to the distance between them and their employees (Antonakis & Atwater 2002; Neufeld et al. 2010; Wang et al. 2009). However, less qualitative in-depth studies are focusing on how virtual leadership is exercised in practice within a virtual environment. In our study, we could study how virtual leadership is exercised in practice by presenting a case company that is characterized by decentralization and open organizational culture, as well as aiming to achieve autonomy and innovative ways to establish leadership efforts virtually.

With our study on the case company, we have been able to bring both practical and theoretical insights on how virtual leadership is exercised and understood in practice at our case company Globe-T. Our study further elaborates on previous literature by confirming that working in a virtual environment calls for significant adjustment of the leaders’ actions in practice (Savolainen, 2013) as well as emphasizing that realities in practice are context-based (Chalmers, 1999). However, by applying literature to our study, we explored uncharted areas in research and identified the need for leaders to adjust their leadership actions to situational-structural and cultural contexts. Moreover, we contribute with theoretical insights by demonstrating that virtual leadership is a contextual process rather than a de-contextualized act

often seen in previous literature. Primarily, we illustrated how socially constructed leadership ideals are inconvenient to establish in a virtual organizational context such as the one at Globe-T, due to the virtual context resulting in the creation of conflicting instrumentality. Furthermore, we are adding to the literature of virtual leadership through outlining that Globe-T, as a global decentralized organization, has to deal with additional complexity as their organizational culture is allowing managers throughout the organization to act as leaders in different ways.

### **6.3 Practical Implications**

Elaborating on our empirical findings, and taking our discussion about how virtual leadership is exercised at Globe-T into account, we would like to promote practical implications that emerged throughout our study. It became apparent that virtual leadership is a complex process, and that it is based on contextual aspects, which put pressure on the manager to adjust and shape their leadership action to the specific context. In our study, it became evident that the leadership actions performed in a virtual environment at Globe-T, are potentially unconscious acts by the managers. However, acknowledging that virtual leadership is a contextual process, we want to emphasise that there is a need of the managers to increase their self-reflection capability in order to adjust their actions effectively, as well as to understand the perception of them by others. Moreover, we suggest that practitioners shall address the challenges of managing a virtual team by openly addressing their actions, the team members' differences and the context. More specifically, we suggest that practitioners need to be aware and justify their actions when engaging in virtual leadership.

Furthermore, virtual communications tools put significant efforts on the explicitness of the managers to avoid ambiguity, resulting in further pressure on the manager to frame their virtual leadership to the context. Therefore, we suggest that there is a need for practitioners to increase their capacity to influence their team members and support employees across the organization in order for them to convey the organizational culture and accomplish corporate goals. Moreover, we recommend following Lamson (2018) advice by creating a community and



context on *what*, *why* and *who* they are as a team and communicating a shared vision and overall mission to create meaning for the team members. By doing this, the manager will build a stable ground to stand on and be able to establish a team cohesion. However, as a part of the managers' changed mindset, it is of importance to accept that the change process of managers could be uncomfortable for them as their self-identification could change.

## 6.4 Further Research

Our study surfaced undeveloped areas of virtual leadership that appear overlooked in the literature. We claim that the findings mentioned above can not be generalized and applied to other organizations due to the case study being specific context. Despite this, we hope that our research can encourage organizations that operate in a virtual environment and inspire them to start acknowledging the challenges of virtual leadership in practice. The complexity of the phenomena is yet uncharted, and with the fast-developing digitized organizational world, we hope that the topic of virtual leadership will attract more consideration in future research. Therefore, we have identified two areas of future research.

First of all, we suggest future research on the phenomena of virtual leadership by conducting more in-depth interpretive studies based on observations and a larger amount of interviews. We believe further studies on virtual leadership would help the literature to elaborate on the new topic and explore different kinds of leadership suitable to act upon in a virtual context. Additionally, we believe the employee's perspective on virtual leadership also is of importance. Therefore, we promote future research based on the views of both the manager and the employee's, which will result in a more holistic view of the context. Secondly, we believe that it would have been interesting to future research different organizations that perform leadership in a virtual environment and compare their performance and approaches. Furthermore, it would be of interest to examine how leadership is exercised and understood in virtual teams in a different context, such as countries, industries and size, to possibly investigate how cultural and other contextual differences affect virtual leadership.

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