



**SCHOOL OF
ECONOMICS AND
MANAGEMENT**

Master Thesis

**IKEA Group employees as DANCERs in a normative context:
Mindfulness and its experienced influence on self-leadership**

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Managing People, Knowledge, and Change

Lund University School of Economics and Management

“No problem can be solved from the same
level of consciousness that created it.”

- *Albert Einstein*

Abstract

Titel IKEA Group employees as DANCERs in a normative context: Mindfulness and its experienced influence on self-leadership

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Date 21st of May 2021

Aim The purpose of this research is to investigate the interrelation between the individual's ability to act independently and the individual interpretation of mindfulness and to explore the role of the organizational setting.

Methodology Our thesis follows two streams of research: An interpretative, abductive approach allows us to move fluidly between theory and empirical material. We have conducted a qualitative research in the IKEA Group, in which ten interviews have been completed. These findings are complemented by our auto-ethnography: A self-experiment, in which we lived mindful for several weeks, offer insights.

Theoretical Framework We conduct an overview of prior research on leadership, self-leadership, organizational culture and normative control as well as the concept of mindfulness, and examine their interrelation.

Contribution This thesis contributes to the literature on mindfulness and its impact on self-leadership in the face of the IKEA Group. The DANCER model offers a guideline. Also, this paper strengthens the status of self-experiments for academic reasons.

Keywords Mindfulness, Flow state, Positive Psychology, Leadership, Self-leadership, Organizational culture,

Acknowledgements

Several people have helped and supported us during our thesis, to whom we would like to share our most profound appreciation to:

First and for most, we would like to express our gratitude to our supervisor Dr. Stefan Sveningsson. Dear Stefan, we appreciate all of your feedback and encouragement as we navigated writing a thesis during a worldwide pandemic. Your support, enthusiasm, and guidance has been invaluable, and we are so appreciative. Thank you!

Secondly, we want to thank all of our research interviewees at Ingka Centers. Our research would not have been possible without you! Additionally, we would like to give a special ‘thank you’ to our contact person, who not only allowed us to conduct our research at Ingka Centers, but facilitated connections and provided clarification and encouragement along the way. Having the opportunity to learn from the Ingka Centers employees we interviewed made working on our thesis a more enriching experience.

Also, we would like to say thank you to our friends and family for your encouragement, motivation, and support.

Last but not least, we would also like to thank each other for our great teamwork. We complemented each other's strengths in the best way possible and made the thesis period a delightful time in our lives.

Dear reader, please enjoy!

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21st of May, 2021

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Prologue

Job offer: We are searching for a highly functioning individual who dares to act individually within the fast-paced ever-changing environment of our company's industry. High-performance under pressure and adaptability is a prerequisite for your and our success.

This is just one simplified but often seen example of job descriptions. Employees and applicant are supposed to be machine-like, highly functioning creatures that will contribute to the company's success without a lot of support from the employer's side.

Both of us have faced these expectations in our previous professional lives when being employed in organizations. There, we have been confronted with the challenges the ego contributes to communication, trust, or teamwork. In this context, we have sensed the need to step aside ourselves mentally and take a look at the situation from the outside. However, these experiences make us acknowledge the difficulty to do so and accept an ever changing fast-paced environment in which we are supposed to be highly functioning. We also experienced the difficulty to stay flexible to be equipped for the challenges the organizational environment holds. This led to many questions for us: How can we prepare ourselves - mentally? How can our colleagues prepare themselves? And thus, are we ready to dance in the rhythm of our own decisions?

These reflections have sparked our interest in unveiling mindfulness as a concept and its perceived impact on the individual's capability to behave autonomously and individually in an organizational context. That is what this thesis is for: For us.

1 Introduction

“Happiness is not reaching your goal. Happiness is being on the way. [...] We will move ahead only by constantly asking ourselves how what we are doing today can be done better tomorrow.” (Kamprad, 2021, p.17). This quote by IKEA founder Ingvar Kamprad is one of the principles he lists in “The Testament of a Furniture Dealer” and echoes the argument among contemporary literature that more employee well-being and reflexive thoughts are necessary in order to remain progressive and relevant as an organization (Neff & Davidson, 2016; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). To meet this challenge, some organizations count on their employees’ autonomy and ability to lead themselves which includes finding self-motivation and the willingness to improve on a day-to-day basis (Backländer, 2018; Backländer, 2019). One way to do so is self-leadership: Empowered and motivated employees are more autonomous (Backländer, 2019). Individuals aspire less formal control and more independence in their daily work tasks in order to be satisfied with their professional environment (Amar, 2004; Swart & Kinnie, 2003), and in order to meet this expectation, organizations like IKEA need to learn how to enable their employees to be **DANCERS** to the rhythm of the organizational context which is a long process of trial and error.

Mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2004; Cebolla, Enrique, Alvear, Soler, & Garcia-Campayo, 2017; Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) and self-leadership (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Backländer 2018; Backländer 2019) have been gaining momentum during the past few years: A more and more demanding business world risks to neglect the individual’s need to find inner balance – although proven sufficient for one’s employability, productivity, thereby beneficial for the company’s goal (Sauer & Kohls, 2011; Backländer, 2019). To meet this challenge, some companies count on their employees’ autonomy and self-leading capacity (Amar, 2004; Swart & Kinnie, 2003). However, self-leadership entails the risk of overwork and stress for individuals with less access to their limits, thoughts, and emotions (Backländer, 2018; Wilhelm, Richter, & Semrau, 2019).

IKEA approaches the threat of overwhelmed self-leading employees by educating them about the concept of mindfulness with all its advantages, benefits, and usability recommendations in leadership development programs. IKEA, hereby, follows the approach that mindful employees are more likely to be self-leading (Burmansa, Rugaiyah, Mukhtar, Nabilah, Ripki, & Fatayan, 2020). We aim to challenge this approach in our research, which we consider vital for IKEA. As a mature organization who aims to institutionalize mindfulness and self-leadership as concepts, IKEA addresses self-leadership as one way to meet the employees’ need for

autonomy and less formal control (Amar, 2004; Swart & Kinnie, 2003). Doing so, IKEA can be considered a strong normative context and organizational culture, which typically encourages organizational members to think alike (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2017; Brown, 1995; Alvesson, 2002; Keyton, 2011; Kunda, 2006). The desired autonomy is necessary to include reflexive thoughts and reflections in organizational processes (Neff & Davidson, 2016; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). In other words, IKEA needs reflexive thoughts and reflections to oil the engine of its organizational culture (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Self-leadership is one way for the organization to allow pluralism and mindfulness is one tool to enable self-leadership (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Backländer 2018; Backländer 2019). Though there may be limitations to the findings, our research intends to minimize inconsistencies in the definition of the vocabulary around mindfulness as an umbrella term, which entails the concepts of positive psychology (Ackerman, 2020; Boniwell, 2012; Al Taher, 2020; Peterson, 2008) and the flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

This study explores the step after any initiatives to establish mindfulness and self-leadership are initiated, how employees understand and interpret both phenomena and how those definitions are impacted by the sensemaking from the organization (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Palmer et al., 2017). We conducted interviews with employees of all levels from Ingka Centers to understand the dynamic learning process and how both phenomena are institutionalized (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999). Throughout the research, we intended to use an abductive approach in which we keep an open mind, and adapt our learning based on the findings from the collected data (Prasad, 2018). The data will then be analyzed with an interpretivist approach (Prasad, 2018).

Throughout the evaluation of contemporary literature about mindfulness and self-leadership and the analysis of our findings from interviews with IKEA employees, it became evident that there is still space for further research. Two main questions have been arising throughout collecting ideas on this theme: First of all, **to what regard does an employee's understanding of mindfulness influence his or her ability to act independently?** Second, **how does IKEA's strong normative context influence the individual's interpretation of mindfulness and self-leadership?** To answer these aforementioned questions, we conclude our discussion emerging our findings in the DANCER model, which offers recommendations for employees and entities on how to create an organizational culture facilitating self-leadership and mindfulness.

In sum, our study is motivated by our fascination for mindfulness, the presented concepts related to mindfulness and our curiosity for how and to what regard mindfulness influences the

individual's ability to feel autonomous and independent in his or her professional life. Furthermore, we hope to contribute to IKEA's learning journey (Crossan et al., 1999) in how to enable and equip employees to be mindful and self-leading. Thereby, we plan to contribute to knowledge sharing about mindfulness and self-leadership to enhance IKEA's sense making opportunity, or "what we do when we face a problem" (Palmer et al., 2017, pp. 42).

1.1 Problematization and rational

This section demonstrates an overview of "what is missing" in literature. We highlight the conceptual and empirical gap in exploring the interplay of self-leadership and mindfulness in an organizational setting and show the relevance of our study.

As illustrated above, 'mindfulness and 'self-leadership' are of essential concern in today's management context and introduced as main drivers for a company's success (Sauer & Kohls, 2011; Backländer, 2019). Researchers voice the necessity to focus on the **interrelation** between both phenomena as criteria for organizational success (Burmansa et al., 2020). The growing interest has derived from findings suggesting that those employees who feel responsible for their contribution to the employer's success are beneficial for the same (Backländer, 2018; Backländer, 2019). In this sense, enabling employees to act autonomous and independently, makes them feel ownership over their work, which increases the level of engagement, encouragement, and motivation (Backländer, 2019). Still, management studies and the organizational world today are largely determined by the hierarchy as a mode of organizing (Alvesson et al., 2017), which could be disadvantageous for entities aiming for self-leading employees. Moreover, the concept of self-leadership is regarded with scepticism as there is the threat of overwork and stress which leads to a lower level of psychological safety (Backländer, 2018; Wilhelm et al., 2019). As Backländer (2019) expresses, self-leadership often results in self-exploiting employees, which invest more resources as they can recover from. This subsequently leads to burnout due to overload as employees engaging in a non-generative working style, will not be able to maintain the high-quality level of their work (Kira & Forslin, 2008). Those employees feel the pressure of a "dictated autonomy" (Maravelias, 2007) as organizations which demand self-leadership without providing the appropriate resources, infrastructure, and tools, do not facilitate independency, but are "harvesting agencies", as Bramming, Gudman-Høyer, Kärreman, Levay, Pedersen, Raffnsøe, and Spoelstra (2011) summarize.

One tool to cope with these threats is to equip and educate employees about the concept of mindfulness and its positive impact on decision making, and attention and awareness regulation (Kabat-Zinn, 2004; Cebolla et al., 2017). The observation of emotions, thoughts, and sensations that emerge helps to regulate awareness, which is important to control attention (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012; Cebolla et al., 2017). Stressful life events can be handled more psychologically resilient through the help of self-compassion, which contributes to a mentally healthy life (Neff & Davidson, 2016). According to Tan (2014), psychological resilience, self-compassion, and attention and awareness regulation are vital factors for situational leadership, so the leader's ability to adapt their leadership style quickly according to how employees perform and how the situation changes, enabling them to give their employees the needed guidance, support, and meaning (Alvesson et al. 2017) We aim to add another angle by following an approach that challenges the leading positive connotation of mindfulness. This thesis questions the assumptions that mindfulness is thoroughly positive for an individual's personal development and enhances the employability of the individual. Moreover, we focus on mindfulness's influence on the individual's capacity to act autonomously and independently. Still, no matter if positively, neutrally, or negatively connoted, there is a gap in literature combining mindfulness and its influence on self-leadership.

Literature on mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2004; Cebolla et al., 2017; Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) and self-leadership (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Backländer 2018; Backländer 2019) is vast, which makes the research in both areas well-developed and well-understood. When going through contemporary literature on both phenomena, we acknowledge various approaches and perspectives on both phenomena individually but found profound research on a connection and influence from one phenomenon on the other to be missing. Connecting this missing aspect in contemporary literature with the need for organizations to meet their employees' expectations on autonomy and independence at the workplace, creates a double loop learning process for both literature and organizations (Crossan et al., 1999). Hereby, one needs to aim for a dynamic feed forward process of exploration to bring knowledge from the individual to the group and in the final stage to the organizational level (Crossan et al., 1999): Knowledge about mindfulness and self-leadership is hereby institutionalized. Institutionalization means that systems, structures, and other formal mechanisms in the organization actively support mindfulness and self-leadership (Crossan et al., 1999).

The focus on the interplay of both phenomena is vital for the scope of this research as we emphasize, that we aim for an investigation of mindfulness and self-leadership as well as their

interrelation and influence on each other within an organizational setting (Burmansa et al., 2020). Thereby, our findings will be strongly impacted by the normative context and the culture of the organization examined (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). We attempt to contribute to academic research on an individual's ability to act and behave autonomously and independently resulting from his or her interpretation of mindfulness, which we consider to be strongly impacted by the organizational culture. Thereby, we view both phenomena as independent but influential and distant our research from the often referred to the concept of mindful leadership.

The concept of mindful leadership describes the phenomenon of a leader figure as the one who embodies leadership by cultivating focus, clarity, creativity, and compassion in the services of others (Nandram & Borden, 2011; Pater, 2020; Burmansa, Rugaiyah, Mukhtar, Nabilah, Ripki, & Fatayan, 2020). Hereby, compassion, openness, understanding of the individual member can be seen as typical traits of mindful leader figures. As emphasized by Burmansa et al. (2020), mindful leader figures avoid uncertainty or unknown territory. Furthermore, mindful leader figures continuously differ between their own interpretation of a phenomenon and how this phenomenon can be seen by somebody else (Nandram & Borden, 2011; Pater, 2020; Burmansa et al., 2020). In organizational settings, managers with prevalent traits connected to mindfulness and mindful leadership - compassion, openness, understanding of the individual member - are facing difficulties: Their focus on non-judgemental behavior and preference to center their awareness on known terrain make them be perceived as weak and not able to handle decision-making capacity as a managerial task (Burmansa et al., 2020). With judgment and decision-making under pressure being vital for managers, we plan a more **mindfulness-inspired self-leadership of the individual employee**. We shift the focus of contemporary literature by highlighting the formally non-leading employee, also defined as follower, in an alternative way.

Moreover, predominant literature on leadership centers on the performance and behavior of the leader, which is performed and addressed to followers, specifically employees (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). Organizations need to emphasize ways to motivate, excite, and encourage employees to meet the individuals' need for less formal control and higher degrees of autonomy (Amar, 2004; Swart & Kinnie, 2003). As recognized years ago, less of formal control is found to have a positive impact on the individual's motivation, for example in knowledge intensive firms (Amar, 2004; Swart & Kinnie, 2003). Knowledge intensive firms are characterized by a strong knowledge base, creative working methods, the particularly close relationship with the client, and autonomy of the individual (Amar, 2004; Swart & Kinnie, 2003). As found by Swart and Kinnie (2003) knowledge intensive firms are particularly keen to meet the need for high

levels of autonomy for employees. To establish self-leadership in an entity could help the organization to meet the employees' expectation to be less formally controlled. However, research on formal control has mostly been researched within the field of under-designed work in knowledge intensive firms. In under-designed work, the individual is responsible to decide how to distribute one's time and energy between different projects and how to meet the demands of work (Backländer, 2019). Research about other contexts and approaches is scarce.

To summarize, it is of particular relevance to combine the two concepts of self-leadership and mindfulness. Firstly, to rethink organizational modes of organizing and shift the focus from hierarchy to independence and the power of self-driven individuals. As this contains the threat of overwork, the concept of mindfulness can be used as a tool to cope with this. Hereby, it is important to challenge the positive connotation of mindfulness as well as acknowledge the difficulties, organizations face when aiming to establish both phenomena on an organizational level. Furthermore, **mindfulness inspired self-leadership of the individual employee** needs to be distinguished from mindful leadership as a practice. Lastly, contemporary research focuses mainly on knowledge intensive firms and under-designed work and centers around the managerial tasks in this environment. Concluding, we challenge common beliefs about both concepts by critically reflecting on their usability and application. Hence, consider it is interesting and important not only to contribute to the theoretical field of self-leadership and mindfulness but also to conclude this research by practical implications for organizations as our findings will be impacted by the normative context of the examined organization. Therefore, we endeavour to merge our findings in an intuitively DANCER model. The DANCER model will summarize our findings from a researcher's perspective and provide a checklist for companies.

1.2 Purpose and research questions

Considering the pictured gap in contemporary literature, the overall purpose of this research is to investigate and understand the connection between the individual's ability to act autonomously and independently and how this is influenced by the individual's interpretation of mindfulness. To allow employees to act independently is one way to motivate, excite, and encourage employees to meet the individuals' need for less of formal control (Amar, 2004; Swart & Kinnie, 2003; Backländer, 2019). According to research, this is beneficial for the feeling of ownership over the individual's work, which contributes to the organization's success (Sauer & Kohls, 2011; Backländer, 2019). Self-leadership is one way to ensure autonomy for

both managers and employees, which might enhance the overall level of motivation, encouragement, and empowerment (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Backländer 2018; Backländer 2019). Psychologically resilience is considered a vital factor for situational leadership (Tan, 2014). The threat of overwork and stress when acting independently (Backländer, 2018; Wilhelm et al., 2019) could be coped with through the help of mindfulness, because mindfulness has a positive impact on decision making, psychological resilience, and awareness regulation (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012; Cebolla et al., 2017; Neff & Davidson, 2016). Therefore, this thesis is guided by the following research question:

RQ1: To what regard does an employee's understanding of mindfulness influence his or her ability to act independently?

Referring to what is previously stated, one possibility to equip employees with the tools to be self-leading is to educate about mindfulness and institutionalize both phenomena within the organization (Crossan et al., 1999). Through the help of mindfulness, self-leadership as a concept is facilitated – according to IKEA. Mindfulness oftentimes aims to bring heterogeneity into organizations because it increases the level of reflexivity among employees and managers (Neff & Davidson, 2016; Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). According to the authors, the individual employee can make sure to not be blinded by the organizational culture. Yet, mindfulness and self-leadership as concepts are strongly impacted by the normative context and the culture of the organization examined (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). We will explore this aim in the organizational setting of Ingka Centers. The IKEA Group and Ingka Centers as one of their subsidiaries is a very strong normative context to examine, which typically encourages individuals to think alike. It leads to a second research question:

RQ2: How does IKEA's strong normative context influence the individual's interpretation of mindfulness and self-leadership?

1.3 Outline of the thesis

The following section presents the disposition of this study and provides an orientation for the upcoming chapters. This thesis consists of seven chapters: introduction, theoretical background, methodology, collection of empirical data, our findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Chapter 1: This chapter constitutes a brief introduction to the thesis topic and has provided the reader with background information, making our rationale and research aim clear.

Chapter 2: Here, we will outline the literature review and present previous research within the topics of culture, leadership, and mindfulness. We will also address our research aim by examining the interrelation between the aforementioned concepts. This literature review will provide greater contextualization of the current research and will become the conceptual framework for our thesis, as it gives a detailed overview on normative context in an organizational context, (self-)leadership, positive psychology, flow-state, and mindfulness. The literature review will be completed by addition from our interviewed experts had into all three phenomena.

Chapter 3: This chapter, methodology, is describing our research approach and underlying ontological and epistemological foundations. In this chapter, we will introduce our two streams of research. We will finish this chapter by critically reflecting on our methodology.

Chapter 4: Afterwards, the basis of our empirical data will be showcased in chapter 4. To build a solid base to do so, Ingka Centers as our case company is introduced first with a special highlight on its leadership approach and understanding of mindfulness. Additional remarks contain comments about our self-experiment, which forms empirical data as well.

Chapter 5: In this chapter, we will discuss and interpret our empirical data, connecting it to our theoretical background. We structure this chapter based on our coding.

Chapter 6: Chapter 6 contains the discussion of the collected and analyzed data with a focus on the key themes self-leadership and mindfulness, wherefore the structure is adjusted to our coding. We will summarize our findings by connecting them to organizational culture.

Chapter 7: Finally, Chapter 7 will conclude our paper with a summary of our main findings and research contributions. In this chapter, we will also discuss the limitations of our study, as well as recommendations for further research.

2 Theoretical background

To build a proper base, we will take a look at the organizational culture to highlight the cultural perspectives on self-leadership and mindfulness. An overview of the main themes in contemporary leadership literature is presented before it is focused on self-leadership. Hereby, we touch upon to normative context and control within an organizational setting to meet the research aim. Doing so, we plan to analyze the connection between mindfulness and self-leadership. Afterward, the concept of mindfulness will be presented. Additional remarks from our interviewed experts support us to understand our study from different perspectives. Finally, the literature review will conclude with critical reflections on both phenomena.

2.1 Organizational culture as normative control

Emphasizing the importance of interpretation, the close linkage between leadership and **organizational culture** become evident (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). Both “influence the way employees think, feel, and act toward others, both inside and outside the organization” (Palmer et al., 2017, pp. 150–151; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016; Alvesson, 2002). A closer look at culture is necessary as it is a subjective phenomenon and we mean to get the full picture and a broad basis for our analysis: Organizational culture has the main influence on how organizational members think, feel, and act because how managers shape organizational culture highly impacts the employees’ sense of purpose of themselves in the organizational setting (Brown, 1995). Thereby, common beliefs, values, and ideas are created that form organizational culture (Alvesson, 2002). Those who are following the common beliefs, create a “corporate community [whose] means [...] are shaped and expressed” (Kunda, 2006, p.8). For the scope of this research, we target Keyton’s (2011, p. 69) definition of organizational culture as “set of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge from the interaction of organizational members” which allows us to include the symbolic character of life within entities.

In conclusion, one can say that organizational culture highly impacts the actions, behaviors, and thoughts of employees as well as of managers (Alvesson et al., 2017). Sub-cultures and cultural fragmentations can arise through different interpretations the managers have on the organizational culture (Schein, 2010) and can co-exists to the organizational culture (Sackmann, 1992). The feeling of affiliation with the sub-culture and distinction from other sub-cultures (Schein, 2010) creates a sense of community for the individual. This opens room for a critical view, more precisely normative control within an organizational setting (Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). Concerning this research, we will follow Kunda’s (1992, p. 11)

definition of normative control as *“the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their action. In short, under normative control it is the employee’s self – that ineffable source of subjective experience – that is claimed in the name of the corporate interest”*.

As mentioned by Barley and Kunda (1992), this poses the risk of manipulation by managers who aim to create a sense of a united community to which one belongs based on trust and shared beliefs. The socialization process to create the feeling of belonging to this “strong culture” (Ouchi, 1980) can be done by training or indoctrination. Following this critical view on normative control, employees’ freedom, dignity, and privacy are at risk (Whyte, 1956; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Willmott, 1993), wherefore ethical considerations should be taken into account (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 2003). Managers’ roles should not be neglected as they play a major role in creating a strong organizational culture by “shaping norms, instilling beliefs, inculcating values, generating emotions” (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p.51). Because of managers’ decisive role, the next chapter will focus on leadership.

2.2 Leadership

Leadership as a phenomenon has been researched extensively, which results in various definitions with different meanings depending on the organizational setting or interpretations (Ahmed, Nawaz & Khan, 2016). On behalf of this thesis, we decide to proceed with the definition of leadership as centring on managers, who are **“influencing ideas, meanings, understandings, and identities of others [subordinates] within an asymmetrical (unequal) relationship context”** (Alvesson et al., 2017, p. 3). This enables us to see leadership as an unequal relationship between individuals, whereby one of these individuals has a great impact on the meanings and ideas of the other. This relational nature is also referred to by Grint (2005), who stresses the importance of both parties – managers and followers – for the existence of leadership as an exercise of power over followers (Grint, 2005).

Despite the extensive research on leadership and its importance for the success of a company (Alvesson et al., 2017; Gil, Alcover, Rico, R. & Sánchez-Manzanare, 2011), there is no ideal handling of leadership as an exercise (Barker 1997; Collison & Tourish 2015) due to the **lack of a universal confirmed theory** (Harrison, 2018). Although personal interpretations depending on (organizational) contexts or socialization (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009) impede the unification of leadership, there are three dominant perspectives in contemporary literature.

The following section will define those, namely classic leadership, symbolic leadership, and relation-oriented leadership as defined in Alvesson et al. (2017). The former, classical perspective can predominantly be found in a formal setting with a focus on hierarchy and management as a mode of organizing, where the leadership approach of trait, style, and situational express themselves (Alvesson et al., 2017). Whereas traditional literature on leadership often circles around authority and the demonstration of power (Spillane & Joullié, 2015), modern corporate values with a focus on the responsibility, passion, talents, and ideas of the individual (Ingka Centers, 2021), and more recent literature follow a different approach: Here, the focus on employees as free human beings with the demand to express their creativity, freedom, and the wish to act independently is emphasized. Referring to Rehn (2019), this is fundamental for a company to survive, develop progress and innovate. According to Alvesson et al. (2017), symbolic leadership in contrast to this, emphasizes the impact on meaning and values by its charismatic, transformational, and authentic leadership styles. Hereby, employees' as followers' identification and sense of purpose are influenced by their superior managers (Alvesson et al., 2017). Lastly, relationship-oriented leadership stresses the importance of employees' well-being and happiness as a main driver of performance. In order to ensure employees' well-being, coaching as a tool is valuable (Alvesson et al., 2017).

This social nature of leadership as a process is dependent on the followers' interpretations and how they make sense of leadership (Meindl, 1995). This holds the challenge of reacting appropriately to interpretations and address the upcoming contextual matters (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982), which requires governance, coaching, support, and delegation (Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). The needed flexibility can be seen in **situational leadership** approaches of individuals who aim to adapt their leadership style quickly according to how employees perform and how situations change, enabling them to give their employees the needed guidance, support, and meaning (Alvesson et al., 2017). Important to mention is the idea of employee-independence when it comes to situational leadership, thereby neglecting the relationship between managers and followers as the main focus are the actions on the manager's side and the receptiveness and behavior on the subordinate's side (Alvesson et al., 2017).

The employee's interpretation of the superior's action is vital but highly dominated by the understanding and interpretation of behavior, socialization, and organizational-, cultural- and social context (Alvesson & Björkman, 1992). Through this understanding, managers are better equipped to interpersonally define meaning and reality for the followers who are inclined to them (Alvesson et al., 2017). A more **reflexive view on leadership** is based on meta-reflection

and the manager's willingness to challenge own thoughts, ideas or vocabulary (Alvesson et al., 2017). By questioning one's own mental position occasionally, reflexive leaders are encouraged to switch positions. This results in leadership not being limited to an asymmetrical and unequal relationship between manager and follower (Alvesson et al., 2017); leadership position and follower position converge on each other, which raises the question of the necessity of leadership (Alvesson et al., 2017).

2.3 Self-leadership

When examining a definition for self-leadership, it is the attribute of autonomy that needs further explanation: Scholars voice autonomy as "the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the employee in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out." (Hackman, & Oldham, 1975, p. 162) Autonomy is characterized by employees' latitude to decide over themselves, while managers or the company provide the guidelines and tools to ensure the success of the employees' self-determined actions (Backländer, 2019). Key elements to do so are communication, trust, and transparency, especially when it comes to the information shared between management and employees (Backländer, 2018; Backländer, 2019).

Self-leadership as a concept is well-reviewed in literature and often referred to. Self-leadership is considered a management paradigm that contains the worldview of the highly educated and skilled employees who do not need a manager, wherefore it is often looked at as a "substitute for leadership" (Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998). Proactivity in decision-making about what to work on and how to work on it aligned with the needs of the organization is a prerequisite to ensure its successful performance and outcome (Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998; Costea, Crump, & Amiridis, 2008). A variety of models and concepts with a focus on the employee's independence can be found, which is cited from Backländer (2019) and is summarized in **table 1**. What unites all these concepts is the idea of independent and skilled employees with the right mindset, skillset, and toolset who rather rely on their assessment instead of blindly following their manager or a rather fixed set of guidelines and rules (Backländer, 2019).

Table 1: Overview and comparison of independent working styles

Concept	Definition	Goal	Optimize for	Needs
Self-Leadership	“A self-influence process through which people achieve the self-direction and self-motivation necessary to perform” (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006)	Improved intrinsic motivation, improved performance, to positively influence personal effectiveness”	Intrinsic motivation	“Natural reward” strategies, thought strategies, and behavioral strategies
Self-Leadership according to Bäcklander	Exerting influence over ones’ organizational activities	The successful implementation of desired behaviors that support one’s chosen goals	Available cognitive resources	1 Situation selection; 2 Situation modification 3 Self-control; 4 Reappraisal
Self-governing competence	“The guiding, supervising function needed for the individual to be able to define, structure, and discipline her own performance and, ultimately, her ability to manage and govern herself in a wider, functional sense” (Hanson, 2004)	---	---	Advanced metacognitive competencies
Self-management	Harnessing of agency and subjectivity in service of management (Kärreman in Bramming et al., 2011)	---	Extracted values	---
Proactive behaviour	“The extent to which [employees] take action to influence their environment” (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Future-oriented, change-oriented and self-starting (Parker & Bindl, 2016)	Descriptive, no goal per se. Proactive pursuit of goals	---	For example: Voice, issue selling, feedback seeking, taking charge, role expansion
Proactive followership	“Working to advance the mission of their department or organization” and to challenge their leaders if necessary (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010)	Description of proactive exercise of followership	---	---

Employee-ship	Employee has great discretion and practices self-management, takes responsibility, manages their work-life balance, and manages relations to manager, colleagues, and others (Backström, 2003)	Increased engagement and adaptive performance	---	---
Self-entrapment	“Using autonomy granted by participative work practices to design activity structures that unintentionally entrapped the workers” (Michel, 2014)	Enabling constant work, exploiting worker insecurity about what is “good enough” to trigger self-discipline to always work	Compelling habitual, indiscriminate overwork	Sozialization
Job crafting	Using employee discretion to modify/ craft one’s own work tasks (cognitive, task, and relational boundaries) (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001)	Higher sense of meaning in work	Improved intrinsic motivation, improved utilization of skills	Change cognitive, task, and/or relational boundaries
Self-regulation	“The ongoing exercise of self-influence”, “self-directed change” (Bandura, 1991)	Regulation of behavior or emotions	---	Self-monitoring, self-diagnostic and self-motivating functions

Reference: Brief overview and comparison of independent working styles, Backländer (2019, p. 38)

It is important to mention that **table 1** is ordered in a sequence of independence with self-leadership being the highest level and self-regulation the lowest level of independence (Backländer, 2019). However, one could argue that halfway through the spectrum, a higher level of independence is needed from the employee as the entity offers less guidance and support than in the approach of self-leadership.

In addition, it can be stated that especially under-designed work, more precisely “complex, ambiguous, or new work situations” (Backländer, 2019, p. 39), needs self-led performance and appropriate behavior to support the handling of weak working situation without much guidance. As cited by Backländer (2019), motivation is not enough, but the employees need to be equipped through education, experience, and knowledge. To fulfil this requirement, the self-leading employee necessitates an inspiring and coaching leader figure. Thereby, it is ensured that self-leadership contributes to the organization’s “efficiency, innovation, and competitiveness” (Backländer, 2019, p. 39).

In sum, on behalf of this research, we follow Backländer’s (2019) definition of self-leadership, who thinks self-leadership as “a self-influence process through which people achieve the self-direction and self-motivation necessary to perform” (cited in Backländer 2019: Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006) one step further. Backländer acknowledges the fact that this can be

stress-reducing and beneficial for performance (cited in Backländer 2019: Unsworth & Mason, 2012; Hauschildt & Konradt, 2012; Prussia et al., 1998).

2.4 Additional remarks: leadership expert

As announced in the abstract and aligned with our research, the following chapter complements the theoretical background with knowledge we gained during the conducted interview with our leadership expert. The combination of literature review and interviewing experts contributes to the critical review and reflexive thoughts on contemporary literature we target. To objectify our requirements for an expert, we search for individuals who can demonstrate more expertise on a topic than the average human being (Dictionary, 2021) and can show recognized credentials and have testimonials refer to them (Share, 2018).

To learn more about leadership, we interviewed **Dr. Marcus Gottschalk**. As the CEO of Change, Leadership & Partners (CLP, 2021), he educates organizations on the important role of leadership and the new arising demand of [new ways of] leadership.

Referring to leadership as a phenomenon that contains an unequal relationship between a superordinate leader and a subordinate employee, Gottschalk highlights the importance of hierarchy by expressing:

“There are more thoughts behind self-leadership as a concept that could be put into a definition. It is important to highlight the aspect of hierarchy, which is not only self-help for an organization, but it is also important to consider that there are areas of responsibility behind it. This cascades down the strategy. When I hear self-leadership, I say ‘Yes, but remember that everyone stays in their area of responsibility’ There are things you have to decide for yourself and there are things others can not decide for you.”

In this, Gottschalk stresses the necessity for clear roles and that the individual acts and behaves in his or her area of expertise, in order to come with thoughtful decisions that are beneficial for the entity. Hereby, as can be seen here, Gottschalk advocates thinking about leadership as a way of structuring responsibilities, which he considers important regarding the systematic and efficient roll-out of, for example, the organization’s strategy. In the first glimpse, we consider this to be potentially overwhelming for the individual as the number of tasks a manager has to fulfill, thereby, increases. This holds the potential of intensive overload for the particular hierarchy level responsible for the strategy. Consequently, hierarchies underneath this strategy

forming hierarchy level, hold the burden to reflect, as was expressed by Gottschalk in the following quote:

“What is needed are leaders with a good holistic view of the organization as a whole and leaders who understand with the help of this holistic view that silo thinking, and overloaded management are often not bad intentions at all. [...] It can even be beneficial.”

Considering this strict organization-internal distribution between strategy forming hierarchy levels and working teams, our interviewed leadership expert figures self-leadership to be potentially critical and harming for the organization on a strategy level, as was discussed by the following expression:

“When we talk about self-leadership, then I would talk about bottom-up processes, for example in change. And when we talk about bottom-up things I think that is possible but more difficult than when top-down processes are initiated and stimulated. And that is simply because the executive, the person in the “top” has responsibility for finances, investments, and so on. I as a manager need relative security or at least something like a parachute.”

Gottschalk puts a lot of emphasis on the role of responsibility for the work’s outcome. He does so by stating that managers are those being responsible for their team’s outcome and work. With the individual holding the responsibility for his or her own decision-making or the delivery of results, the manager possibly has no backup or security of success.

Being very aware of the disadvantages and difficulties self-leadership as a concept contains, Gottschalk, on the other side, underscores the significance of typical self-leadership allowing characteristics, the individual holds:

“Of course, I need self-responsibility and self-motivation, because I cannot control people all day long and I do not want to because that is not my job as a leader. That would be boring. [...] What I need is to notice that there is an energy and when I notice that, then I am satisfied.”

And, when asked why a manager needs to give employees the benefit of the doubt, and what this includes for him personally:

“To think for themselves and to come up with initiatives: What matters is that I see the results and the results speak for themselves. If I do not get complaints but praise from

the customer, it shows me that I do not have to worry as much, and then I also seclude myself. [...] Company culture is what counts [to make that possible]. And communication: Communication is one of the most important tools in leadership, not only qualitatively but also quantitatively. As a leader, I need to be able to tell them how all my employees are doing.”

In these quotes, our interviewed leadership expert qualifies his previous statements by underlining the aversion to micro-management and the importance of highly energetic, self-motivated employees with the drive to be responsible for customer-centricity and other acts. Gottschalk describes the self-leading employee as pictured by Backländer (2018, 2019), Manz (1986), and Neck and Houghton (2006).

Gottschalk concludes our interview by expressing the importance of soft skills within the concept of leadership, by accentuating the necessity of “*soft topics*” for the future and successful (self-) leadership. The quote below explains this further:

“I believe that when we look at the challenges ahead of us - technology, AI, virtual leadership, and the question of how we want to work in the future - more soft skills are needed than before. Empathy, communication, trust, mindfulness - these are all such soft topics that are needed!”

To investigate to what regard mindfulness can impact the individual’s ability to meet the previously stated expectations, according to Gottschalk, is the aim of our study. Having built the fundament in (self-)leadership in the previous chapters, the following units will focus on mindfulness. Having built the fundament for our analysis and discussion in the area of leadership and self-leadership. the following units are focused on mindfulness.

2.5 Critical reflections on self-leadership

As aforementioned, there is no unique definition of leadership, which leaves room for critique in any leadership approach and in the view on leadership to be autonomous as well. As outlined in Backländer (2019), the downside of self-leadership lies in high-stress levels due to intense (over)work, which might lead to self-exploitation and self-entrapment, especially if the organizational culture promotes overwork and stress. Furthermore, new employees might have a more difficult onboarding and establishment in an organization as there is less situational judgment of their behavior, which complicates organizational socialization (Chan, 2006). In regard to self-leadership’s connection to intrinsic motivation, several strategies to enforce the

latter can be found: Self-observation and self-goal setting equip the self-leading employee to follow natural reward strategies like self-rewards or self-punishment aiming towards constructive thought patterns (Manz & Sims, 2001). However, “nowhere in the development of this concept is it really acknowledged that there might be some upper boundary to the extent that one can rely on internal cognitive processes to lead one's own behavior” (Backländer, 2019, p. 18-19).

2.6 Section mindfulness

In the following section, mindfulness is presented. For the scope of the study, we focus on the flow state, positive psychology, mindfulness, the connection between positive psychology and mindfulness. Finally, tools are portrayed.

2.6.1 Mindfulness

The emphasis on mindfulness has significantly increased over the past few years. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn (2004), who is known for engaging as a meditation teacher to mindfulness into the mainstream of society and scientist, defines mindfulness as paying attention to purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally. Thus, being mindful means being aware to maintain a moment-by-moment of our feelings, thoughts, and environment. It is all about examining who we are, cultivating an appreciation for the fullness of each moment we experience. Thereby, attention nurtures clarity, greater awareness, and acceptance of present-moment reality (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). As our lives unfold in moments, we might miss what is most valuable in our lives and might fail to realize the richness and the depth of our possibilities for transformation and personal growth if we are not present in these moments because one lacks the focus on ‘now’ (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). It is a way to commit ourselves to pay attention with an open mindset about how we walk through the world without expectations and projections, prejudices, and opinions (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Living a mindful life helps to be more in touch with the fullness of your being through a systematic process of self-inquiry and self-observation. To take charge of the quality of one's own life entails all kinds of relationships such as the bond with our family, friends, work, to the larger world and most importantly, the relationship with oneself as an individual (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Hence, one benefit for health is to be aware of one's body and to be able to regulate attention and emotions (Cebolla et al., 2017). Vago and Silbersweig (2012) state that mindfulness is a mental state which describes the intentional focus on attention such

as breathing while observing emotions, thoughts, and sensation as they emerge in the present moment. Positive psychology can be seen as a tool to train the mind to achieve the state of intentional focus and is highlighted in the following section.

2.6.2 The link between mindfulness and positive psychology

According to Cebolla et al. (2017), an essential link between positive psychology and mindfulness is that mental qualities and well-being rise through compassion. Compassion is a great virtue and known as the cause for the highest level of happiness (Tan, 2014). In contrast to compassion, sympathy means being able to understand what an individual is feeling, and empathy means that one can feel what the other is feeling. However, compassion goes one step further by feeling the pain of others or recognizing that others are in pain while simultaneously alleviating the individual's suffer from the situation that causes pain (Schairer, 2019). Thupaten Jinpa complements compassion as a “mental state endowed with a sense of concern for the suffering of others and aspiration to see that suffering relieved.” According to Jinpa, compassion consists of three components (Gollent, 2019): A cognitive component (“I understand you.”), an affective component (“I feel for you.”), and a motivational component (“I want to help you.”).

To become compassionate means going from the self to others, which is the decisive factor for situational leadership (Tan, 2014). Furthermore, self-compassion allows individuals to thrive and has shown to support psychological resilience and mental health benefits during stressful life events (Neff & Davidson, 2016).

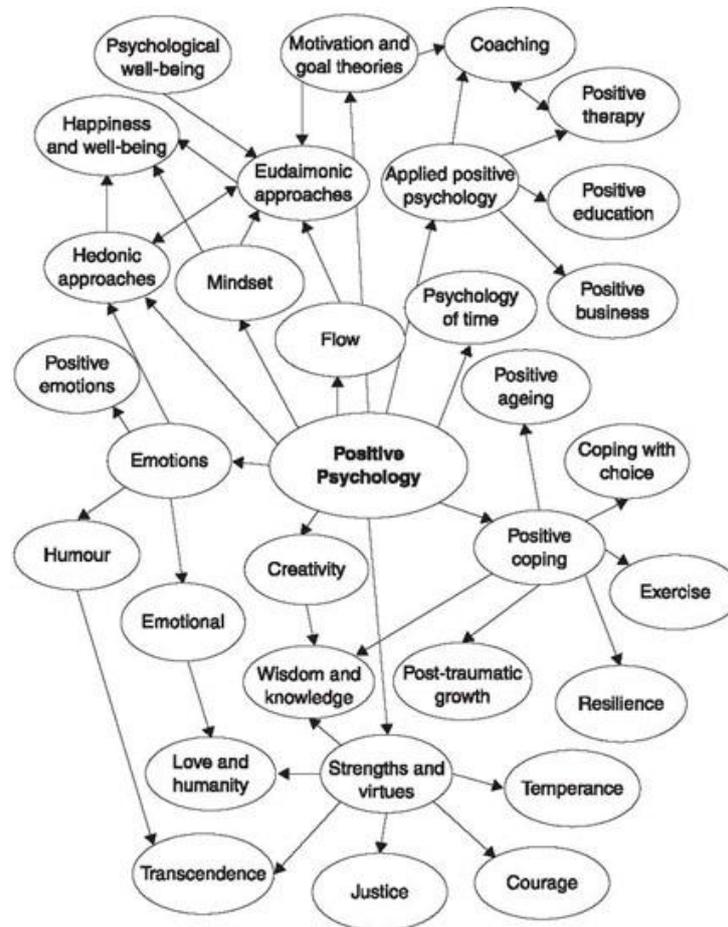
Gratitude is an action of thanking, but also a positive emotion that produces longer-lasting positivity (Ackerman, 2021). The Harvard Medical School (2011) states that, thereby, individuals acknowledge and appreciate the existing goodness in their life instead of always reaching out for something new in the hope that it improves their current situation or make them happier.

2.6.3 Positive psychology

Positive psychology is the scientific study of positive traits and what makes life worth living (Peterson, 2008). Martin Seligman is seen as the founding father of positive psychology. Positive Psychology is also co-initiated by Christopher Peterson and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Al Taher, 2020). It is the study of positive emotions and character of human functioning, which

aims to promote and discover how individuals and communities thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). **Figure 1** illustrates a broader overview of the topic of interest which positive psychology covers. It aspires to add empirical research about the concepts of flow, well-being, mindset-shift, or personal strengths (Boniwell, 2012).

Figure 1: Positive psychology in a nutshell



Reference: Boniwell, I. (2012). *Positive Psychology in a Nutshell. The Science of Happiness*. London: PWBC.

In sum, positive psychology consists of positive experiences like happiness, inspiration, love, and joy. Furthermore, positive psychology highlights traits like gratitude, resilience, and compassion. Positive psychology is a quest to understand the optimal experience. Two forms of optimal experience have received attention within the literature - mindfulness and the flow state (Sheldon, Prentice, Halusic, 2015).

2.6.4 Flow state

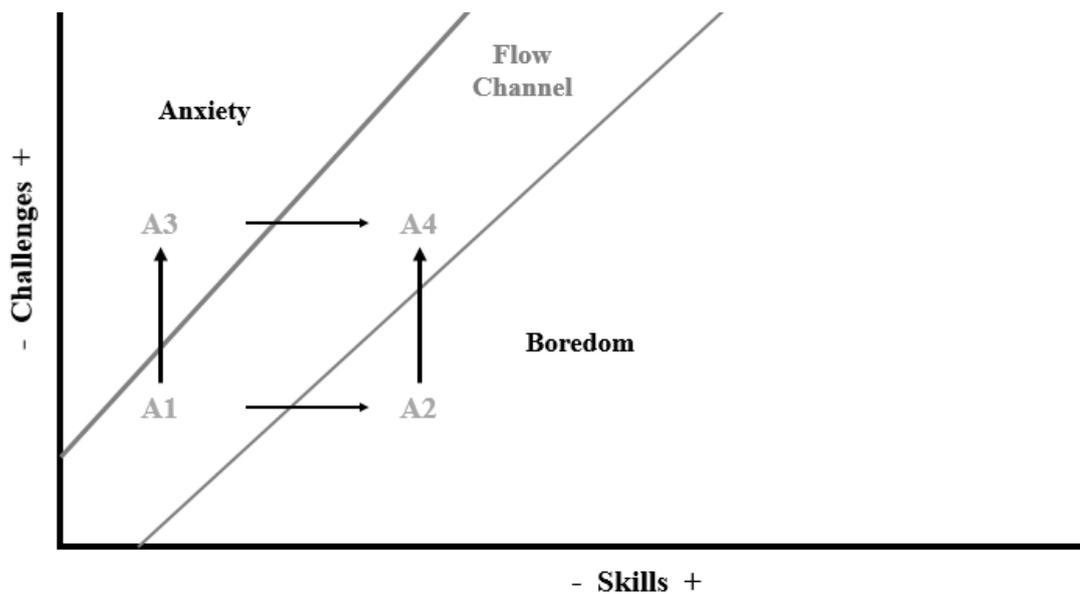
Positive psychology entails the theory of optimal experience, also called the concept of flow which was first defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1998). The phenomenon of flow occurs

when individuals are immersed with an intense focus on a task or an activity and lose track of time; nothing else seems to matter anymore as the experience itself is so enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

To experience the flow state, Csikszentmihalyi (2008) advocates defining attention as psychic energy, because the usage of attention as energy determines how we shape memories, thoughts, and feelings. Any experience depends on how psychic energy is invested and is a vital tool in any activity to improve the quality of experiences related to intentions and goals (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Csikszentmihalyi identified six factors that characterize an individual in flow: Focus on the present moment, to be present in your actions, lack of attention to the self, a sense of personal control, a distorted sense of time passing, and to experience the activity which is intrinsically rewarding (Ackerman, 2020).

Figure 2 displays the Flow-channel diagram that explains how one can enter and maintain the flow state. The two most relevant dimensions of the optimal experience are skill and challenge. For example, A1 represents someone who just has started to learn an instrument. At first, it is fun getting a sound out of an instrument, so this individual will be in flow. However, he or she will not stay in this focus mode for long because after practicing for a while, one gets bored and wants to improve. Feedback is utilized to improve or to find new challenges in the current tasks (A2). Another possibility is that the individual is getting from A1 to A3 if he or she meets an opponent who is more advanced in playing the instrument. Anxiety occurs within the individual, who just begun to learn an instrument. Both boredom (A2) and anxiety (A3), will give this individual a negative experience. The flow-channel diagram explains that being in the state (A1) and (A4) will provide the optimal experience. Although both situations are equally enjoyable, the two states are different, as (A4) involves challenges and demands better self-leading skills from the individual (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

Figure 2: Flow-channel diagram



Reference: *The Flow-channel diagram (adapted from Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).*

Once someone can control and organize the awareness to enter the optimal experience, according to Csikszentmihalyi (2008), the quality of life will improve, even mundane tasks and routines at work can become purposeful. Being able to turn trivial work tasks into more enjoyable activities has several benefits. With increased flow, individuals experience more growth toward emotional complexity, which allows employees to develop the skill to steer emotions more effectively. Furthermore, flow creates greater happiness, intrinsic motivation, increased engagement, and improved performance (Cherry, 2021).

2.6.5 Positive psychology – mindfulness - tools

As mentioned above, mindfulness has become a relevant topic for individuals who thrive in a successful career as emotional and mental competencies are the foundation for the leadership journey (Tan, 2014). In the following, some tools will be portrayed which help to increase positive feelings, improve quality of life, satisfaction in relationships, and empathy (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012). Integrating all the listed tools in one's habits and routines solely requires motivation.

2.6.5.1 4-7-8 Breathing technique

The 4-7-8 breathing technique requires focusing on taking a long and deep breath in and out and is also known as 'relaxing breath' (Legg, 2019). Dr. Andrew Weil (2015), director of the

University of Arizona Centre for Integrative Medicine, claims that this technique can help to manage cravings, reduce anxiety, helps a person to fall asleep, and control anger emotions. The method does not require any equipment.

To use the 4-7-8 breathing technique, one first needs to place the tip of the tongue on the tissue right behind the upper front teeth. Followed by these steps (Weil, 2015): First, air needs to be released from the lung by exhaling completely through the mouth. Afterwards, one has to close the mouth and inhale quietly through the nose for four seconds. Then, the breath needs to be held for seven seconds. Lastly, one needs to exhale deeply through the mouth and make a “whoosh”-sound for eight seconds. The circle of this breathing technique needs to be repeated four times.

Possible benefits of this technique are less hypertension, better stress management, and decreased fatigue (Legg, 2019). Bringing awareness to our breathing reminds us that we are in the present moment because it acts as a tool to regulate emotions and attention (Kabat-Zinn, 2004).

2.6.5.2 Meditation

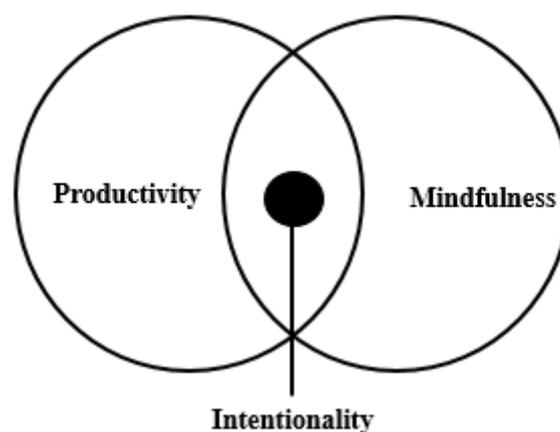
First of all, meditation is the only systematic human activity that accentuates the realization of where one is instead of focusing on improvement (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Additionally, Kabat-Zinn (2004) describes mediation rather as ‘being’ than ‘doing’. Meditation should not be confused with positive thinking and does not attempt to change thinking processes, but it entails looking through oneself (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Practicing meditation is beneficial because it supports the acknowledgement of the present moment and cultivates the quality of patience (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). Moreover, meditation supports a non-judging attitude toward what might come up mentally, such as private opinions, prejudices based on limited knowledge and influenced by past conditions (Kabat-Zinn, 2004).

2.6.5.3 Bullet Journal method

Overwhelmed by an endless flood of information, we tend to lose touch with ourselves and feel overstimulated yet restless. Carroll (2018) recommends the Bullet Journal method for individuals who lack the self-awareness to find their place in the digital age as this method helps getting organized through clarity, focus, and direction. To start with bullet journaling, one needs a notebook and a pen to write down everything that comes to one’s mind. Practising bullet

journaling can be the first step to organize a distracted mind and helps to train the brain to become more patient. At first, a bullet journal resembles a combination of a diary, a planner, a to-do list, and a sketchbook. It allows individuals to pay attention and have a deeper look into the two most valuable resources in life: our energy and our time (Carroll, 2018). **Figure 3** pictures, why finding the balance between productivity and mindfulness is essential. It is a process to become more present and reflect on the awareness of who one is, what one desires, and how to get there. Bullet journaling is essential as the act of writing by hand draws our attention and our mind into the present moment (Konnikova, 2014). Over the last decade, our productivity has decreased, and we feel paralyzed by the overload of information (Sprague, 2017). The never-ending stream of any data is worse than exhaustion (Levitin, 2018). By making bullet journaling a daily habit, it helps the individual to realize and to focus on where one sees themselves and focus on what one wants to canalize all attention. Bullet journaling finally leads to the empowerment of acting, also known as the art of intentional living (Carroll, 2018).

Figure 3: Finding the balance between productivity and mindfulness



Reference: Carroll, R. (2018). The Bullet Journal Method: Track the Past, Order the Present, Design the Future, London: Penguin Random House LLC.

2.6.5.4 Gratitude List (6-Minute-Diary)

The more we cultivate gratitude, the happier we will be as it contributes to happiness in life (Seligman et al., 2005). To keep a gratitude journal helps to remind oneself regularly about all the gifts and positive experiences one gained. According to Fredrickson (2009), it takes three good experiences to overcome a negative one. To start with gratitude journaling, one can begin by writing a diary based on the “6-Minute-Diary” from Dominik Spensst, which is named after

the conviction that it takes six minutes each day to develop gratitude. The morning and evening routine requires each three minutes to fill out the diary. Before starting the day, he suggests writing three things down which one is grateful for. Followed by a few bullet points of what the daily goals are as well as one positive affirmation, meaning a statement that affirms something to be true (Spenst, 2019). Spenst (2019) states, that to cultivate joy one needs to focus on the good things in life and develop positive habits such as the 6-Minute-Diary. Thereby, one can proactively remind oneself to be optimistic and to be grateful. For the evening routine, it requires three minutes to write down one good deed of the day and reflect on three points of positive experience to grow: To focus on how one will improve tomorrow based on what happened this day, and list three points of positive experience of this day, is essential. It is vital to reflect to grow and trains the brain to focus on what worked out and how to improve Spenst (2019).

2.7 Additional Remarks: Mindfulness Expert

To get more in-depth knowledge about mindfulness we decided to interview Chade-Meng Tan, co-founder of the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute (2021) and international bestselling author. Tan led the creation of mindfulness-based emotional intelligence courses at Google called Search Inside Yourself. Tan's opinion about how mindfulness contributes to the leadership journey is emphasized as follows:

“Mindfulness develops two sets of skills: cognitive and affective (emotional) skills. Mindfulness raises cognitive skills because it multiplies and improves the mind: concentration, equanimity, clarity of thought, clarity of perception, creativity, and objectivity. On the affective side, mindfulness improves emotional skills [...]. All these skills have profound implications for all knowledge workers. These skills helped me to become successful in my career, as they do for everybody else who practices them.”

Tan stresses the possibility that everyone is highly trainable in mental and emotional skills and that everyone can be more successful as professional success strongly depends on mental and emotional competencies.

Tan listed three findings and underlines that organizational cultural change can be facilitated if managers intuited the following: 1) In many jobs, especially those involving leadership, having a high level of cognitive and emotional competency makes a huge difference. 2) Cognitive and emotional competencies are highly trainable. 3) The foundation of that training is mindfulness.

Furthermore, Tan highlights that emotional intelligence on the leadership journey is foundational as emotional competencies make a manager successful.

“The observation that emotional competencies are really what make successful leaders is even true for those individuals that others consider not emotionally intelligent. Many people think of Steve Jobs as the opposite of emotionally intelligent, but while he's an individual with flaws, he has at least one very compelling emotional mastery: He is very good at demanding excellence in an inspiring way. The way he inspires others is by always focusing on the greater good. When you work for Steve, you are not working hard so he can buy his next yacht. You are working hard because you are helping create ‘insanely great’ products that will ‘change the world’. A lot of his success comes from that.”

2.8 Critical Reflections on Mindfulness

Topics around positive psychology and mindfulness might often be positivity bias. Studies about mindfulness tend to highlight positive results while negative findings are often not published (Britton, 2019). For instance, studies found out that long-term meditators have poorer sleep as the duration of sleep and depth began to decrease (Ferrarelli et al., 2013).

As outlined earlier, one's self is the sum of the structure of its goals. Through the active direction of attention, one can be conscious of these goals. The consciousness of the goals is the result of the attention. Thereby, attention shapes the self and vice versa (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). What we experience depends on how we invest our attention which is related to our intentions and goals. However, a critique here is the disorder in consciousness, which Csikszentmihalyi (2008) refers to as psychic entropy when some information appears to conflict with the individual's goal, thereby disrupting the inner self. Depending on how important that goal is to the self, whenever information disrupt consciousness by threatening the intention and goals, some amount of psychic energy needs to be mobilized to get rid of the threat of danger which leads to a condition of inner unbalance, or psychic entropy (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Hence, every piece of new input for the self might either create disorder in consciousness or it will reinforce our goals and free up the psychic energy (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008).

2.9 Chapter Summary

The previous theoretical framework enables us to understand relevant literature regarding self-leadership and mindfulness and the possible impact both concepts have on each other, depending on the organizational culture. The following section aims to summarize the status-quo of both phenomena that are presented in contemporary literature.

In conclusion, literature on leadership elaborates on different styles originating from a leader figure based on situation, context, aim, and personal interpretation since there is no universally confirmed theory. On the other hand, there is a broad consensus to view leadership as “influencing ideas, meanings, understandings and identities of others within an asymmetrical (unequal) relationship context” (Alvesson et al., 2017, p. 3). Emphasizing the great impact of the context for interpretation, we conclude organizational culture essential for the possibility to institutionalize self-leadership and mindfulness. Referring to self-leadership as a management paradigm, we follow Backländer’s (2018, 2019) definition: “Exerting influence over ones’ organizational activities” (Backländer, 2019). To understand how this can be facilitated by an employees’ understanding and interpretation of mindfulness, we reviewed the literature. Positive psychology entails the study of positive traits and experiences such as gratitude, resilience, and compassion. These traits are directly linked to mindfulness because of their non-judgmental focus on the present moment. Furthermore, the optimal experience also known as the flow state is defined as the concept of flow when individuals are immersed with an intense focus in a task (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998). Flow results in individuals losing a sense of time as the experience is overly enjoyable. All of it can be achieved by the practice of tools connected to positive psychology. Ultimately, a critical view on these presented concepts from contemporary literature allows us to see the high stress due to intense overwork, which might lead to self-exploitation and self-entrapment and the possibly insufficient internal cognitive processes and the side of self-leadership. Last but not least, studies found out that practising mindfulness tools might not always have positive effects as literature of a critical perspective pointed out that for example, long-term meditators have poorer sleep or before entering the flow state possibilities might appear to trigger the disorder in consciousness.

3 Methodology

The following sections will provide the reader with an overview into our methodological approach to ensure transparency about how we addressed our research questions, our chosen research design, and why we resonated in the findings, discussion, and conclusion as we did. Therefore, we will begin by elaborating in detail on the chosen **qualitative methods, philosophical grounding, and research design**. Afterward, we will present how we proceeded with our data collection and our approach for analysis, and how it was operationalized. To bring clarification into our data analysis, we will present a figure regarding how we arrived at the overarching themes of this essay. To conclude, we will take a critical look at the reliability and credibility, of our process, from research design to data analysis and how we have worked with reflexivity as well as generalization and quality considerations.

3.1 Research approach

Following two streams of data collection as a basis for our analysis and discussion, both research' approaches will be emphasized in the following section of this thesis. While the first part will focus on our qualitative study at Ingka Centers in Malmö, the second part will center around our self-experiment.

3.1.1 Research approach: Ingka Centers

Aiming to investigate and understand the connection between individual's ability to act autonomously and their interpretation of mindfulness, the conducted research can be perceived as following rules of interpretive philosophy (Prasad, 2018). Doing so, we acknowledge the role of human interpretation in knowledge about the social world as the underlying assumption – reality as a socially constructed entity – recognizes the existence of several realities at the same time; we contribute to the co-creation of reality (Prasad, 2018). Intersubjectivity as a key theme of the interpretive philosophy does not contradict the creation of common constructions and shared interpretation of realities between individuals (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Holstein & Gubrium, 1993). We hereby ensure to not take the interviewees' statements as the 'objective truth' (Prasad, 2018).

Considering this, our approach is to follow the necessity to make sense of the subjectivity and interpretation of our interviewees articulate by envisioning an emphatic and open mindset and being aware of the interviewees' bias towards the IKEA Group as a brand as we enter their

socially constructed world (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2002). This results in the consideration of values of the IKEA Group (see **appendix B**), their values, their position, tenure, nationality, seniority into concern while the data is collected and analyzed.

3.1.2 Research approach: Self-experiment

The self-experiment is inspired by Carl Cederstrom's one-year abstinence from an active sex life as presented in *The Wellness Syndrome* (Cederström & Spicer, 2015). With this plan we intend to gain first-hand experiences about the advantages, disadvantages, opportunities, and threats of a mindful life and how this influences our ability to be self-leading. Our self-experiment consists of mindful habits. Doing so, we follow an autoethnographic approach, in which we discover our behavior, language, and meaning (Prasad, 2018).

3.2 Research design and process

To make sense of intersubjectivity and reification our interviewees expressed is vital when it comes to meeting our aim of examining and understanding the connection between individual's ability to act autonomously and their interpretation of mindfulness. Therefore, we follow a qualitative and abductive research design. As emphasized by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2017), the abductive design will enable us to fluidly move between theory and data as well as between induction and deduction. Thereby, we can make use of the knowledge we gained during our earlier research on contemporary literature throughout the interviews conducted with Ingka Centers employees. On the other hand, it is also this empirical data collected during the interviews that will have an impact on our later-stage theoretical research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). This movement between theory and data thereby follows a hermeneutic cycle as beforehand explained. This is of great advantage for us, as through the help of this fluid movement, we could avoid naivety when analyzing and discussing the collected empirical data (Alvesson, 2003; Prasad, 2018). Furthermore, the examination of our interview questions, as well as the evaluation and consideration of the context behind an interviewee's data (for example backgrounds, positions, ages, genders), is allowed by our abductive approach. As already discussed, we follow Alvesson and Kärreman's (2007) reflexive '**gap approach**'. The comparison to contemporary literature gives valuable knowledge about Ingka Centers' contribution to findings on mindfulness's impact on an individual's ability to act autonomously and independently in the workplace. The thereby gained awareness and sensibility for

inconsistencies (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) equipped us for our second interview round, in which we gained deeper knowledge concerning our research topic. Contrary to the first interview round, we did not send any information following the interview during our second interview round. Furthermore, we have not evaluated this as a special method as we are not aiming to follow the action research approach (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), but rather wanted to meet our interviewees' interest about the concept of mindfulness.

We intent to dig deeper into the interviewees' experience with mindfulness, aiming to answer the question 1) *How* is mindfulness and self-leadership understood and made sense of by IKEA employees?, 2) *What* is the organizational culture's impact on the employees' interpretation of mindfulness and self-leadership? and 3) *Why* is mindfulness important for their ability to act autonomously and independently? (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). This is no addition or contradiction of our research questions, but aims to act as an orientation while deepening our understanding of our interviewees' interpretations. Finally, as we aim to investigate and understand the connection between individual's ability to act autonomously and the individual's interpretation of mindfulness, our research design can also be seen as exploratory (Prasad, 2018).

3.3 Collection of empirical material

To meet our research aim, we conducted semi-structured interviews to collect our data. Additionally, we complement these findings with reflections from our self-experiment. However, our main stream of data and primary source for analysis are semi-structured interviews, of which the following section will provide justification and explanation. On the account of completeness, our method of data collection during the self-experiment will be emphasized afterwards.

3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews with employees from Ingka Centers are our chosen method to investigate and understand the connection between individual's ability to act autonomously and the individual's interpretation of mindfulness. We decided to do so as Bryman and Bell (2011) refer to interviews as the most valuable method when conducting qualitative studies. As can be figured by the name '**semi-structured interview**', this method has a structured character to some extent, for example, ensured by an interview guide, and follow a specific cluster of

themes (Bryman & Bell, 2011). According to Bryman and Bell (2011), the main focus is the interviewee's interpretation and understanding of the asked questions. Hereby, we offer our interviewees the possibility to elaborate on the questions to ensure room for observations into how the employees experience Ingka Centers' approach to mindfulness and self-leadership. Following a semi-structured strategy, we as interviewers were equipped to ask follow-up questions, if necessary (Saunders et al., 2002).

In total, we conducted ten interviews, which lasted approximately 45 minutes resulting from 15 questions. Being left with the feeling of insufficiency, we decided to virtually meet the same individual a second time approximately five weeks after the first interview. This follow-up interview contained six questions which resulted in an interview time of about 15 minutes. After that, we felt enabled to have gained awareness the employees' interpretation, without generating an excessive amount of data. We analyze and write our thesis as a team of two but collected some of the empirical data individually.

The interviews were conducted via zoom due to the circumstances of the COVID-19 virus. During the period of our interviews, the employees had been instructed to work from home due to the ongoing circumstances. The fact that we did not meet the interviewees in person is something we have reflected upon but considered irrelevant since we evaluated most of our interviewees capable of the situation, especially because this working style lasts for one year now as the global pandemic started in March 2020. After conducting the interviews, we have enough knowledge about to state there is not any indication whatsoever to argue that the last-mentioned factors (virtual interviews via zoom) hold any substantial meaning or change our findings, which provides additional anonymity for our interviewees.

Lastly, as we performed an **open interview** technique aimed at enabling the interviewees to elaborate on key themes (Bryman & Bell, 2011), we took notes throughout the interviews to base our further procedure.

3.3.2 Selection of interviewees

We aimed to have an unbiased sample, wherefore our sample consists of ten employees from various backgrounds, positions, ages, genders. A list of our interviewees and their position can be found in **appendix A**. Since we promised the interviewees anonymity, we have chosen to only mention their hierarchy level.

Our contact person helped us to conduct and arrange the interviews as she mediated contact with the other nine interviewees, inspired by a snowball sample. Our contact person remained our contact person through the entire process and answered several clarifying questions before, during, and after the conducted interviews.

We acknowledge that the number of interviews might be considered as scarce. Still, we follow Alvesson's and Sköldbberg's (2009) argumentation that as a researcher one should focus on sense-making instead of the frequency or numbers of interviews.

3.3.3 Interview-guide

As recommended by Kvale and Brickmann (2009), we followed an interview guide to not be distracted from the key themes. Based on our literature review we figured that the following key themes are the most suitable to answer our research questions.

To do so, we came with a list of interview questions that we orient ourselves on during the interviews, thereby working as a guideline. Using semi-structured interviews, we occasionally distanced ourselves from the interview guide through follow-up questions, if appropriate, which emerged in new ideas, concepts, and themes. These were the pivotal point for our follow-up interview.

The prepared questions treated both open subjects as well as more precise areas regarding the interpretation of self-leadership and mindfulness. We offered the interviewees to freely elaborate on the subjective and reflect on the themes without any guidance from our side by choosing open questions. As emphasized by Saunders et al. (2002), open questions offer new perspectives, opinions, and reflections that would not have been found if we chose a rather rigid interview guide. We have not been hesitating to ask critical questions, which were reacted to in a very open and reflected manner by most of our interviewees. The elaborations opened new areas of interest for the follow-up interview as well as anchor points for our expert interviews and the reflections of our self-experiment.

3.3.4 Data organization

We interpreted our collection of empirical material during the interviews with Ingka Centers employees with the intent to link the data and mentioned literature in a meaningful way. During the conduction of the interviews, we took notes to transcribe each conversation. This enabled

us to reflect upon each interview, identify key themes, and focus on adding or removing questions for the second interview round that contributed to the foundation for our thesis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Concerning our analysis, we proceeded to examine the data through an **open-coding technique** – an analyzing method grounded by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012) -, which will be further outlined.

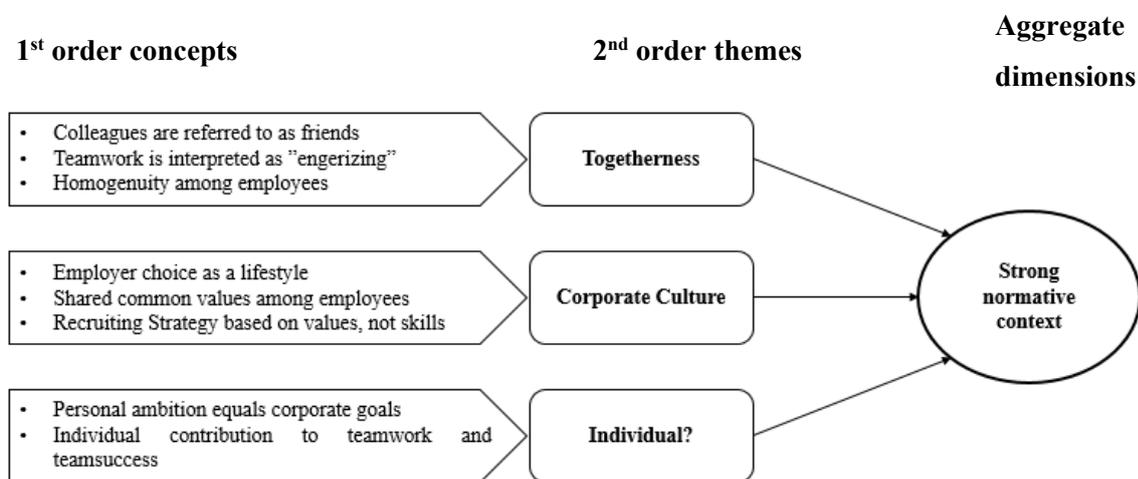
To highlight the notes and phrases that resonated with the overall aim of the study and the theme of the interview offers insights into what Ryan and Bernard (2003) describe as ‘open codes’ through which we were able to identify repeating themes as we analyzed the interviews. Each of these codes was supported by several quotes from various interviewees which enabled us to identify specifics and interesting odds (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This ensured a higher degree of reliability in our findings reoccurring phrases, ideas, and observations were discussed referring to the open codes that were identified individually. Hereby, we were equipped to sort expressions and ideas that allowed us to identify the recurring themes and patterns (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) from both empirical data and theoretical backgrounds. Therefore, we decided to compare the collected empirical material with key themes from literature, so that we are able to systematically search for similarities, differences, and IKEA specialities (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This resulted in us being confronted with gaps between our findings and contemporary literature (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

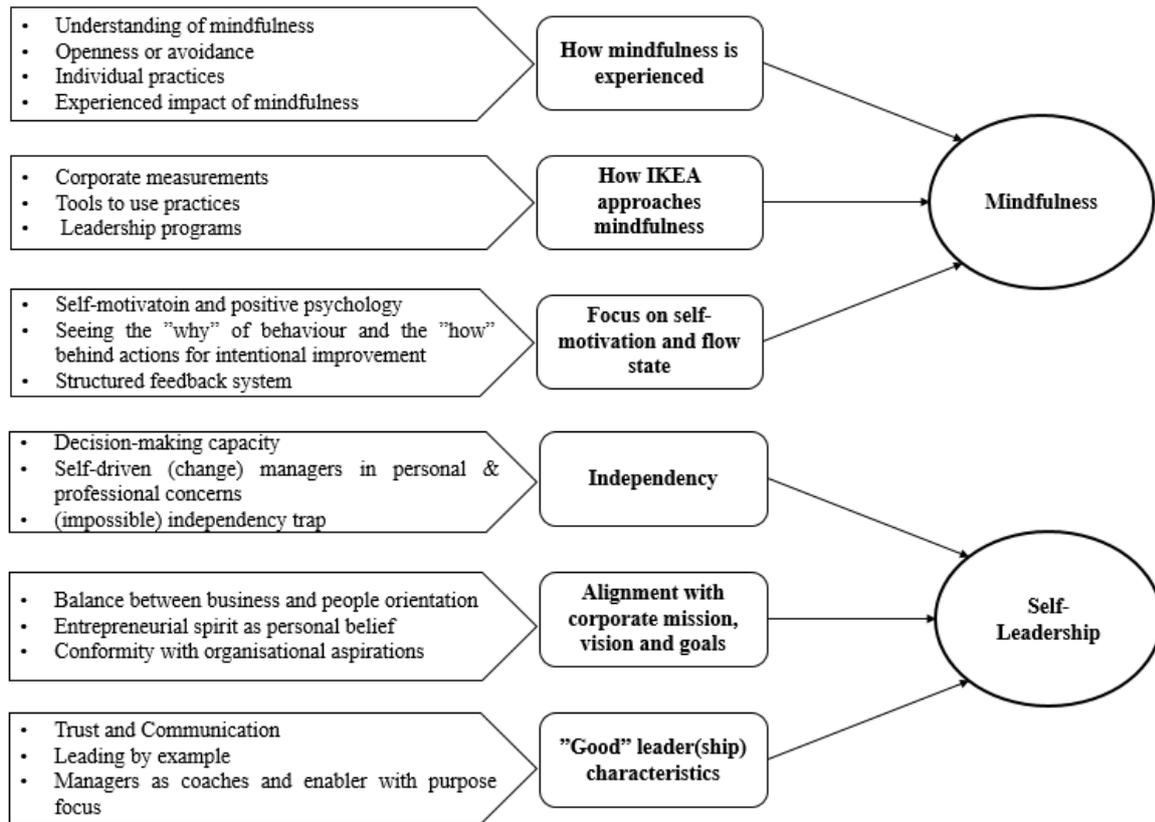
This research is based on the analyzing tool grounded by Gioia et al. (2012) in order to include both systematic accuracies as well as creativity and openness to our thesis. Hereby, the final data structure for this paper results from 1st order concepts, 2nd order themes, and aggregated dimensions. The 1st order concepts are found by scanning the notes from the interviews for similarities and differences, whereby we focus on repetitions of certain phrases or ideas following a thematic sorting process (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). As emphasized by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015), the categorization – the coding of the empirical material in relation to a phenomenon – leads to us analyzing the collected material as we interpret our interviewees' answers. This categorization builds the basis for the 2nd order themes (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012), which we came up with through discussion, combination, and reduction of our individually collected 1st order concepts. Hereby, we benefitted greatly from challenging each other's understandings, interpretations, and interpretation of the gathered data, which consequently leads to a – what Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) call reflexive look at the collected data. This helped us in our ambition to

continuously aim for unbiased data collection and the intention to address the theme of this research from different perspectives.

We methodologically felt supported in the process of finding appropriate literature to investigate and examine our phenomenon, whereby we trained our understanding for what we are observing (Gioia et al. 2012). Furthermore, we continuously and profoundly discussed both phenomena, our collected material, and literature (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). Thereby, we concluded our data organization with the following aggregated dimensions, which are summarized in **figure 4**.

Figure 4: 1st order concepts, 2nd order themes, and aggregate dimensions





Reference: How we reflected and discussed our 1st order concepts, 2nd order themes and came up with our final aggregated dimensions, based on Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012).

Doing so, we constantly reminded ourselves to think reflexively, whereby our critical thinking and teamwork were challenged. During this time, our assumptions on self-leadership and mindfulness are questioned by ourselves and other researchers, which we identified serving the purpose of this thesis. Aiming to think outside the box and be open, we made a particular effort to avoid following contemporary agreements about mindfulness and self-leadership.

3.3.5 Additional data collection

Additional remarks regarding our method of data collection during the self-experiment will be focused on. In order to do so and to highlight the variety of data collection methods among our team, the following section will be divided into two parts, whereby the first emphasizes Anna's data collection method, while the second half of this subchapter contains Mi's method of data collection.

3.3.5.1 Data collection - Anna

January, the start of the self-experiment, begins with more organization than expected since I am restructuring my day to ensure a daily practice in the studio is possible timewise. Classes are in the afternoon and evening and have to be well-aligned with university assignments, language class, and regular check-ups with the unemployment agency, my sleep schedule, and social life. My daily schedule could be considered to be oriented on intervals of all these obligations and I organize myself using the calendar blocking method on my mobile phone's schedule to get a good feeling for how I use my time and find balance in all these liabilities. Therefore, I decided to reflect on my thoughts, ideas, and incursions by writing a few notes about these in the respective block on my mobile. Throughout the experiment, this happens to be forgotten, which I evaluated disadvantageous as results might be distorted when not captured at the moment. Furthermore, I feel disconnected from my thoughts in reflection processes that include technical devices. Therefore, after approximately six weeks into the experiment, I decided to keep a habit-tracker-inspired list of typical and expected findings in my diary, aligned with the codes which I just need to cross after class. This held the potential risk of not digging deep enough for me to have data to analyze and discuss on behalf of this thesis, wherefore I changed my method again after using it about two weeks: Finally, I ended every yoga and meditation session by sending myself a voice memo with ideas and reflections I had during the session. This could be used as a transcript to have the data that will be analyzed and discussed later in this research.

3.3.5.2 Data collection - Mi

I decided to use social media, in this case Instagram, as a visual-diary tool to collect and store data. Consequently, I posted daily videos about my progress to receive immediate feedback from friends and strangers. I got out of my comfort zone by freeing myself from inner worries and kept posting videos about the whole project. In addition to the visual diary, I kept track of my visions, goals, reflexive thoughts in my bullet journal daily every evening.

3.4 Critical reflection on methodology

In the pursuit of scientific excellence, the following paragraph aims to discuss our methodology. We aspire to enhance the trustworthiness of our thesis by taking a critical perspective on **reliability, reflexivity, quality, and credibility** (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Following Alvesson's (2003) reflexive interview approach, this thesis aims for ongoing reflection throughout the data collection, analysis, and discussion.

Concerning the *reliability* of our qualitative approach, a closer look needs to be taken into the *credibility* and *quality* of our study. Using interviews as our data collection method in the interaction with Ingka Centers employees, indicated the usage of interview techniques without leading questions as well as our note-taking during the interviews (Alshenqeeti, 2014) to maintain the reliability. The level of reliability is also highly influenced by the preparation and the quality of equipment used to conduct interviews via zoom, to minimize bias resulting from insufficient sound or video quality. Therefore, we attempt to compensate for the lack of revealing body language through video interviews. Furthermore, the interviews were held in English, which for both sides, us as researchers as well as all our interviewees, is not the native language. Therefore, observations might have remained concealed as valuable observations might be lost in translation. Having worked to a large extent with semi-structured interviews limits the findings of this study to the reflections IKEA employees and our chosen experts have themselves and are aware of. An ethnographic study would have offered us first-hand experiences into the everyday life of our interviewees, thereby examining the obscure (Prasad, 2018). The interviewees hold an essential value to understand the chosen phenomena since the findings are gained through their understanding and interpretation (Merriam, 2002). Therefore, it was of interest to us to interview employees from various backgrounds, positions, ages, genders, etc, so that we hold a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the interpretation of (self-)leadership. Thereby, we strive to enhance the *generalizability*.

However, *generalizability* could be criticised considering that all of our interviewed experts are male. However, it was of greatest concern for us to talk to employees from different countries and backgrounds. In the case of IKEA employees, this is particularly important to focus on IKEA specifics when collecting the data. Regarding the experts, we focus on cultural diversity as our female interviewees cancelled and we tried to compensate for the lacking diverse perspective of that dimension by evaluating the insights of German-British, Asian-American, and Polish. Our inner attitude and striving for neutrality and objectivity regarding the research objectives help to ensure the *credibility* of our research and allows for reflexivity (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). However, concerning *credibility*, Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2012) point out that interviewees have personal biases. We are aware of these potential biases as we not only analyzed the answers of the Ingka Centers interviewees but also the available documents which were available e.g., of the training and program the IKEA Group is offering. Regarding *reflexivity* as a crucial component of qualitative studies, we address continuous careful interpretation of the collected data with an ongoing reflection process aiming to reinterpret our findings (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Furthermore, when analyzing and

interpreting the data, we recognize that following the positive connotation of mindfulness and self-leadership portrays only one viewpoint. Even though we question and challenge this in our research, we still might interpret the data with our biased view. This has been acknowledged by Prasad (2018). Prasad (2018) emphasizes the human tendency to establish a shared interpretation of reality is the central limitation of the interpretive perspective. We consider this to have a big impact on our self-experiment particularly.

We decided to neglect validity considerations, more specifically the extent to which a study measures what is aimed for and to what the results of this study can be generalized (Bryman & Bell, 2011), as this is primarily important for quantitative studies. Nevertheless, we aim to remain reflective throughout our research (Alvesson, 2003). This enables us to challenge our perspective and reflect on our data from different perspectives. Thereby, the plurality of meanings serves the *quality* of our research.

4 Empirical material

In the following section of the thesis, the basis of our data collection during our interviews at Ingka Centers (IKEA Group) and their approach to self-leadership, mindfulness, and the organizational culture will be presented. Our empirical material concludes with additional remarks we base on our self-experiment, as these remarks constitute the second stream of empirical material, we use to meet the aim of this research.

4.1 The case organization – Ingka Centers

Ingka Centers Holding BV with headquarters in the Netherlands is a provider for virtual and physical meeting places. Ingka Centers offers their service in close collaboration with the IKEA Group and for IKEA and other customers from various industries all around the world. By doing so, Ingka Centers can be considered a subsidiary of the IKEA Group and follows IKEA Group's values, which are listed in **appendix B**. Therefore, their approach on meeting places as their product is based on IKEA Group's values, but still tailored to Ingka Centers uniquely. Therefore, Ingka Centers as a company reflects the IKEA Group's culture as an organization.

For Ingka Centers, meeting places are a place to “grow, learn, connect, meet and have fun” (Ingka Centers, 2021). Meeting places are not only the product Ingka Centers sells, but the organization as an employer is also seen as a meeting place. Therefore, the company's strategic vision and mission for their products can be transferred to their People Strategy. To give responsibility and trust your colleagues is one of Ingka Centers core values (Ingka Centers, 2021). They present themselves as an employer that appreciates “the real you” (Ingka Centers, 2021) at work, but also acknowledges the possibility that not every employee knows how to be themselves.

To answer that, IKEA Group's “Leading through the new era”-program consists of mindfulness sessions and explanations on how to enable self-leadership through the help of mindfulness. As IKEA Group and Ingka Centers can be named interferingly when referring to the organization's values, mindset, and identity, many motivators differ: Self-Leadership, adaptability, innovation, and passion play a vital role for Ingka Centers (Ingka Centers, 2021). This might lead to a particularly unique approach to mindfulness's influence on an employee's ability to act autonomously and independently. The rather unique but contemporarily mindfulness-inspired approach to leadership that is adopted by Ingka Centers, caught our interest to examine how this is understood, and interpreted by the employees.

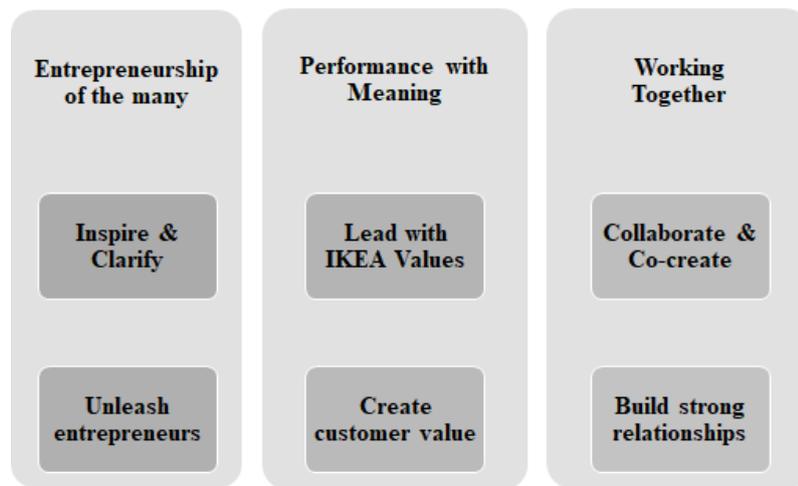
In the upcoming parts of this thesis, we will refer to our research site as “IKEA”. This decision is based on mainly three reasons: First, we intent to conduct our research in a mature organization, where a strong normative context exists and where the concepts of self-leadership and mindfulness are introduced. Secondly, the IKEA Group can be seen as the relevant organizational setting, as Ingka Centers as a subsidiary has the same values and organizational heritage and culture. Third, these organizational values center around the community and belonging. This results in a highly interesting basis for us to examine how the concepts of mindfulness and self-leadership are made sense of in a strong organizational context like IKEA’s. In order to be able to base our research on a consistent story around our phenomena, the following section presents IKEA’s understanding of (self-) leadership and mindfulness.

The close connection between the IKEA Group and Ingka Centers results in Ingka Centers’ leadership approach to be based on IKEA Group’s values (**appendix B**). The two main leadership tasks are based on the organizational culture and contain the empowerment of the individual employee as well as the role model function of managers. IKEA’s leadership approach does not differ between those managers responsible for “topics” and those responsible for “people”. Both types of leader figures visit the same development programs. During the conducted interviews, our interviewees told us about their experiences with and learnings gained during two of those leadership development programs, more specifically, we received knowledge about the ‘Leading through the new era’-program. This program teaches IKEA’s managers about the importance of trust, communication, and the necessity of teamwork.

I think it was one of those leadership programs at IKEA, about 6 years ago, when I realized that it is about respect and communication and trust and it is also about me as a leader putting myself out there and being vulnerable and that was kind of a big milestone for me as a leader. That is how I help my team to be a real team. (interviewee 2)

This approach is also depicted in the current leadership strategy at IKEA: As can be seen in **figure 4** - which is taken from IKEA’s internal documents and aims to summarize the leadership approach the company follows -, the three key values ‘entrepreneurships of the many’, ‘working together’, and ‘performance with meaning’ form the basis.

Figure 5: Ingka Centers' leadership approach and IKEA Group's leadership values



Reference: IKEA's leadership approach (adapted from internal Documents from IKEA, 2021).

Hereby, "Entrepreneurships of the many" centers around a manager's ability to behave independently aligned with IKEA Group's vision, mission, and goals, while the latter refers to a manager's role-model function to encourage non-leading employees to do the same.

[The team is] led by colleagues and not a manager in that sense. [The team] knows what to do. (interviewee 6)

And:

[To be a good leader at Ingka Centers, I need to] understand where the people, colleagues, employees are because I do not know what is going in my colleagues' life and I need to understand how I can be supporting, to give more time and let them feel hurt as well. I need to feel that, so I need to develop empathy – also for myself. [...] That is what I needed to learn when I joined IKEA. (interviewee 8)

As can be seen in the last quote, IKEA's emphasis on the mindset, compassion, and empathy of its employees is the basis for the leadership development programs. Following IKEA Group's value 'lead by example', managers are obliged to share the learnings from the programs with their team. How this influences the dissemination of the concept of mindfulness and how the understanding of the same is shaped throughout the organization is emphasized in the following section.

As can be seen, IKEA is an organization with a well-developed, well-understood and to a large extend uniform approach to leadership. Considering that IKEA is in 1943, this can be surprising as the expectations on leadership and their understanding within entities changed enormously since its founding. Ingka Centers, however, was first established approximately two years ago in 2019.

IKEA approaches their employee through the global leadership program to educate about mindfulness and leadership. The program ‘Leading in a new era 2.0’ and, according to interviewee 7, consists of trying to make a shift from leading a store/ shopping center to leading a market, the ability to navigate the new reality with courage and ownership and leaders who understand the importance of self-leadership. The program specifies self-leadership, people leadership, and market leadership, whereby those modules aiming to educate about mindfulness are in bold.

Table 2: ‘Leading in a new era 2.0’- program content

Self- Leadership	People Leadership	Market Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leading in an omni-channel world ▪ Mindfulness and wellbeing for performance ▪ Adaptive Leadership ▪ Creating change for the better ▪ Peer coaching practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leading a data driven organization ▪ Psychological safety ▪ Developing and empowering people ▪ Practising effective and open dialogue ▪ Building relationship depth ▪ Wise compassion ▪ The Power / Communication of Intention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Making strategic and data-driven decisions ▪ Taking a total market approach to customer experience ▪ Selfless leadership ▪ Leading with purpose ▪ Sustainability

Reference: Program-content (adapted from internal documents from Ingka Centers, 2021).

In addition to the ‘Leading in a new era 2.0’- program, IKEA launched ‘mindful Mondays in mid-April 2021. Interviewee 9 explains that it is a structured approach to mindfulness to make employees practice mindfulness once every week within the company. Sometimes there will be 20-minute sessions on Mondays where the group does breathe exercises together, body scanning, or guided meditation.

4.2 Additional remarks based on self-experiment: Mindfulness

The second stream of empirical material results from our individually conducted self-experiment, in which we lived particularly mindful for a certain amount of time. We intent to either weaken or strengthen common beliefs and contemporary literature around self-leadership and mindfulness by experiencing it first-hand. Our qualitative study investigates the interrelation of the individual's ability to act autonomously and the individual's interpretation of mindfulness. To do so, we intend to critically reflect on the generated data collected during our semi-structured interviews.

The following section of the thesis contains a detailed description of how our self-experiment looks like and why we consider this approach applicable to our research goal. To do so, the first section portrays Anna's self-experiment, before we conclude with Mi picturing her self-experiment.

4.2.1 Self-experiment Anna

To show the reader the starting point of my self-experiment means to be open and transparent about my positive connection to mindfulness in general and yoga as well as meditation as tools specifically. I risk the bias of personal involvement and subjectivity. However, my self-experiment consists of daily (aerial) yoga- and meditation practices – both in groups and on my own (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Visiting the studio on average four times a week before the experiment starts had brought me to a yoga-hour count of approximately six hours weekly as every class takes 90 minutes. Regarding meditation as a tool to gain back focus and control over my thoughts (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012), my usage has been more sporadic and originates from my experience as an orchestral musician overcoming stage fright before important concerts or competitions by meditating with the other orchestral members right before entering the stage in front of the audience or jurors.

4.2.2 Self-experiment Mi

I will teach herself within six weeks how to figure skate. This training will be part of my morning ritual as this activity might cultivate flow. Flow is a concept which describes a moment when someone is fully absorbed in a challenging task (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The self-experiment was about teaching myself figure skating at Lund's outdoor ice rink for six weeks every day for about four hours from the 16th of January 2021 until the 28th of February 2021,

the last day until the ice rink will be removed. The initial skill level was complete beginner which means the trainings-plan consisted of learning the basics.

As Csikszentmihalyi (2008) highlighted, a clear goal and a structured approach are needed to enter the flow state, so a detailed training checklist was created by myself for the upcoming 6-weeks. The original checklist can be found in appendix C. In the first two weeks, the plan was to go to the ice rink every day from 11 PM until 2-3 AM. Throughout these two weeks, I needed to make some changes due to sleep deprivation and exhaustion during the daytime. For these reasons, I decided to go to bed earlier around 10 PM, and started the training from 4:30 AM to 8 AM to start my day with figure skating.

To enter the flow state, Csikszentmihalyi (2008) stresses on the importance of receiving feedback for potential improvements. I decided to use social media, in this case, Instagram, as a visual-diary tool to collect feedback from friends and other figure skaters from around the world. I got out of my comfort zone by freeing myself from inner worries and kept posting videos about the whole project.

5 Findings

In the following chapter, the reader can find an analysis of our findings structured according to the themes emerging during the conducted interviews with 1) the IKEA employees, as well, as 2) those we reflected on during our self-experiment. The themes result from the coding and interpretation of the empirical data we assessed as important based on our extensive literature review.

5.1 Findings from the IKEA Group

In the following chapter, we will present the findings that surfaced during our study of IKEA and their approach to mindfulness and leadership. Following this, we have segmented the empirical findings with regards to the themes that emerged during our coding and interpretation of the empirical data.

5.1.1 Organizational culture as a normative context

IKEA seems to have created an organizational culture strongly focusing on the core value **Togetherness**. When being asked, why IKEA is chosen as their employer, most interviewees referred to the strong organizational culture and that everyone shares the same values which is considered important as it enables a “big teamwork towards a goal together” (interviewee 5). Regarding the fact that employees share the same values, interviewees answered:

“We share common values. It is nice to be part of an environment where people aim for the same goal. It gives me the energy to move something together. That is why I joined IKEA.” (interviewee 7)

And:

“Togetherness! I mean it is IKEA. How we strive to something better and how we are all on the same path both moving forward.” (interviewee 9)

Additionally, the focus on IKEA’s core value togetherness can be seen as colleagues are referred to as “friends” (interviewee 2) and that working for the IKEA Group as an employer is seen as a “lifestyle” (interviewee 8).

It is an agreement among all interviewees that the core values of the IKEA Group are important for the company’s success as well as their personal goals within the organization. This results

in recruitment criteria being mostly based on the corporate values listed in **appendix B**. One of our interviewees emphasizes:

“This may not work for everyone, but we hire and try to hire based on values. It is not the competence, that is important, more the values of the candidate. You can be very good technically, but if you do not fit in our culture and our values, then you are not going to be hired.” (interviewee 8)

This statement reflects that somewhat similar employees are hired by IKEA. For instance, interviewee 8 stresses that culture and values are the decisive criteria in recruitment and not necessarily the professional skills.

IKEA’s organizational culture advocates a community of togetherness. However, for our interviewees, the development of the individual is still possible. When asked about how the individual as his or her “true authentic unscripted self” (interviewee 1) fits into IKEA’s community of mostly like-minded employees, one interviewee states:

“We are not a family, we are still a company. When you are a family, you are more forgiving, but we have the same ambition, we want to be inspiring. What we feel is that every person's contribution makes a difference. That comes from Ingvar [IKEA founder]: he saw everyone, every position, every level, everyone has a role to play and it is also that hierarchies are less. Our managing director is traveling the same way, has the same benefits as we have, we try to treat everyone the same. Yes, there is a community, but I think it is more about the individual's contribution.” (interviewee 1)

Interviewee 1 refers to the organization’s cultural influence on the employees’ beliefs, ideas, and sense of purpose. According to interviewee 1, all IKEA employees have in common that they aim to be ambitious and inspiring. She feels a sense of belonging to IKEA as an organization because she feels her values to be represented in the entity.

Stating corporate values is not enough: Our interviewees stress the importance of authenticity between what is stated and what is implemented. This is underpinned in our interviewees' wish for organizational culture based on values that are aligned with actions taken. The alignment between words and action is highlighted through the following statement.

“The culture and mission align. I like this part the most, the cooperate culture. We mostly meet people with the same values. We do live and act accordingly. We need

people with the same mindset, then it is easier to communicate, build trust and relationships like this.” (interviewee 10)

As can be seen in the aforementioned quote, interviewee 10 stresses the homogeneity among IKEA employees. Due to recruiting being mostly based on the individual’s understanding of the corporate core values and the cultural fit, most employees have the same mindset. For interviewee 10, communication and the building of trust between employees is thereby simplified.

Statements like those advocating similar mindsets between employees open up a question: **Do employees within the IKEA Group acknowledge the strong organizational culture as something that potentially exercises power over them as individuals?** In theory, this question could be linked to the manipulation affine character of normative control within organizational settings. Our empirical material revealed that some individuals perceive IKEA as omnipresent, even in their personal life. The omnipresence of IKEA and its corporate values can be seen in some of the reactions of the interviewees:

“You know, IKEA never leaves you: If you eat, if you sleep, if you meet your friends outside of work – it is all the same. Of course, this makes you be your true self at work. Or am I my work self at home? Sometimes I can’t differ.” (interviewee 5)

And:

“Yes, I join the meditation sessions at the beginning of a meeting, but if I also do that at home, then I don’t do something for myself but for IKEA. Because when I think about meditation I think about work. I learned about it at work, so for me meditation is work.” (interviewee 8)

As can be seen in the statements from interviewee 5 and interviewee 8, IKEA’s approaches are so deeply anchored in employees that a distinction between professional and private life is not possible. The individual’s thought processes and interests are highly impacted by IKEA’s education and the development programs employees visit. How this influences the employees’ interpretation of mindfulness and self-leadership, will be focused on in the following sections of this thesis.

5.1.2 Mindfulness

In the following the findings of the section mindfulness from our interviews at IKEA will be presented structured by the three main clusters 1) How mindfulness is experienced, 2) How IKEA approaches mindfulness, and lastly, 3) Focus on self-motivation and flow.

5.1.2.1 How mindfulness is experienced

Most of the interviewees had an overall idea of the meaning of mindfulness and were convinced that it is an important aspect to implement mindfulness practices not only in their private but also in their professional life.

“Mindfulness is the skill that you develop to become more mindful. It is when you bring your higher state of awareness. Mindfulness and controlling yourself are the key things to become your own leader. Without connecting your actions to the consequences, it will not work. [...] You need to develop this ability to reflect and learn - Building resilient and being compassionate.” (interviewee 2)

The ability to be in the present moment is one of the most important aspects of mindfulness. It facilitates the opportunity to become your own leader by becoming more compassionate and reflective. Thus, the ability to be present can entail positive experiences, such as inspiration, happiness and traits like resilience, compassion and gratitude, which links mindfulness and positive psychology together.

However, not every interviewee considered themselves mindful enough. They understood the meaning and became aware that mindfulness is useful but have issues to fully engage. As a consequence of not living in the moment, is the aspect of constantly overthinking about what happened or holding too much onto the past.

“I have been becoming more and more aware of it, but I must confess that I am too pragmatic as a person who lives in the past.” (interviewee 8)

Interviewee 4 also provided an interesting point of view as it was mentioned that he could not consider himself being mindful. However, in the interview he says that he indirectly already practices typical mindfulness exercises, for example, the breathing technique.

“I am not quite open to using these tools nor being mindful by definition. I already have my own “routines”. I relax my mind when I am exhausted because then I cannot think of anything else. I do breathing techniques or do the Wimhof-Method, take cold showers, and also sometimes go for a cold dip at the sea!”

Even though interviewee 4 denies to define his behavior as mindfulness routines, he mentioned tools and methods such as the Wimhof-Method which indeed do help improving the focus and calm down the mind. He clearly knows what he needs to practice in order to relax and relieve stress. The reason why interviewee 4 might not be able to identify himself being mindful by definition might be due to the existing ‘Leading through the new era 2.0’-program at IKEA which educates the employees about leadership and mindfulness; it also presents a tool-kit for practicing mindfulness. These tools are slightly different than what interviewee 4 describes. However, the exercises he mentioned as well as his personal routines allow him to relieve stress and to gain focus on the present moment. The program itself and how IKEA approaches mindfulness to their employees will be elaborated in the next section more thoroughly.

5.1.2.2 How IKEA approaches mindfulness

As mentioned in the previous chapters, IKEA puts a lot of effort into introducing their employees to the importance of mindfulness. According to interviewee 4, the HR- Department offers various training and tools for the well-being of their employees which became due to the current pandemic even more important than ever before. By training employees refer to the ‘Leading in a new era 2.0’-program which is designed for HR Managers. Interviewee 7 participates in the program with 14 other IKEA employees.

“For the past few years, the movement of mindfulness has been growing more within IKEA. This program is a deeply personal journey where we get exposed to a new way of thinking and it is about digging deep into yourself. [...] In my opinion, being in peace with myself, learn how to become compassionate and being mindful are crucial for acting accordingly as a leader for my team and for myself.” (interviewee 7)

From the perspective of a leadership position getting to know about oneself and become compassionate are essential as it helps to cope with everyday life and stress situations. According to interviewee 4, it remains difficult to turn the new learned knowledge from training into action, routines, and behaviors. However, some employees actively try to practice

mindfulness sessions on their own for example with their team via “Microsoft Teams” where they start their team meetings with breathing exercises together. Furthermore, the majority claims not only doing meditation and breathing exercises to calm their mind but also doing active tasks where the movement of the whole body is involved.

“For me, mindfulness is the concept of taking few minutes for myself and doing some breathing exercises. It helps me to relax and clears my mind. Additionally, I have the same feeling when I go for a run or spend my time in the sauna. I start my team meetings with mindfulness practices, for example, with the guided meditation from the App “Calm”. To make sure we do it together we do it online via Microsoft Teams. [...] I do exercises, go for a walk with my dog and I do a body scan also guided via App.”
(interviewee 7)

Another aspect which IKEA offers their employees is the so-called ‘Mindful Monday’. Interviewee 9 explains that these events consist of a structured approach to make employees practice mindfulness at least for 20 minutes a week. And it contains of a variety of techniques and tool-kits such as breathing techniques or body scanning.

The advice from interviewee 9 on how to put newly learned knowledge into action is: *“Just do it. You need intention. Push yourself and always be ready to develop.”* By just doing it, interviewee 7 approves that the online team meetings which starts with mindful exercises made her more aware of the topic and of the presence of being in the moment.

I needed that space mentally and time to stop and in most of the exercises there is in the end time to meditate and of course, it depends, in the beginning, I was not so mindful, but now I have trained my mind to use it. [...] I was exposed to this topic at work, as one of my colleague is very much into meditation and mindfulness and even wanted to practice it during team meetings (interviewee 2).

IKEA’s employees are not only exposed to the topic mindfulness due to the program and training but also from their colleagues who are already involved and convinced about the topic mindfulness. Also, interviewee 7, who usually is into mindfulness felt a significant difference compared to the time where she did not intentionally practice mindfulness. She also gained the ability to slow down which is a highly needed skill in a leadership position.

“I felt that I suddenly could slow down and be much more present at work not only in conversations with the team but also with customers. [...] I can find concentration and get immersed in my work tasks. This is a good sign as I enjoy work way more this way.”
(interviewee 7)

By being mindful and intentionally practicing mindfulness employees can slow down and be present which is an important aspect in regard to get motivated, find focus and get into the flow state at work.

5.1.2.3 Focus on self-motivation and flow

In order to focus on productivity during flexible working hours self-motivation is required. Our interviewees maintain motivated by seeing the actual result of their work. However, working for a mature organization also means that results of daily projects and work are often not visible immediately which leads to less motivation. Most of our interviewees need to discuss their work with their peers and the team to find meaning in what they do.

“Try to see the little things even though you do not always see the biggest impact of your work. I try to talk about lacking motivation with my manager and my closest colleagues. What I need is to talk my thoughts through in order to find meaning or to find a new way of doing things, and to engage in new things which could provide me energy. Especially the remote-set up can be frustrating.” (interviewee 7)

The essential part in finding self-motivation is the realization of the purpose of the activity you are doing. According to our interviewees, they need to see their goals clearly and they need to understand how to achieve the set milestones. Thus, both interviewees in a leadership position and non-leading employees strongly agree that collaborating with colleagues helps to remind oneself what they are working towards.

“I need to collaborate with others. This gives me energy and is a driver for engagement in my perspective. [...] Also, from my side I strongly have the urge to truly understand and feel what my colleagues are trying to communicate and vice versa. Then the whole team can grow together, work is more fun and you can actually find motivation from it just through conversations and active listening. We need to have a clear purpose of our goal and aim – this is how we can remind each other.” (interviewee 5)

And:

“For me, motivation is to see the perspective. I can work hard if I know why. [...] Through the given purpose I can then focus all my concentration to the task.” (interviewee 10)

After getting to know the reason, meaning, and motivation for work related tasks, the interviewees can enter the flow state which is beneficial for both – them as individuals and the organization as a goal-oriented entity. The interviewees claim to have both personal and professional goals. Furthermore, interviewee 4, stresses the structure of the goals as the company has its own system where every manager must set business development goals and personal goals.

The majority of the interviewees, agree on one specific goal: **Having an impact on people** (Kamprad, 2021). This means they want to be able to move people, to emerge ideas, to be able to influence and grow together (interviewee 9).

“We want to enhance the co-worker experiences. All the time, effort and money we are investing to needs to add value [...] such as mindfulness trainings to improve mental stability and emotional competencies.” (interviewee 6)

Interviewee 7 thrives in her role by exploring the next steps, such as training, to become more open-minded to learn something new, to get to know new tools, or projects which she could work with; all to be able to enter the optimal experience, also known as flow state.

“Having a structured way to reach your goals where you can challenge yourself with feedback on these activities, you are able to enter the flow state. [...] Being in the flow gives me happiness because I am mindful of the moment where I only focus on this one project that everything else just gets irrelevant during this time.” (interviewee 7)

As highlighted in the previous quote, interviewee 7 specifically mentions that she notices being mindful when entering the flow state. In order to reach the optimal experience, the interviewees agree on the necessity to know the purpose for any given task. This is key to find self-motivation and to become mindful as it allows employees to focus their attention on work related tasks.

Through communication and discussions with the team, the manager, or colleagues, our interviewees have the possibility to ask for areas of improvements or feedback and can control the alignment of their personal ambitions with the organizational goals. Interviewee 4 agrees on this statement with an addition:

“The flow state is easier to achieve when your job allows you a minimum of half a day blocked only for yourself. But if it is only for an instance 1h I would not be able to get into this ‘full concentration mode’. You need time. At least undisturbed 2,5 h to get into it. [...] After you managed to find the time, to be able to concentrate all your thoughts into a task, then you can get immersed by it. Be in the moment, be mindful and have no distraction going on.”

Last but not least, the interviewees mentioned the feedback system within the organization. According to interviewee 7, there is room for improvement regarding the feedback culture. Depending on the need, interviewee 7 can conduct 1:1 sessions to give valuable feedback. To give feedback is essential for improvements and to find new challenges, and finally can bring someone to the flow state. However, as interviewee 6 claims:

“There is not a proper feedback system existing. You have to ask specifically for feedback on your own. You need to reach out and ask people. Only if psychological safety is provided I would do so. People do not ask systematically for feedback in that sense. Most people just do not ask for it.”

Many interviewees agree on the aspect that there is plenty of room for improvement on the feedback culture. Interviewee 9 alludes to have a retrospective after the meeting where they shortly questioning the team: “What went well?” and “What do we want to change for the next?”. However, interviewee 9 admits that *“It does not happen often enough as expected.”* and that *“it is an individual decision asking for additional feedback as it is not mandatory to do so.”*

Additional to the previous statement, even though there is a tool existing, interviewee 4 stresses that many individuals do not use this tool.

“I don’t think many are using the tool. [...] Everyone should give more thoughtful feedback and ask for it. People need to improve their performance and the ability to give and receive feedback. [...] It is a skill to develop for everyone and one of the key elements for reaching the optimal experience.”

The feedback system within IKEA is not used systematically as expected. However, having a functional feedback system and getting continuous feedback is crucial to reflect on how to improve, or to find new challenges as thereby reflexive thoughts occur and the flow state can be entered.

5.1.3 Leadership

In the following chapter, we will present the findings that surfaced from our interviews at IKEA while we focus on leadership-specific traits and codes.

5.1.3.1 Independency

The expressed level of self-motivation results in the individual's need for independence. On a more personal level, for some of our interviewees, a high level of independence goes along with their ability to decide over themselves and to make an active effort to change what they reflected on as drivers of dissatisfaction. In their private life, for some of our interviewees, this meant divorces, breakups, moving, or cancelling a friendship. To what regards the employees' independence is a daily companion at work, will be highlighted in the following.

Throughout our research, we learned that all IKEA employees feel a huge change in their way of organizing ever since remote work from home was established due to the global pandemic. For some, this meant losing independence at work. This is further illustrated in the quotation below.

“At the moment, we are much more structured than we used to, in the past, we often had random meetings. Now everything is scheduled in the calendar, so you just follow your invitation.” (interviewee 2)

For this employee, scheduled meetings cause the feeling of being deprived of independence as more long-term planning contradicts her personal working style of spontaneous interaction. Interviewee 2 feels more dependent on her colleagues to react to meeting invitations and to answer emails, which leads her to conclude that “self-leadership is not very easy at the moment”.

Not referring to any aggravating circumstances, other interviewees see their professional life dependent on their self-driven working style. How interviewee 8 answers the question concerning independence at work, is emphasized here:

“My job is not in the competence profile, so we should enlarge our job. Whenever I feel like I am not developing myself, I try to find better work and more work to do in which I can engage with other professional and try to find what I love to do. [...] Otherwise, I feel not in balance, if I cannot work on what I want to work on.”

As can be seen, this employee's attitude is highly impacted by his ability and possibility to decide for his professional life by himself. The independence of working in a job without a competence profile results in job satisfaction, an internal drive, motivation to lead himself and actively design his working life because his job description is not predefined. Interviewee 8 does not need a manager to develop his potential to climb the corporate ladder. The freedom to decide over his work tasks have a calming impact on him which supports his focus on how to enhance his performance.

Most of our interviewees explained their job satisfaction and internal drive by the alignment between their personal ambitions within the organization and the goals of the company. Aligned with IKEA's leadership approach, interviewee 2 refers to her 'entrepreneurial spirit' as the reason to orient her personal goals on the goals of IKEA, which for her builds the base of job satisfaction. This orientation of her personal goals on corporate ambitions is expressed by the following statement:

"Absolutely, 100%, that has always been my mindset that personal goals and company goals should be align– even if that means not working on the project I am assigned to. I would say that this is how I interpret entrepreneurship: Passion and commitment towards our business and aligning the personal goals with the business goals. And I see that in all my assignments, I do not know what to call it, it comes very naturally to me. And I think that the company's goals are my goals. That is how I see it and that is what makes work fun and nice. [...] And only when work is fun and nice you feel comfortable to make your own decisions and lead by example, as we say." (interviewee 2)

For some of our interviewees, this independent and self-driven development has resulted in a formally higher position, for instance in a leadership position, whereby IKEA does not differ between leading people and leading topics. When being asked, what they expected from themselves being in a leadership position, our interviewees came up with valuable insights into what the IKEA Group considers to be relevant leadership characteristics. IKEA's understanding of relevant and valuable leadership characteristics is depicted in the following paragraph.

5.1.3.2 Relevant leadership characteristics

When asked about relevant leadership characteristics, our interviewees' answers strictly center around the IKEA Group's values. Due to extraordinary importance our interviewees attach to

the values of IKEA, and the fact that those values build the basis for IKEA's view on leadership, it can be concluded that leadership as a concept is crucial:

“Here in IKEA, we don't have this typical “hierarchy”. We have it, but not all the attributes are connected to this. Managers create this “togetherness” you can always talk to them without judgments. Leadership in IKEA is not through hierarchies but through actions and helping people. I would say about my manager that he is really people-oriented. He thinks and cares about us, how we feel and what our needs are. He is not dictating.” (interviewee 10)

Leadership at eye level is seen as essential. Furthermore, there seems to be a connection between leaders as “coaches and enablers” (interviewee 7) and the focus on togetherness, people-orientation, and equity (Ingka Centers, 2021; IKEA, 2021). The IKEA Group as a company aims to focus its business on people. This was further emphasized:

“My current manager is people-oriented. He tries to understand us and our needs, compared to the previous managers outside of IKEA, who have not been very people-oriented, but they were focused on work. No one cared if you had a personal problem. You still need to function at work; your problems did not matter. But my manager at IKEA understands me more.” (interviewee 7)

As can be seen here, the IKEA Group's focus on people is understood as an essential part of the business model and reflects in IKEA's corporate values. For our interviewees, “being humble” (interviewee 6), “a more coaching leadership style, in which more questions are asked than answers given” (interviewee 9), “bring calmness into meetings” (interviewee 9) and creates the “purpose orientation that I missed in my previous job outside of IKEA” (interviewee 4). The appreciation of the people strategy is what came through during the conducted interviews as it is expressed by all the interviewees, regardless of whether they hold a leadership position or not. This is further highlighted through:

“I am a human person, so relationships are very important to me. I go to work for the people around me and an environment of people to have fun with. It is not that important, what I do as long as I know what to do. [...] Sometimes I don't know [what to do], because often somebody else does it.” (interviewee 3)

Relationship-orientation puts business critical factors like numbers in the background. The expression and wellbeing of the individual is more important.

But, as interviewee 7 shows, not necessarily is this approach internalized as a business model in people strategy and corporate culture: **Some employees differ between working and being people-oriented**. This discrepancy can also be seen here:

“My leadership style has developed a lot. I was quite business-driven, more directed, and result-oriented compared to today. Today, I am much more present and much more like an enabler. I got better at supporting people and make them shine and succeed. I also do so with my colleagues outside my department. Also, I am more compassionate and selfless, with no urge being responsible for everything anymore.” (interviewee 7)

This is also emphasized by interviewee 2, who as a leader considers people-orientation on the part of a leader contradictory to hard-working:

“So, I think today I can combine my history of hard-core business manager and financial background with the softer and that caring people leader that I am now. [...] That is something that I am balancing today: Both those aspects.” (interviewee 2)

As can be seen by the aforementioned quote, leader figures within the organization emphasize the relevance of a profound understanding of the business as a whole. People-orientation and number-orientation need to be balanced.

5.1.3.3 Trust

During our interviews, the emphasis on authenticity, openness, and honesty is often mentioned when asked about trust at work. This is underpinned in the corporate values, the way the company presents itself, and aligned with what is needed to enable organizational members to be self-leading according to scholars.

As can be seen, when asked about trust, the initial reaction of our interviewees was entirely positive and the necessity of trust – from managers to non-leading employees and vice versa - in the workplace was acknowledged. This is for instance expressed in the following quote:

“I need to feel that I am trusted and not controlled or micromanaged. I need to feel that we can talk about anything and that my manager truly cares about me, both me as a person and me when I am at work. It is important to me that my manager can see my strength and maybe my weaknesses so that we can help develop my journey. But I want to decide what I need to decide in my work.” (interviewee 3)

Another interviewee agreed with the necessity of trust at the workplace by defining it as:

“For me, trust is a kind of ability to open up and the feeling of safety and understanding that you could rely on a person so, if you agreed on something it is deliberate.”
(interviewee 5)

It is also those employees holding a leadership position that are aware of the importance of trust:

“For me, personally, that is the biggest thing: I build every relationship on trust and that is something for me as a leader. It is the most important tool I can use.” (interviewee 2)

For our interviewees, trust is more than a superficial feeling to ensure happiness and a positive attitude at work, but a vital contributor to their retention rate and feeling of being part of the IKEA Group. This is additionally reflected on by one of our interviewees by expressing:

“It gives you the feeling of belonging, you give trust even though you are in your role and have your own responsibility.” (interviewee 6)

Again, we sense a discrepancy between the ideal contribution of trust for the working environment as highlighted in the IKEA Group values or in the leadership approach and the experience and opinion our interviewees express: As can be seen in the latest mentioned quote, trust seems to be of particular importance and interest, but trusting your employees is at least partly seen as contradictory to acting upon what is expected in your role and fulfilling your responsibilities.

5.1.3.4 Communication

Asked about how one could gain trust, communication is the most frequently mentioned answer expressed by our interviewees. Hereby, the interviewee refers to “appreciative communication” as the “team norm” (interviewee 7).

“Making sure that everyone is heard and being understood. We are clear with communication and honest when we are giving feedback. We are curious, present, and active.” (interviewee 7)

Feedback is seen as a strong tool in an organization that needs to be delivered honestly. Feedback aims for self-leading employees as it offers validation for both employer and employees about whether their self-leading experience is aligned with the organizational

ambitions. Interviewee 5 identifies a need for improvement in the way IKEA gives feedback. This is stressed in the following quote:

“I guess the feedback should be continuous and a general practice; Currently it happens accidentally, if there is a case. So, my idea is about having regular feedback sessions and that it will be about both positive sides and areas of improvements, and areas for improvements shouldn't be judging but be based on facts and evidence and not judging the personality.” (interviewee 5)

Being asked about which steps she took to establish a feedback culture that benefits her development and serves her work, interviewee 5 does not picture conversations or suggestions she offered to those colleagues she considers being responsible for it.

Feedback as a tool to measure development is the most frequently mentioned need of improvement for the way IKEA employees communicate with each other. This can be seen in the following statement:

“Feedback is important and nice to have and I feel like most of my friends and I are on the same page. But what IKEA really needs is a feedforward process. [...] What we have is good but we have to bring it to the next level. At the moment, that is too complex to achieve, because first, we have to agree on what mindfulness and what leadership is for us.”

Interviewee 2 shares reflection in what alternative way of response about each other's work might be beneficial for the organization by emphasizing **feedforward processes as a learning journey**. One of our interviewees also acknowledges the complexity and over challenging character by saying:

“We need to understand that everything is complex. The work-life balance needs to be in balance to perform. We are not a machine but a human being [... If we only act in complexity,] we cannot come to the right conclusions.” (interviewee 6)

Balance and the need to react according to the situation supports interviewee 6 to meet the complexity she mentions.

5.2 Additional remarks based on self-experiment: Mindfulness

The collection of data during the self-experiment aimed to be strictly aligned with the goal of this thesis and therefore, focusses on flow, positive psychology, mindfulness, and the feeling

of freedom and independence, and managing our private life productively yet stress reduced. To build a solid basis for the discussion of the self-experiments contribution to solve the research questions, the first part of the following chapter focuses on Anna's reflections and shortly summarized self-experiment, before the second section centers around Mi's thoughts on the flow state experiment.

5.2.1 The inner work and inner world: Self-experiment

Visiting Aerial Yoga classes daily is a decision I made since those feel the most familiar and I expected the community to have a motivating effect on me. Aerial Yoga as a practice feels very similar to artistic circus stunts and is exercised in and with a hammock. I decide to use the meditation sessions at the end of each yoga class to be my daily meditation exercise to not overwhelm myself with an additional daily task. The teacher's intentions become my daily affirmation and meditation focus. Throughout the experiment, I decided to not limit myself to Aerial Yoga classes but get the whole spectrum of the studio's schedule by visiting Vinyasa Flows, Hot Yoga, and Restorative classes as well. Therefore, my circus-like hour of happiness and laughter transforms into a full-body shred and cardio workout every day. Moreover, I began to start my morning and end my evenings with a five-minute guided meditation as I figured the usage of the end-relaxation during yoga classes to be cheating regarding this experiment. In further evolution of this experiment, I feel on top of my head and allow myself to pause in the middle of a yoga flow when feeling exhausted or stay at home for a little desk yoga or calmer bed-yoga session when feeling too tired to go to the studio. However, when I go to the studio, I finally dare to visit classes in Swedish, which opens up a whole new yoga world for me as it feels like a completely different practice now.

On a more personal level, I see myself distancing from – what I reflected on to be - energy vampires, which describes individuals draining my energy and focus away from myself through incessant complaints, consistent and active search for problems. This also results in me avoiding news or not accepting job offers mostly based on my gut feeling. Contrary to this, I see myself being able to cope with opportunities neglected before. This leads to the acceptance of my SFI-teacher's offer to start the next Swedish course on a higher level, articulating personal importance in front of my new roomies in a new apartment with emphasis as well as adapting to my body's needs whenever possible.

5.2.2 The flow state: Self-experiment

Week 1-2:

Full of excitement and joy I committed myself to go to the ice rink every day and focused all my attention on figure skating. However, I already noticed in the beginning that I did not need to force myself to find intense focus as it became almost natural when I entered the rink for practice. The reason for this might be that I had a clear plan on how to start and what I wanted to achieve within every practice session. Being embarrassed to fall and fail did not matter anymore as I lost myself in the activity while having so much joy learning how to figure skate. Three to four hours might sound like a long session, but I had the feeling that I lost the sense of time as if it got distorted. Sometimes I only noticed that the times flew by when I was too exhausted to continue practicing.

Due to the visual diary on social media, I received instant feedback from friends and to my surprise, many supporters cheered on my project which gave me additional external motivation even though these external pushes were not needed to motivate myself to continue pushing my limit and waking up early for practice.

Week 3-4:

On the third week my body got slowly used to daily practice and every day. According to my training plan, I overachieved the goals which I set at the beginning. Many skills which were supposed to be on week 3 and week 4 were already achieved in week 2. As I got even more excited about my fast progress, I made many adjustments and added new skills which I wanted to learn on my plan to stay in the flow state. During weeks 3 and 4 I experienced the optimal experience at its finest. Even though I started my day at 4:30 AM with no breakfast I still got immersed in what I love doing or what I envisioned myself to become and achieve. Without much effort, my determination went over the top and my brain did not want to focus on anything else anymore. I truly lived in this “bubble” of mine. Worries and fears vanished at that moment and I was aware of living in the present moment. A situation I have not felt for a long time, but it made me happy and grateful. To my surprise, even with all the bruises and pain from the falling it did not stop me from becoming more self-disciplined and led to even more intrinsic motivation and self-fulfilment to win “the battle” against myself. The battle was not against myself rather for myself as you establish control of your attention to keep going.

Week 5-6:

Ice skating took over my life within few weeks, I was in love and realized that the experiment turned out to become my ultimate passion. My mind was not wandering. My concentration has never been this focused before. I enjoyed every second of being on this rink. However, as I checked daily on my progress and my training plan it came to my realization that I only had one week left until they removed the ice rink in Lund. This was the moment where I noticed that I lost my inner balance due to sadness as I was thinking about the future instead of being fully present and mindful about my thoughts.

Towards the end of week 5, I found my focus again. It was a hurtful realization, but I forced myself to put all my attention back to the present moment and to continue practicing. I must admit that forcing myself where to put my attention takes indeed a lot of energy. A trained mind is needed to fully stay in the present and to be mindful. Training my mind to be in the moment requires even more discipline than learning how to figure skate. During this week I did a lot of bullet journaling and it helped to re-order my thoughts and reflect about what I desire.

In week 6 all my attention was spot on just to enjoy the final week on the rink as much as possible.

6 Discussion

In analyzing our empirical material in the previous chapter, we have addressed our two research questions: 1) To what regard does an employee's understanding of mindfulness influence his or her ability to act independently?, and 2) How does IKEA's strong normative context influence the individual's interpretation of mindfulness and self-leadership

6.1 Discussion IKEA

To examine and understand the connection between mindfulness and self-leadership as well as the impact of the organizational culture, the following chapter will discuss our empirical findings from IKEA concerning our theoretical background.

6.1.1 Strong impact of organizational culture

The first finding refers to the strong impact of organizational culture and answers the second research question. According to Brown (1995), organizational culture influences how organizational members should think, feel, and act and IKEA's strong organizational culture, especially the core value togetherness, has shown to have a strong influence on IKEA's employees. For instance, interviewee 7 refers to colleagues as his friends, because they share common values and "orient themselves on the same goal which bring the employees on the same path to move forward" (interviewee 9). The tendency to think alike brings homogeneity into IKEA as an organization. Mindfulness as a tool to facilitate reflexivity can help the organization to handle and end this homogeneity if institutionalized. As far as we can evaluate, this is not the case: Mindfulness and self-leadership is not fully understood by some of our interviewees, who consider themselves "not mindful enough" (interviewee 8). The witnessed picture of mindfulness is too narrow. Therefore, advantages and benefits are not visible to those who follow the narrow picture of mindfulness.

As Ouchi (1980) outlined, the socialization process can be achieved by trainings to create the feeling of belonging to the "strong culture". However, sub-cultures can arise through different interpretations on the organizational culture (Schein, 2010). In fact, the mindfulness concept is still in the process of getting institutionalized at IKEA; not every employee shares the same idea of mindfulness. Due to this fact, this might create sub-cultures of mindful and not-mindful-employee within IKEA based on the question if the concept on mindfulness is fully understood and lived or not (Kabat-Zinn, 2004).

6.1.2 IKEA as either enabler *or* obstacle for self-leadership and mindfulness

The second finding also answers the second research question as IKEA's culture can either act as an enabler or as an obstacle for self-leadership and mindfulness. As IKEA Group (2021) notes on their website, in the center of their leadership approach is the commitment of the individual (leader) to take responsibility for the company's success and empower colleagues to bring out the best in each other through self-leadership and passion. This was reiterated by our interviewees and could also be found in documents that were made available for us. For our interviewees, this was experienced by the possibility to take charge of the projects they are involved in and actively search for tasks consistent with their personal interests. This approach strongly correlates with Hackman and Oldham's (1975, p. 162) definition of autonomy in the context of leadership as "the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the employee in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out" (Hackman, & Oldham, 1975, p. 162) as well as Backländer's (2019) approach on self-leadership to be characterized by employees' latitude to decide over themselves, while leaders or the company provide the guidelines and tools to ensure the success of the employees' self-determined actions (Backländer, 2019). IKEA enables mindfulness as most of the interviewees understood the concept of mindfulness. Being mindful means paying full attention to the purpose and being aware to be present in the moment, non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 2004). An insightful perspective of an interviewee is how employees were aware that the ability to control themselves and being mindful is key to being your own leader (interviewee 2).

On the other hand, as mentioned above, IKEA can also act as obstacle for self-leadership and mindfulness. The employees' feeling of independence and freedom is a dominant characteristic in the organization's people strategy and prerequisite for self-leadership. IKEA lays the foundation for spontaneous and informal talks, for example at the coffee machine, an open-door policy, which highly contributes to our interviewees' feeling to act and behave autonomously. Doing so is part of IKEA's DNA as a personification strategy in knowledge management within the organization (Vahlne & Jonsson, 2017). More long-term oriented planning and scheduled meetings since remote work from home were established due to the global pandemic contradict the working styles of spontaneous interactions – depriving employees of their independence.

The establishment of self-leadership as a way of organizing could be rather simple as our interviewees already "see the purpose in their work". However, they see the purpose of their work as their work and personal ambitions are strictly aligned with organizational goals due to

a structured goal setting initiated by IKEA - which is contradictory to the principles of self-leadership. Referring to togetherness as one of the core values, the work in the team plays a major role. As pictured in the analysis of this research, our interviewees get energized by working with others and are motivated through teamwork. The hiring strategy increases this experience as mostly like-minded people-persons are hired acting in the same manner. This again contradicts self-leading employees, which according to the literature should be able to be capable of the goals and milestones without being reminded or motivated by team members.

Lastly, IKEA can also be considered as obstacle for mindfulness because even though a handful interviewees do not consider themselves mindful enough. Mindfulness is not understood well enough for it to be institutionalized as a concept. This causes the feeling of being deprived of independence and freedom due to the rather new approach of planning and less spontaneous interaction in remote work times hinders the establishment of productive self-leadership. Self-leadership is therefore experienced as “too overwhelming because nothing is ever good enough” (interviewee 5).

6.1.3 Non-dictated autonomy dictates autonomy (for some)

Finding three also answers the second research question as can be seen by the previous section, the question whether IKEA as an organization enables or hinders mindfulness and self-leadership strongly depends on the programs the employees attend. The leadership program is divided into the three components self-leadership, people leadership, and market leadership, and all these components entail mindfulness and themes connected to mindfulness. The fact that our interviewees are educated about mindfulness in a leadership development program pictures IKEA’s approach, that mindfulness facilitates self-leadership. Thus, IKEA’s perspective is that mindful employees will be more independent and autonomous in their behavior and acts. For IKEA as an organization, mindfulness is a tool to cope with the potential high-stress levels due to intense (over)work, which might lead to self-exploitation and self-entrapment, resulting from self-leadership (Backländer, 2019). Appropriate resources or the infrastructure to be self-leading are not provided by IKEA, which makes them “harvesting agencies” (Bramming et al., 2011).

IKEA employees could handle this situation by being more resilient and able to focus and locate their attention and awareness. However, as found out during our analyzes, not all interviewees feel mindful enough to cope with the demanding requirements to be fulfilled in order to be self-leading. We can see a division among our employees: Those employees, who considered

themselves mindful before visiting the leadership program and those, who first were educated about mindfulness in the leadership program. Those employees, who already have been engaged in mindfulness before the leadership program do not feel the rising pressure on themselves to be self-leading and do not feel dictated autonomy. On the other hand, those employees, who first were confronted with mindfulness in the leadership program, do not feel part of the sub-culture of mindful and self-leading employees. In organizations with a strong interest in mindfulness and its tools, using those tools can create the feeling of belonging to the sub-culture doing the same. The colleagues play a vital role: Those employees meditating regularly feel connected to their colleagues preferring meditation over rock-climbing and vice versa and distance themselves from those colleagues not sharing the same beliefs as their sub-culture. Those interviewees who have not internalized or followed mindfulness (activities) will soon have two choices: Either maintain homogeneity, put on a mask and (pretend to) come to terms with mindfulness, or withstand the peer pressure with the risk of being an outsider at work due to not belonging to the growing sub-culture of mindfulness enthusiasts. Both options will lead to dissatisfaction, disadvantageous for both employer and employee.

In sum, IKEA educated its employees about mindfulness to facilitate their ability to be self-leading, which, for some, dictates autonomy as our interviewees are educated about both concepts during their leadership development program. Those employees, who can handle this situation build a sub-culture within IKEA as an organization. There is the risk of sub-cultures of employees distancing themselves from each other is high, which threatens IKEA's organizational ambition to be **together**.

6.1.4 Self-leading employees as substitute for themselves

Finally, the first search question is being answered with finding four. One interviewee feels highly independent at work as his job is not in the competence profile, which results in an overall job satisfaction because he is able to actively design his professional life. To stay employable, interviewee 8 needs to align his personal ambitions with company goals. Interviewee 8, thereby, becomes a self-leading employee by definition and gains a holistic view on the organization as he needs to enlarge his job for more challenging tasks in different departments.

Hence, the questions on how to improve self-leadership and how to secure a successful career arise. This is where positive psychology and mindfulness contribute to the concept of flow, well-being, personal strengths (Boniwell, 2012) and consist of leadership characteristic such as

resilience and compassion. During the interview with the mindfulness expert Tan stresses on the relevant combination of two sets of skills, cognitive and affective (emotional) skills, and that these skills can be developed through mindfulness practices. He also claims that these skills can help to become more successful in one's profession as mindfulness raises skills such as focus, clarity of thought and perception and compassion. Tan highlights that these two skills are essential for jobs, where leadership is involved, and that those cognitive and emotional competencies are highly trainable, and that the foundation of that training is mindfulness. Self-leadership as a concept is facilitated because, through the help of mindfulness as a tool, individuals are more equipped to cope with stress situations, question their own mental position, reflect about their goals and how to achieve them. The more departments he sees and positions he holds, the higher he climbs the corporate ladder because of more experience and retention in the organization. Once he achieves a hierarchy level in which he is a leader figure, interviewee 8 will become a substitute for himself: Self-leadership as a paradigm is considered a substitute for leadership. When a self-leading formally non-leading employee climbs the corporate ladder and becomes a formally leading employee, this individual will be a substitute for himself or herself.

6.1.5 Organizational culture as enabler *and* obstacle

As one can see, we answer both research questions in one finding: The impact from IKEA on mindfulness can be seen through the special training they offer their employees to make everyone even more aware of the concept of mindfulness, becoming more compassionate and self-leading. Hence, this understanding also helps to allow employees to enter the optimal experience also known as the flow state. This can also be explained by the structured goals IKEA has for their employees in combination with various possibilities for example joining new projects, participating in training, to challenge themselves and at the same time receiving valuable feedback of their work from co-workers and managers. It is not only beneficial for the company when employees are at peace with their minds and enter the flow. As Csikszentmihalyi (2008) explains it as a state where individuals are so immersed with an intense focus in a task that nothing else seems to matter anymore. Therefore, not only does IKEA itself benefit from its employees' efficiency but also makes the employees happier as they enjoy their work. Thus, if employees find the purpose in their work, they concentrate fully on their tasks which equals being present in the moment and in their action. According to Csikszentmihalyi (2008), the result is that the experienced activity will be intrinsically rewarding.

As organizational culture is an enabler it is at the same time also an obstacle for mindfulness and self-leadership. Firstly, “feedback as validation” (interviewee 5) speaks for employees searching for external confirmation and acknowledgment of their work within other people or teams, wherefore their capability to be self-leading could be denied. One could argue that this area of improvement is a conscious decision of IKEA as an employer to raise self-leading employees who proactively must ask for qualitative multi-perspective feedback. However, one vital step to get into flow is to receive feedback to find new challenges in the task or to improve (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). On the other hand, receiving feedback as external validation contradicts with the definition of mindfulness and self-leadership as employees need to find motivation intrinsically. However, in flow state, the sub-theme of mindfulness, constructive feedback is needed which offers room for improvement. Therefore, we conclude that self-leadership facilitates mindfulness and not the other way around.

6.1.6 IKEA employees face ambiguity

IKEA’s strong focus on people and aim to have an “impact on people” (Kamprad, 2021) results in the expectation that leader figures within the organization should be “inspiring and enable others” (interviewee 1). Following the core values of IKEA and their people strategy, this can be considered an essential part of IKEA’s business model. However, our interviewees experience a focus on individuals and their matters, needs, and expectations as not focusing on business and soft in the sense of being weak leader figures (interviewee 2, interviewee 6).

According to our interviewees, strong connections between employees are the key factor when it comes to following IKEA’s people orientation approach and can be achieved through trust (Backländer, 2018; Backländer, 2019). In order to gain trust, our interviewees strongly highlight the importance of communication (Backländer 2018; Backländer 2019). To differ between “doing business” and people orientation leads to the fact that the trust among employees is experienced as contradicting making business. Thereby, trust, communication, and the focus on individuals as components for self-leadership are not institutionalized within IKEA as an organization. Self-leadership as a tool to reduce stress and increase performance, therefore, cannot be utilized since it is not institutionalized.

To give each other well thought through feedback is one tool to communicate and highly appreciated by our interviewees. For the scope of the thesis, we must differ between feedback as a tool to seek external validation for the individual’s behaviour, and productive feedback that offers room for improvement (Ackerman, 2020; Cherry, 2021; Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). As for

IKEA, the majority of our interviewees stressed that they receive positive feedback on a regular basis. The positive feedback our interviewees receive, is utilized as a tool to gain external validation for their behaviour (interviewee 5, non-leading position) and thereby contradicting the concept of self-leadership, because self-leading employees are intrinsically motivated and confident in their work. Self-leading employees are not seeking validating feedback (Backländer, 2018; Backländer, 2019) the way our interviewees do. On the other hand, productive feedback, that offers the recipient of the feedback room for improvement, enables individuals to enter the optimal experience, also known as flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008; Ackerman, 2020). The flow state is one sub-theme of mindfulness (Sheldon et al., 2015). Mindfulness can be used as a tool for individuals to cope with the ambiguity (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012; Cebolla et al., 2017; Neff & Davidson, 2016), in the case of our interviewees the ambiguity between people orientation and business.

During the interviews with our interviewees, we have no reflections about how productive feedback and validating feedback are used for different outcomes have been shared with us. Therefore, we concluded that feedback is not fully understood. Still, interviewee 2 herself mentioned **feedforward instead of feedback** as more beneficial for the individual's performance and the organization's success (Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998; Costea et al., 2008; Crossan et al., 1999). By mentioning feedforward, interviewee 2 subconsciously confirms our conclusion: Mindfulness and self-leadership as concepts are not institutionalized within the organization and Crossan et al.'s (1999) dynamic feedforward process of organizational learning needs to be followed to establish both concepts within IKEA. Through institutionalization of mindfulness in the organization, the employees will be equipped and educated to cope with the ambiguity (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012; Cebolla et al., 2017; Neff & Davidson, 2016) between people orientation and "making business". To cope with the ambiguity between people orientation and "making business" through the help of mindfulness as a tool would give our interviewees enough mental capacity to be self-leading and institutionalize self-leadership as a concept within the organization.

However, the following section will picture to what regard our interviewees are not institutionalizing self-leadership but the concept of ambidextrous employees.

6.1.7 Ambidextrous employees forced to be self-leading

According to McGregor (2006), ambidextrous employees adapt new opportunities aligned with the overall strategy of the organization and are motivated and skilled to do so without formal permission. We heard about behaviours like that from interviewee 8, whose job is not in the competence profile, wherefore he is free enough to design his professional life according to his expectations and needs. Referring to self-leadership and our interview with Gottschalk, our leadership expert, he highlighted the importance of clear roles in an organization, which is threatened by the company's approach to having self-leading employees because of the potential uncertainty about responsibilities. With interviewee 3 mentioning confusion about role division in a self-leading organization, we conclude that our interviewees follow the characteristics of ambidextrous employees and not self-leading employees.

In contrast to self-leading employees, ambidextrous employees act outside their job in the interest of the organization (McGregor, 2006). Interviewee 2 resonated with the necessity to act outside her role and engage with various projects from different departments occasionally to work on IKEA's success. Furthermore, according to McGregor (2006), ambidextrous employees take the initiative to follow opportunities beyond the confines of their jobs and build internal linkages to have the right cooperative connections to combine the effort they have with their colleagues' effort. For instance, interviewee 7 stresses a major part of her work is connected to colleagues from other departments, even if her projects or tasks do not demand her to do so. Moreover, most of our interviewees highlighted their interaction and connections to colleagues or individuals outside their projects, departments, or IKEA and portray the positive influence of these interactions on their work. We see a strong emphasis from our interviewees to do so proactively. Ambidextrous employees are not overwhelmed by the overwork proactivity causes but are actively striving for that (McGregor 2006).

As McGregor (2006) emphasizes cultural ambidexterity, meaning the contextual ambidexterity of which ambidextrous employees are part of, brings the "human side of an enterprise" to the surface. Contextual ambidexterity focuses on flexible systems and organizational structures, in which individual employees are encouraged to make decisions daily. Referring to McGregor (2006), an individual's ability to make decisions in a more flexible organizational structure acknowledges their necessity to do so for their motivation. Because of what is previously stated, our interviewees resonate with ambidexterity rather than with self-leadership: For instance, the people-orientation of IKEA as an organization, the origin of IKEA's people-orientation and how this resonates with IKEA's business model has been emphasized several times.

Furthermore, less micro-management and more decision-making capacities daily have been highlighted, for example, by interviewee 3. In sum, most interviewees coherently follow McGregor's definition of ambidextrous employees and not Backländer's (2018, 2019) understanding of self-leading employees.

In sum, IKEA's strong organizational culture and focus on togetherness as their core value confirms Brown's (1995) findings of the company's influence on individual's feelings, thoughts, and actions. This influence also impacts IKEA's approach to mindfulness and self-leadership: Those interviewees who are interested in mindfulness and self-leadership as concepts form a sub-culture within the IKEA Group by distancing themselves from those interviewees that avoid mindfulness or self-leadership (Schein, 2010; Sackmann, 1992). As emotions play a crucial role in (professional) relationships (Kabat-Zinn, 2004), the organizational culture's impact on employees' emotions acts as either an enabler or an obstacle for the institutionalization process of mindfulness and self-leadership as concepts. The peer pressure among employees increases, so that autonomy is dictated for those interviewees who avoid it (Maravelias, 2007). Furthermore, with formally non-leading self-leading employees climbing the corporate ladder to formally leading positions and self-leadership as a paradigm being a substitute of leadership (Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998), self-leading employees become a substitute for themselves. This is one ambiguity our interviewees face. Another ambiguity can be seen in the various understandings and interpretations concerning feedback that result in mindfulness and self-leadership being enabled and impeded simultaneously. Therefore, we advocate for self-leadership's influence on mindfulness and not vice versa as intended at the beginning of the research. However, concluding our research, we found that self-leadership is not institutionalized well enough to regard it as a substitute for leadership. Our study revealed that our interviewees act more like ambidextrous employees.

6.2 Additional remarks based on self-experiment

The following elaboration is based on our self-experiment, which excludes the findings from the organizational normative context IKEA offers its employees.

6.2.1 Self-experiment - Anna

Contrary to what our interviewees from IKEA and contemporary literature on mindfulness, the flow state, positive psychology, and self-leadership emphasized, I figured it more complex than expected to live particularly mindful and be self-determined, independent, and self-decisive at the same time.

Touching upon self-leadership, the following section explains why we consider being self-leading while conducting this research with Lund University acting as the organization. Being equal team members in a team of two, none of us has more say about how to proceed than the other. Doing so, we conduct this research alone to the greatest possible extent: We, together and without great direction from others, decided on a research topic as well as a preferred cooperation company and supervisor and did everything in our power to follow our preferred path of progress by actively working towards our goal cooperation and goal supervisor.

Furthermore, we decided for additional, rather unusual empirical data to be collected and analyzed by conducting a self-experiment, whereby we acted particularly creatively in the interest of the best possible outcome. Moreover, we did all this in socially distant times of Covid-19, in which - for the lack of face-to-face lectures and seminars – students hold greater responsibility for their academic success as their peers educated on the campus. As can be seen, our self-motivation, decision-making competencies, and self-direction for the sake of the best possible outcome follow the contemporary definition of self-leadership (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Backländer 2018, Backländer, 2019).

Unlike our interviewees, we do not have an organization that strongly influences our approach to be self-leading or mindful, but we act in this manner out of necessity in these times. The rather rapid shift from a structured schedule with predefined seminars or lectures times to several weeks without assignments or deadlines, for me, causing an overload in two regards: Firstly, my intent to actively design my life after the master's program, resulted in an overwhelming number of classes, interviews, courses that I signed up for – leaving less and less time for mindfulness and reflection on my needs and dreams. Lastly, the smaller the team, the less benefit from self-leading team members, as necessary communication is lost, which for us as a master thesis team in the meantime meant a distance

6.2.2 Self-experiment - Mi

The self-experiment aimed to observe and analyze how one can enter the optimal experience by following the summarized steps based on Csikszentmihalyi (2008).

The first step is called 'focus'. According to Csikszentmihalyi (2008), it is possible to turn any work tasks into flow-producing activities through attention and direction. The next step is 'freedom' and stresses how important it is to free oneself from worries and self-scrutiny by periodically permitting myself to work without my inner critic. The third step is about giving and receiving feedback as it provides the opportunity to evaluate the progress. Feedback allows the adjustment in the last step 'challenge', where the tasks are adjusted to stay in the ideal flow state. The final step is triggering the flow and to makes the activity turn into a challenge slightly higher than the current skill.

The Flow-Channel diagram portrays that finding the balance between 'boredom' and 'anxiety' is vital to stay in the optimal experience where the challenge is slightly too difficult.

Csikszentmihalyi (1998) described flow as "a state in which individuals are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that individuals will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it". And I could not agree more with this statement. These six weeks have been proof to me about how it feels to be in the flow state and that it is possible to create every task into an optimal experience. Following the four steps from Csikszentmihalyi (2008), I was able to outperform myself and taught myself a skill that I thought was impossible. Knowing how to approach the flow state will help many employees in their professional life to make work more enjoyable. One key learning is to create a structured plan with a clear goal. This plan must be broken down into small steps to make the impossible seem possible and to maintain self-motivation as the challenge is ever so slightly above your current skill set but still doable. In addition to this plan, feedback is another crucial factor. For instance, during my skating project, I needed to keep track of how I improve. Ticking my checklist showed me clearly if I reached the goal within the timeframe or not. Furthermore, I noticed how easy it is to exit the flow state (week 5) if the mind is wandering and not fully in the present moment.

In a nutshell, my ice-skating project is the best experienced I have had so far, and a video of the progress is in the link in Appendix C.

7 Conclusion

This exploratory thesis has aimed to facilitate a deeper understanding of the concepts of self-leadership and mindfulness, specifically their interrelation and influence on each other and the impact of the organizational culture. We used three different streams of research to explore this connection: A qualitative approach was followed during the interviews with employees of IKEA. Additionally, our self-experiment helped us to observe additional discoveries. Furthermore, we focused on a critical review of our findings through the understanding experts shared with us. Our objective was to contribute to the literature on self-leadership and mindfulness and to address the research gaps that we identified and explained. In the following chapter, we summarize our empirical findings and demonstrate our contribution to the literature as it relates to our aim and research questions. We also indicate our research limitations and suggest areas for further research, after presenting practical implications on self-leadership and mindfulness in praxis.

7.1 Short summary: Answer to research questions

According to our study, mindfulness does not influence the individual's ability to act independently, but self-leadership positively influences the individual's ability to be mindful which answers the first research question. Regarding the second research question, we emphasize that IKEA's organizational culture is both enabler and obstacle for the institutionalization process of both phenomena – self-leadership and mindfulness.

7.2 Contribution to literature

Individuals who regulate their attention, awareness, and emotions play a fundamental role for mature organizations to remain flexible. Nonetheless, most existing studies on mindfulness and self-leadership in an organizational setting solely focused on both phenomena individually. These studies are thus neglecting the interplay between both phenomena. Hence, we contribute to the literature on mindfulness and self-leadership in an organizational context in highlighting the strong interrelation.

In this regard, we can specifically contribute to mindfulness and self-leadership literature by showing how one facilitates the other: Contrary to our initial assumption after our literature review, mindful individuals are not prone to be self-leading, but self-leadership characteristics

equip the individual to be mindful. That is what we conclude because of the different evaluation of feedback in the learning processes to become mindful and self-leading.

Moreover, combining our interviewees interpretation of IKEA's learning journey about mindfulness and self-leadership with Crossan et al.'s (1999) findings on dynamic learning processes in organizational contexts, we contribute the individual's strong position within these learning processes in organizational settings to the literature, that focuses solely on the organization. In mindfulness and leadership literature, the leader figure in an asymmetric and symbolic relationship to the follower is highlighted. In this sense, our study revealed the importance of the non-leading individual and the drive, motivation, reflexivity this individual supports the organizational goals with.

Additionally, a finding that results from our self-experiment: We acknowledge that there is less advantage from self-leadership the smaller the team is because individuals need to invest more time and effort to become realigned. Our auto-ethnographic study can develop a higher interest in self-experiments as one way of academic research.

7.3 Practical implications: DANCER Model

In light of our research findings and aligned with our research goals, we developed a model consisting of six aspects: (1) looking at organizational incidents from an outside perspective, (2) aiming for independent employees that are held accountable for their actions, (3) without demanding that they follow this approach, (4) providing employees with the right mindset, skillset, and toolset to act independently, (5) establish a roadmap for a successful implementation of this long-term plan, and (6) acknowledge and trust the process with a realistic view on milestones.

As we could not apply already existing verbs that correspond to all these six aspects, we decided to create an acronym to ease an understanding of this new label, which works "as a name for a word made from the first letter of each word in a series of words" (Mack, 2018, p. 16). Following this approach, we came up with the word **DANCER**. Here, 'D' stands for distance and entails the outside perspective on organizational matters. Employees are equipped to gain the outside perspective through the help of mindfulness, which enables them to shift their focus and attention on necessary, important, and urgent concerns. 'A' stands for autonomy and accountability and describes the gained capacity to come to valuable conclusions and decide on the best behalf for the company, individual, and employee. Accountability results in the individual employee being responsible and liable for those decisions, which offers a high level

of trustworthiness of the individual for the organization. This can be guaranteed through the help of productive feedback. This makes sure that the company does not see the need to dictate autonomy, which makes it 'N', non-doctrinaire. Self-leadership is a complex process, and that it is based on contextual aspects, which put pressure on the organization to adjust and shape their landscape to make room for – in this case – mindfulness and autonomy, without forcing employees to be mindful or self-leading. 'C' is short for commitment, which alludes to the individual's engagement and promise to ensure to be equipped with the right tools to be self-leading and, if not, proactively initiating everything that needs to be done to do so. Thereby, 'E' - as in for establishment - is ensured: The employee did everything to be trusted so that his or her independent working style can be well established in the organizational culture. From the organization's perspectives, 'establishment' is a reminder of the rather fixed and stable structures a mature organization acts in. Hereby, our model reminds us of 'R' - reality. The model hereby emphasizes the potential long-term character concepts like self-leadership and mindfulness need to be well-adapted by organizations. The stronger the normative context in which organizational members act, the higher the difficulty. As found by Backländer (2018), to enable self-leading employees, an entity needs to attract employees with the "personal characteristics or drive" to support self-leadership. Following another approach, there is more to successful self-leadership than attracting the right leaders and employees: To ensure a structured introduction into the organization, to share information transparently and to avoid misleading expectation and responsibility communication encourages the open climate with no fear of asking questions. Thereby, the entity ensures a high level of psychological safety (Wilhelm et al., 2019) and avoids overwork and stress. As found by Backländer (2018), this can be supported by the implementation of agile coaches, who aim to support constructive communication and respectful coexistence as the basis for productive contribution of everyone due to a high quality of interaction. The organization needs to ensure resources for its self-leading employees to allow them to spare for where and when they are truly needed.

Table 3: DANCER Model

	Employer side	Employee side
D	Distance → An outside perspective on organizational matters is necessary to be reflexive and serve the organizational goals. An outside perspective is achieved through the help of mindfulness as a tool to regulate attention and awareness. Employees need to be open to use mindfulness, the employer needs to educate the employees and has to offer appropriate infrastructure, room, and systems for employees to be mindful.	
A	Autonomy → The employer offers autonomy to the individual (non-leading) employee and trusts in his or her ability to decide on best behalf for the organization.	Accountability → The individual is responsible and liable for the decisions he or she takes. The level of trustworthiness is very high and ensured through multi-perspective feedback.
N	Non-doctrinaire → To dictate autonomy is counterproductive, wherefore organizations need to ensure the voluntariness to be mindful or self-leading.	
C	Commitment → The individual commits to ensure to be equipped with the tools to be self-leading and mindful. If not, the individual proactively initiates everything that needs to be done.	
E	Establishment → The mature organization needs to acknowledge the rather fixed structures it acts in. Only if current structures are understood, they can be adjusted and changed accordingly.	Establishment → The employee did everything to be trusted in his or her independent working style by strictly aligning with 'C': Commitment.
R	Reality → Institutionalizing the complex concepts self-leadership or mindfulness is a long-term project. To be well-adapted by organizations takes time. Trust the process.	

Reference: Authors' own table.

The Cambridge dictionary defines a **dancer** as “a person who moves his or her body and feet in rhythm to music” (2021). Therefore, our acronym DANCER is referring to the importance of balance and adequacy: When and how to familiarize an organization with self-leadership and mindfulness strongly depends on where the company stands now. An institutionalization of both phenomena is only possible if the “rhythm of the music” is followed, meaning if the institutionalization process is strongly aligned with the normative context and organizational culture to be acted in. Then, employees can follow the flow.

7.4 Limitations

The work in this thesis is not without limitations. Here, we address some limitations we want to acknowledge that pertain to the thesis.

First, our literature review of self-leadership is, to a large extent, based on literature on under-designed work in knowledge intense firms. Furthermore, the work in this thesis has started in a phenomenon and expanded out, rather than starting in a theoretical frame to be narrowed. We as the researchers framed and perceived this phenomenon, wherefore our own bias and perception might have influenced the findings. Finally, our study was conducted parallel to the program roll-out, hence knowledge about mindfulness and self-leadership was newly gained and fresh in mind and we have no observation afterwards.

7.5 Future research

Initiating to do this, this thesis made the obscure impact of mindfulness on self-leadership more obvious (Prasad, 2018). This makes us hopeful that organizations are encouraged to use the benefits of mindfulness to rethink their leadership approach and vice versa. Still, we claim that our findings cannot be generalized and applied to any organization as we figured the organizational culture of the IKEA group to be the main driver and influence on their unique use of mindfulness and self-leadership.

Having said this, we consider this area to be ripe for future research and we identified two areas of future research: It would be of great advantage to know if globally acting companies with organizational members from cultural backgrounds that support mindfulness, meditation, or yoga, are more independent in their employee ship, wherefore we advocate for future research in different organizational settings. Moreover, referring to IKEA's strong normative context, it might be appropriate to conduct similar research in an organizational setting, in which employees do not identify themselves to this large extend with their employer and compare the results.

Epilogue

Imagine your employer's expectation that you lead your way through your career within the organization on your own rise as you are supposed to from your home, as a graduate, in your early twenties.

What some may consider exceeded expectations has now become reality: Graduating from a master's program during a global pandemic will force all of our fellow students and us to do exactly this. Our already overstimulated (corporate) world has become more complex. This raises the need for the individual to gain back focus, come into flow and actively steer attention and awareness.

Lastly, referring to our prologue, our own work experience in demanding organizational context sparked our interest to explore coping mechanisms that help us handle the challenges of self-leading expectations from the employer's side. When reflecting on our study and self-experiment, we are now better equipped to dance in the rhythm of the organization and support our colleagues to join our dance.

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Appendix

Appendix A – List of interviewees

Interviewee	Hierarchy Level
Interviewee 1	Leadership position
Interviewee 2	Leadership position
Interviewee 3	Non-leading employee
Interviewee 4	Leadership position
Interviewee 5	Non-leading employee
Interviewee 6	Leadership position
Interviewee 7	Leadership position
Interviewee 8	Leadership position (Leading topics)
Interviewee 9	Non-leading employee
Interviewee 10	Non-leading employee

Appendix B – IKEA Group values

Togetherness	Togetherhness is at the heart of the IKEA culture. We are strong when we trust each other, pull in the same direction and have fun together.
Cost-consciousness	As many people as possible should be able to afford a beautiful and functional home. We constantly challenge ourselves and others to make more from less without compromising on quality.
Renew And Improve	We are constantly looking for new and better ways forward. Whatever we are doing today, we can do better tomorrow. Finding solutions to almost impossible challenges is part of our success and a source of inspiration to move on to the next challenge.
Give And Take Responsibility	We believe in empowering people. Giving and taking responsibility are ways to grow and develop as individuals. Trusting each other, being positive and forward-looking inspire everyone to contribute to development.
Caring For People And Planet	We want to be a force for positive change. We have the possibility to make a significant and lasting impact – today and for the generations to come.
Simplicity	A simple, straightforward and down-to-earth way of being is part of our Småland heritage. It is about being ourselves and staying close to reality. We are informal, pragmatic and see bureaucracy as our biggest enemy.
Different With A Meaning	IKEA is not like other companies and we don't want to be. We like to question existing solutions, think in unconventional ways, experiment and dare to make mistakes – always for a good reason.

Lead By Example

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

Declaration of authorship

Hereby, we declare that we have composed the presented essay independently on our own and without any other resources than the ones indicated. All thoughts taken directly or indirectly from external sources are properly denoted as such.

Tra Mi Nguyen & Anna Monika Reichert

Sweden, May 21st 2021