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What am I doing?

An interview study regarding the experience of managers practice on a distance and the leadership within

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic moved work from the office to the home, rapidly creating a new working life where remote work became the new normal. In times of change, leadership becomes important, and the managers have to take big responsibility in guiding during new uncertain situations. This thesis aims to explore how first line managers make sense and handle their practice in the new context created by the pandemic, and how they perceive that the distance has influenced their leadership within this practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 managers within the Swedish labour force. To understand their sensemaking of the situation as well as how they view themselves as leaders, the concepts of role and identity alongside the contemporary leadership discourse was used in the interpretation of their experiences. The results show that the managers perceived that social interaction was much more difficult and that ‘something’ went missing in the digital context, making it difficult to understand the role expectations. They strive to be modern managers but perform contradictory actions. In order to make sense of their new practice the managers implemented strategies based on their own needs and previous experiences as well as performing identity work, either to adapt or maintain their leader identity, to handle the pandemic practice. It can be concluded that it is easier to be a manager from a distance than a leader.

Keywords: First line managers, distance, role, identity, identity work, leadership discourse, pandemic practice.

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Introduction

In March 2020, the lives of many drastically changed in a way that nobody could have thought would have been possible. Things such as digital work-shops, virtual office meetings and keeping at least two meters between you and another individual, rapidly became, and still is, the new 'normal'. Today, every third individual works from home (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 2020) and it seems as if this way of working is something that will continue even after the pandemic, it is therefore of importance to explore its effects further.

Organisations and individuals had to quickly adjust themselves to this new way of working and communicating, a lot of the latest research has therefore focused on the employees in this new context. However, little attention has been paid to the managers, who have been forced to take a great responsibility during the pandemic.

In times of change and when the environment gets more uncertain, leadership is highlighted as important to keep the organisation working towards its goals (Yukl, 2013). Thus, being a leader is a hot topic in today's society and theories regarding which leadership style is the ultimate is discussed and reviewed. But the definition of leadership is rather ambiguous, and every individual holds their own interpretation and expectations (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

However, the pandemic has created a new context, which brings new expectations for the managers to adapt to in relation to the already demanding contemporary leadership discourse. Within the managers practice, there is an expectation of performing leadership since it has become part of all managers' roles according to the discourse (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). Therefore, it is of importance to also explore the leadership within the managerial practice, which is defined by the specific tasks and duties that are related to being a manager. The pandemic has created a new practice and the managers now have to try to make sense of this and how to perform their leadership within. But how does one make sense and handle this new pandemic practice?

This thesis focuses on managers' practice and experiences of leading from a distance using an interpretive social constructivist perspective. Hopefully contributing with a new dimension regarding distance in the research of leadership. The interpretation emanates from three concepts: role, identity and the contemporary leadership discourse in the understanding of leadership and the managers' new practice. These three concepts are often used when aiming to understand management and leadership (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006; Hammond, Clapp-Smith & Palanski, 2017). They are related and depend on one another regarding leader identity. To get a conceptualisation of leader

identity as a construct and its dynamic characteristics, identity work has been applied.

In accordance with much previous research on leadership (e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b) our perspective of interpretation is based on that leadership is less about qualities and more about expectations, fashion and how one creates and relates these beliefs of the self. By using an interpretive approach of the managers perceptions of these three concepts, this thesis is able to examine the managers views of themselves and what they are supposed to do. Based on this interpretation we want to understand how managers manage in the new pandemic practice.

Making sense in a pandemic

In the beginning of 2020 the reality of the Swedish population, as the rest of the world, was transformed. Social distancing became the new main mantra constructing the new reality, in which people tried to make sense of the pandemic. The Covid-19 virus was discovered in November 2019 in the Chinese city Wuhan, but it was not until 11 of March 2020 Covid-19 became classified as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Since the virus is very complex and difficult to understand, the new situation was marked by uncertainty. Every country dealt with it in their own way depending on which strategy the authorities chose, meaning that every country had different restrictions. As the confirmed virus-cases grew higher in Sweden, the Swedish government and the Swedish public health authority (FHM) came with new recommendations and restrictions to decrease the spread of the virus. The Swedish strategy relied on the responsibility of the individual, trying to appeal to a certain collectivism in our individualistic society, indicating if we all take our responsibility it will have beneficial results for the society as a whole. Social distancing was the key element and during spring, FHM recommended everyone that was able to work from home to do so. However, it was up to the organisations to decide how to implement and facilitate the remote work. A new reality was forced to be implemented on the labour market, and to understand this new context sensemaking became an important tool.

As the spread of the virus expanded during the fall, the restrictions of increased remote work were implemented in the end of October, resulting in occupations that were able to work from a distance had to. However, the organisations were still able to control the level of remote work to a certain degree, e.g. if it was necessary to be at the office the employees were allowed with some limitations. The organisations based their decision on the authorities' restrictions and in the majority of cases it resulted in forced remote work for all employees. This new working life was built on uncertainty and insecurity for the future. As the organisation tried to make sense of how to handle business, so did the individuals when

trying to make sense of how the new way of work influenced them.

The changes forced many individuals to work remotely from their team and colleagues. Thus an alteration of how teams interact with each other had to be considered. Instead of meeting at the office, in a meeting or when refilling your coffee cup, colleagues now meet each other on their computer screen. Individuals no longer got the daily social interaction where they discussed not only work-related topics but also more personal and private things. A new reality emerged, one where the meaning of the work needed to be reevaluated. To understand and make sense of the situation the individuals made an effort to create order and a retrospective sense of what occurred (Weick, 1993), which is made through previous experience and dialog (Ericsson & Rakar, 2017).

Remote work is not something that suddenly has emerged in today's labour market, nevertheless, it has not composed the majority of the way to work as it does today. Scholars provide different labels of remote work, for example it is often called distance work, indicating performing one's work at another location than the office. When it was new to the workforce, it was often referred to as telecommuting (e.g., Thatcher & Zhu, 2006), which implies mostly email and telephone as primary tools of communication. Today, the new digital innovation and technology development has facilitated communication. These digital solutions can differ among organisations, but mostly they imply being able to have digital video meetings alongside other chat tools to keep in contact. This means that the team can now be located in different places but still work together through the use of different digital communication solutions. The meaning of remote work does not have to imply that the individual works from their home, they can work from anywhere except the office. However, since the restrictions given by the FHM were to keep a social distance everyone was encouraged to work from home.

Hanson (2004) argues that in flexible work, it is the individual's own comprehension of what work is that is essential and composing the working conditions. When the external frame and structure of the work is vague, a greater space for the individuals own definition and interpretation is created. Regardless of where geographically the individual decides to work, the experience of distance is subjective. To understand and make sense of one's work in relation to the distance and the new situation structure, order and meaning is as the foundation of the actions (Ericsson & Rakar, 2017). Wilson, Boyer O'leary, Metiu and Jett (2008) emphasises the importance of understanding this subjectivity in the experience of distance. They suggest not to treat distance as only a spatial concept, but the perception of proximity. Perceived proximity can be described as "the perception of how close or how far

another person is” (p. 283). Through contextual rationality the individual can view the distance and try to make sense of it (Weick, 1993). Proximity has both an affective and a cognitive component. Affective component is subjected to emotions or feelings towards others, whereas the cognitive component refers to the mental assessment of how distant someone seems (Wilson et al., 2008).

The new remote work created by the pandemic has contributed to an uncertainty in the labour force, implying that individuals strive to make sense of their practice in the new context. This also applies to managers. As leadership becomes important in these kinds of situations (Yukl, 2013) but being an ambiguous concept (Alvesson & Gjerde, 2020), the contemporary leadership discourse plays an important part in creating structure, order and meaning (Ericsson & Rakar, 2017) in making sense in their practice.

The contemporary discourse of leadership

Through ideas and course of action in history, the discourses shape how people act and relate to a phenomenon or construct. The discourse of leadership can be seen as both forcing and enabling for the leaders (Fairhurst, 2012), through the reasoning of the ways discourse disciplines its users. Often this discipline remains unaware. The contemporary discourse often frames leadership as something heroic and visionary (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b). Gjerde and Ladegård (2019) describes this as: “The long list of leader role expectations, influenced by a booming leadership literature and media’s craze of heroic leaders (to be authentic, charismatic, humble, considerate, strategic, transformational, and empowering, to name a few) presents contemporary leaders with an overwhelming demand.” (p.46). When an organisation implements major changes, for instance such as remote work, leadership becomes vital (Yukl, 2013). Leadership is, however, a complex concept which can be difficult to define as there is no correct definition that truly captures its essence since it is multifaceted phenomena (Yukl, 2013). Scholars have over the years tried to define the concept, perhaps due to the importance it has been ascribed in organisations. Individuals crave leadership since it offers a sense of meaning and purpose to an organisation (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

Leadership is often viewed as an ambiguous concept (e.g. Alvesson & Gjerde, 2020; DeRue, Ashford & Cotton, 2009; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), meaning that it holds several incoherent meanings with a persistent uncertainty (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a). What is appropriate behaviour tied to leadership is often unclear and varies across contexts (DeRue et al., 2009). This makes it difficult for leaders to relate and adapt to as well as creating divergent demands, and due to the ambiguousness the

expectations of the leader role differ, making it unclear and hard to live up to (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). The ambiguousness can be seen as a key dimension of a lot of leadership talk, thinking and practice (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a).

The individual's description of leadership is grounded in their own definition and assumptions (Hammond et al., 2017). Current literature describes the leaders as supposed to be something positive and almost super-natural, emphasising that leadership is crucial in every situation, resolving both negative situations but also important in guiding during success (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Leadership is according to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) often viewed as an activity of high moral level which should reflect harmony and voluntarism, and most important is that it should involve as little formal power or coercion as possible. Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) describes how the notion of contemporary leadership is creating new, modified demands and expectations of the leaders, such as being change-oriented, transformational and a visionary. In conclusion, leaders have many different demands to live up to, creating an ideal of leadership almost impossible to reach.

What is the difference between being a leader and a manager? Scholars often differentiate between the roles of leader and manager, which is seen as a complex task (Kotter, 1990). However, the differentiation varies, and sometimes the roles are used interchangeably creating a greater uncertainty to the field (e.g. Rostron, 2021). In this thesis we aim to separate the roles but view them as interconnected in the practice of management. The following section will try to explain the relationship to these similar concepts.

A leader is someone who leads others in times of change (Kotter, 1990). It can depend on the situation, however, leadership becomes more important when the environment is more uncertain and dynamic (Yukl, 2013). Within the role of management there can be seen as there is a leader role, for instance managers can be leaders, but only if they influence engagement and motivation (Yukl, 2013; Kotter, 1990). Or it can be seen as all manager roles provide opportunity for leadership (e.g. Mintzberg, 1973; DeRue and Ashford, 2010). It can be described as management mainly focuses on the administrative side as to leadership referring more to lead a team or group towards a common goal. Leadership is related to establishing direction through inspiration and communication, but also contributing with a vision, motivation and teamwork. In comparison, management is more related to planning, organising, staffing and controlling (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006; Kotter, 1990; Yukl, 2013). However, modern management is described to manage more soft values such as aspirations, hopes and fears instead of the employees' direct behaviour (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). One way of explaining the different roles a manager has is by using

Mintzberg's (1973) taxonomy of ten managerial roles. The roles represent different activities the managers are responsible for or reenact with and apply differently from manager to manager. Within these ten the leader role is one characterised by interpersonal relationships between leader and the led (Mintzberg, 1973). According to Yukl (2013) the leader role within management is to provide "... guidance to subordinates, ensure that they are motivated, and create favourable conditions for doing the work." (p.45). The leader role is what permeates all managerial activities (Mintzberg, 1973). The other roles accounted for are liaison, figurehead, monitor, disseminator, spokesperson, entrepreneur, disturbance, resource allocator and negotiator. Demands, constraints and choices are said to define the managers' job and influences their behaviour. Demands and constraints are situational influences on the manager and affect the choice of actions. Demands are referred to as required duties, activities and responsibilities whereas constraints are characteristics of the organisation and external environment limiting what the manager can do (Yukl, 2013).

Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) argues that the contemporary discourse of leadership wants to transform managers from being bureaucrats to leaders and visionaries. The discourse targets an increased number of managers, due to the will to be seen as a leader. Contemporary leadership can be viewed as a fantasy (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006), hence managers can talk about performing leadership but are doing the contrasting activity (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b). Through the discourse the managers can be disciplined and controlled by the identity construction of a leader (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Managing a manager role

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) suggests that within an official managerial role there can be several roles that the manager needs to fulfil and within these roles there can be different managerial identities. As previously explained by both Mintzberg (1973) and Yukl (2013), being a leader can be seen as a part of manager practice. This is one viewpoint of the leader role in relation to the managerial role, which is also the one this thesis embraces. Hence being a manager is the formal role and practice, where there is expectation and some space to practice leadership.

Within an organisation there are often several types of managers with different kinds of responsibility, varying from team leaders, middle managers to top managers, where the organisational structure determines the titles and roles. The group called middle managers compose a large proportion of the managers existing within an organisation. In the literature the term has a broad meaning, including management with employees below and top

managers above as a general definition (Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020; Hales, 2005). Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) describes that the term is often used with the objective of separating these managers with the subordinates and the senior managers. It is not rare that this group is being researched together as a whole, even though the group consists of several different types of managers, such as first line managers, senior managers or leaders of smaller teams. This study aims to focus on the group of first line managers.

The definition of first line managers is the level of management to whom employees with a non-managerial position report to (Hales, 2005). First line managers have become more similar to coordinators and team leaders due to the fact that the day-to-day activities are developing towards supporting and empowering responsibilities (Hales, 2005). Hales (2005) argues that the core of the role of first line managers is performance-oriented supervision, which then branches into more managerial responsibilities, thus they have both the responsibility to oversee the work as well as actively manage performance. The supervision the first line managers perform is seen as important regarding controlling working methods and facilitating growth, despite the increased empowerment in today's labour-force (Hales, 2005). Hales (2005) describes how the implementation of first line managers is due to the superiors' reluctance to trust the employees' self-leadership, hence the task is to keep control. In common all middle managers experience pressure and expectations from above and below, as Gjerde and Alvesson (2020) name them as being "Sandwiched". In this position it may affect the perceived identity of the managers since they have two positions to relate to; being a subordinate but also being a manager.

Today the term leader is associated with more positive identities and has replaced titles that are less 'attractive' for example, foreman, supervisor, in some cases even manager (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The vocabulary around leadership is more appealing, drawing on what can be seen as the softer aspects of managerial work (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003a). Management strategically tries to influence, introduce and legitimise either the presence or absence of a particular discourse, which are represented within culture, as well as work and professional ideologies. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003b) propose that the everyday activities, that is a large part of what managers do, is marginalised and maybe even denied in the contemporary leadership discourse.

Performing leadership from a distance

In certain occupations and professions, a remote leadership is not as foreign as one could think, for example in occupations such as medical and caregiving, managers are often not in direct physical contact with his or her subordinates. The conditions contributed by the

organisation alongside the manager's skill regarding remote leadership, are factors that influence the leadership (Solstad, Pettersen & Robbins, 2019).

When implementing remote work social and organisational support are crucial (Contreras, Baykal & Abid, 2020). Remote work has brought a lot of benefits such as improved work-family integration, productivity and a reduction in fatigue for all the organisation's employees, including the managers. However, remote work also comes with challenges. The line between work and home becomes more vague which can have a negative impact on both physical and mental wellbeing of the individual. It is therefore important that organisations provide both assistance and training for the managers so that they are able to handle the new practice (Oakman, Kinsman, Stuckey, Graham, & Weale, 2020). Newman and Ford (2020) describe many challenges for leaders in the Covid-19 setting, such as enabling trust, sustaining the culture, brainstorming and team bonding.

Leading from a distance can contribute to difficulties related to communication, for instance, Solstad et al. (2019) describes how the distance can result in a reduced quality of information. Communicating through digital tools creates challenges as non-verbal cues goes missing (Newman, Ford & Marshall, 2020). In face-to-face interactions the employee can more easily notice if the leader is expressing sincere interest or vice versa, thus a nonverbal interaction demands a communication that is more explicit to a greater extent. This will also lead to fewer misunderstandings (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). Spatial and physical distance creates an obstacle in both vertical communication and control, and horizontal coordination between departments (Solstad et al., 2019). The perception of closeness, regardless of the distance, is increased by the frequency, depth and interactivity of the communication (Wilson et al., 2008). Remote leadership prevents the employees to 'feel' the leaders' presence (Avolio & Kahai, 2003).

Today's digitalisation has created new tools and instruments which have facilitated remote leadership, that has for instance created a greater workforce interconnectedness. Trust between the leader and employer is viewed as important to create prerequisites for leadership (Avolio & Kahai, 2003), and also correlates with employee satisfaction (Kim & Cho, 2020). A decreased communication can result in increased uncertainty within a team (Wilson et al., 2008). In a digital setting it is important that the leader uses the technology to emphasise the group as "we" and "us", this will deal with workforce diversity and create a team-feeling and also increase the trust (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). When a leader makes a decision based on objectives and sincerity, the employees often trust them (Kim & Cho, 2020). According to Newman et al. (2020) communication is one of the key aspects of leadership, however, they

also describe it as being the biggest challenge in virtual work for the leaders. This is due to enabling team work as well as trust, both between leader-employee as well as within a team.

Digitalisation and information technology have an impact on leadership behaviour and create changes that affect the leader role (Cortellazzo, Bruni, & Zampieri, 2019). If the leader should be successful in mastering the digital change, it is important that they are provided with the right resources, otherwise it can affect their wellbeing and add stress. Those managers who have a lower level of digital leadership skills are also more likely to have a lower psychological wellbeing (Zeike, Bradbury, Lindert & Pfaff, 2019).

It has been described that being an ideal leader is almost impossible to fulfil due to an overwhelming demand (Gjerde & Ladegård, 2019), the current digitalisation of the working environment adds on to these demands where the leader needs to confront new situations (Zeike et al., 2019) and constantly is á jour with technology.

To get an understanding of the managers perception of their role both as manager but also their performance of leadership, this thesis uses the concepts; role, identity and the contemporary discourse as they are often used in previous research.

Role and identity

Role and identity are two concepts interrelated thus they often occur in the same research, however it is important to separate the two constructs (Alvesson & Gjerde, 2020). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) describes role as an external component and identity as an internal self-meaning, where role does not have the same focus on self-understanding but more generalised expectations of behaviours. Role refers to what someone is expected to do, the functions they have and tasks to perform, whilst identity focuses on who the individuals are in that specific role (Alvesson & Gjerde, 2020). Identity can be viewed as the process of trying to answer the question of "who am I?" while the role is referring to "what should I do" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

What should I do?

Roles are important in individuals building a conception of the self (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). There is an interaction between the roles within the organisation and the individual roles. The expectations of a behaviour of a certain role determines the behaviour (Mintzberg, 1973), where the leader role has many different expectations and tasks to fulfil (Yukl, 2013). Individual members of an organisation exert pressure on managers to conform with their role expectations, i.e. their beliefs about the proper way to behave (Yukl, 2013). Several other important aspects of the leader role have been raised such as: giving direction and purpose to the organisation and achieving collective goals (Gjerde & Ladegård, 2019).

The role of a leader is expressed in the leadership, e.g. how it influences and motivates the employees to work towards achieving the organisational goals (Kim & Cho, 2020). The different demands the leader has from the surrounding determines how time is spent to fulfil the role requirements (Yukl, 2013).

Through the categorisation of identifying with different roles it is possible to know what to expect of oneself and others in different organisational positions (Alvesson & Gjerde, 2020). The role expectations are communicated to the manager by the subordinates, the leader can either choose to follow them or deviate from them, hence the leader role is influenced by both leader and subordinates (Gjerde & Ladegård, 2019). In addition, the leader's perception of the role requirements depends on the nature of the task (Yukl, 2013). Activities that remind leaders of their role can enhance their self-concept. Leaders who identify with their role tend to seek opportunities to exert their leadership behaviours in a broader sense (Lanaj, Gabriel & Chawla, 2020). When the nature of the task or the external environment changes, but the norms and beliefs about what proper leadership behaviour is remains the same, it creates an inconsistency of the task requirements and role expectations (Yukl, 2013).

Who am I?

Multiple identities conceptualise the individual's self-concept (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Identity is dynamic and develops quickly (Hammond et al., 2017), which can be reviewed when necessary and needed (Brown, 2015). It is often referred to as individuals attaching reflexivity to themselves, continuously developed and sustained through social interaction (Brown, 2015; Burr, 2015), hence it represents the self at different points in time (Lanka, Topakas & Patterson, 2019). Through experience and social feedback, identity evolves (Lord & Hall, 2005). DeRue et al., (2009) highlights the ambiguity in identity, how difficult it is to describe identity traits and behaviours with the explanation of it being vague, dynamic and socially constructed.

Who am I as a leader?

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) emphasise the role of discourse in the process of formation, maintenance and transformation of identity. The meaning of leader identity varies from person-to-person and between domains, however it is related to the conceptualisation and understanding of leadership (Hammond et al., 2017). According to Ibarra et al. (2010) there is an importance of understanding the being of leadership and not just the doing, to do this is through identity. Leader identity can be described as how strongly the individual identifies to the role of being a leader but also how central the identification is to their self-

definition (Gjerde & Ladegård, 2018). Scholars highlight that leader identity is something that vary across contexts and within the individual (e.g. DeRue et al., 2009; Lanka et al., 2019; Brown, 2015; Lanaj et al., 2020), but can be viewed as a part of the individual self-concept (DeRue et al., 2009; Waldman, Galvin & Walumbwa, 2013). The conceptualisation is developed through experience and continuing socialisation processes at the workplace (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005), thus leader identity is a process of change rather stable.

Leader identity is an ambiguous concept (DeRue et al., 2009; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), and depending on the leadership-follower relationship it develops differently (Hammond et al., 2017). It is a socially created construct where the level of identification depends on whether the leader role is granted by the members of the organisation (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Waldman et al., 2013). By having a formal leader position it provides an institutional granting of the leader identity. This facilitates the individual's integration of leader identity into the self-concept (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). The context in which the individual is situated endorses the leader-identity as well as the follower-identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Waldman et al., 2013). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) suggests that the leader identity is affected by the organisational discourses and roles, but also by the personal history. If individuals strongly identify themselves with their role as a leader, they tend to get more empowered to fulfil it (DeRue et al., 2009).

The leader identity possesses three levels of self-construct: individual, relational and collective. On an individual level, identities differentiate oneself of others, emphasizing being unique. The relational level refers to defining oneself in roles and relations, thus including others in the definition of identity. The collective level of identities defines the self in specific groups or organisations, also aiming to develop the qualities necessary for those specific collectives (Lord & Hall, 2005). According to DeRue and Ashford (2010) it is important to consider all three levels to fully understand leader-identity. Change and fragmentations can create a search for ways to deal with one's identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Performing identity work

Identity work refers to a process of regulating identity. It is when individuals engage in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the identity in a sense of coherence and distinctiveness (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Identity work is based on the understandings and assumptions of leader identity (Brown, 2015). Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) suggests that the function of contemporary leadership is a significant input in leader identity work. Managers try to live up to the contemporary leadership through basing their

identity work on this fantasy (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). This type of work can be ongoing or be something happening in changes or a crisis, either conscious or unconscious (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

The fundamental idea is to preserve existing identities and cope with the external expectations. This is a way of coping with situations affecting the identity (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). The organisation constructs the roles and tasks, it is within these roles that the process of identity work occurs. In other words, roles influence identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Identity work has two assumptions: the importance of external display of role-appropriate characteristics and the desire to uphold a coherence of the internal identity (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010).

An objective of identity work is acting and looking as expected, to be able to be granted the claim the identity. Primary function is to comply with the role expectations, thus they can trigger identity work (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). There can be different role expectations within one official role and imply certain self-definitions with a personal meaning. By having several inputs it might create a struggle between the identities of the leader (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). This discrepancy between the role expectations and the self can be experienced as an identity threat, to violate either the view of the self or the role identity expectations (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), hence identity work is performed. According to Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) the leadership discourse can prevent identity work rather than accomplishing it. Reviewing identity can even be seen as a way to optimise leadership development (Lanka et al., 2019; Lord & Hall, 2005).

Drawing on the foundation of identity work is the theory of leader identity construction, implying that individuals can use identity work to construct a leader identity by a process of reciprocally claim or grant (Lanka et al., 2019). According to DeRue and Ashford (2010) leader identity work is a process when individuals either claim or grant others an identity, i.e. the followers grant the leader the identity and the leader claim their own identity. This is a way for the follower and leader identity to be both established and maintained. Grants from followers simplifies the identification for the leader in different contexts. It can help create motivation for further experimenting with the identity. This process can either be indirect or direct. The grants and claims need to be of sufficient quality to be more reciprocal. This means that they should be clear, credible and visible within the social context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Lanka et al., 2019). DeRue et al. (2009) proposes that this process occurs when situations are unclear, but also when an identity is ambiguous. The proposition is that clear claims and grants creates transparency in the sense of how the

individual sees themselves but also how they are viewed (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), thus clearness is of great essence. Lanka et al. (2019) implies that identities are internalised at an individual level, reinforced at a relational level and endorsed at an organisational level.

According to Brown's (2015) review of the concept it is more necessary to perform identity work as well as intense and frequent in situations characterised with strain, tension and surprise. This is due to the examination of the self that feelings of confusion, contradiction and self-doubt are awakened.

Aim and significance

This thesis aims to understand the managers' practice in the new context since working remotely is something that probably will continue in various shapes, due to the increased demands for flexibility. Research regarding what is expected of leadership and management explains that it is ambiguous (e.g. Alvesson & Gjerde, 2020; DeRue et al., 2009; Kotter, 1990; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). What happens to an ambiguous concept when the context also becomes ambiguous? How does one relate to the assignment?

Many managers had never had to be distanced from their team before and had limited knowledge of how to work remotely. Still, the managers are expected to be responsible and guide their team just as before but now in a new intangible context. The pandemic has created a new practice for the managers, where leadership still is part of this practice since it is expected from their manager role according to the discourse. Therefore, it is of importance to consider the leader role within the manager role. As reviewed, the expectations of what a leader is varies, which makes it both unclear and hard to live up to (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), even without the uncertainty added by the new context created by the pandemic.

In accordance with Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) and Hammond et al. (2017), we suggest that leadership is shaped by discursive forces, and aim to explore the forced implementation of distance in relation to leader role and identity. Being a leader is something desirable and contemporary discourse often frames it as visionary and valiant (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b). The contemporary leadership discourse colour the managers work since leadership has become something that is done by all levels of managers (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). However, today's leaders are "faced with an ambiguous and demanding role that is always in the making" (Gjerde & Ladegård, 2018, p.44) and due to its ambiguity, the leadership discourse affects how individuals choose to view and practice leadership. In this study the search for an ideal leadership is not meaningful, which seems to be the core of a lot of leadership research, instead the focus lies on what the manager does in a changing working environment and how this distance relates to the experience of who the managers are in the

new working context. The aim is to understand how managers make sense of their practice in the new pandemic context and how to perform leadership within it. Thus we want to explore:

How managers make sense and handle the new pandemic practice?

How managers perceive that the distance influences their leadership in the new practice?

This thesis uses an interpretive social constructivist perspective to understand the managers' new reality, using the concepts of role and identity in relation to previous experience and the contemporary discourse.

Methodology

The goal is to explore the managers practice from a distance and the leadership performed within it. With our exploratory motive and constructivist interpretation, we aim to capture the phenomenon of leadership and managerial practice remotely in the setting of a pandemic.

This thesis is based on the assumption that all managers identify themselves as leaders due to the expectations based on the contemporary leadership discourse (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006), thus the leader role is part of the manager role (Mintzberg, 1973). Through this approach we get a more genuine understanding of our data and possibility to explore the specific practice (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). We chose to adapt an interpretive constructivist approach.

From the field we take the position that reality is not objective, but we interpret and reconstruct it in interaction with others. We use an interpretive approach, with the realisation that the participants' experiences and descriptions of leadership and management are constructed in a societal and institutional context. Language and words play an important role in social constructionism and the understanding of different concepts (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017; Burr, 2015). This can explain people having different perceptions of the same phenomenon (Tjora, 2012), such as leadership and distance. To conduct this study by adapting our interpretive approach we use an abductive research method.

Abduction is not a fusion of induction and deduction but consists of elements from the two as well as it adds new ones (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). The purpose of this study is to understand, more than to explain, with a focus on understanding the underlying patterns of the participants' experiences (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). Bryman (2011) emphasises the understanding of the participants' reality in abduction, hence studying their language, meanings and perspectives. By using theory parallel to our collection of data, as well as revising our interview guide and reflecting upon the empirical results along the process we used an abductive approach. Previous research can be viewed as an inspiration to get an

understanding of the empirical data to detect the underlying patterns (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). Through this reasoning we were able to create a deeper understanding and add on to the research of performing leadership from a distance.

The abductive process is a form of hermeneutic process, going between theory and empirical findings (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). The thesis adapts a hermeneutic phenomenology where the individual experience is central, researched through individual interpretations of the world and events (Bryman, 2011). A key element in hermeneutics is that meaning within a few can only be understood if it is put into the context of the entity - so called the hermeneutic circle. In the view of research this implies a parallel work of data and theory, by building onto existing theory. By alternating between collecting the data and putting it into the context, a deepened understanding for both was achieved (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). The entity can be seen as the social and historical context (Bryman, 2011). Using the presuppositions and pre-understandings of a subject will help and understand our additions of research (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). Through explanations and descriptions of retrospective experiences and actions we want to understand their way of making sense of their practice in the context of distance. The interpretation derives from the three concepts: role, identity and the contemporary leadership discourse. Due to the large concepts used and the accounted ambiguity of them, as well as it being socially created constructs, a reflexive approach to the data collection was adapted. Reflecting upon our interpretations of the experiences as well as concepts.

Design and data collection

To meet the aim of the study we chose to adapt a qualitative method since it allowed us to dig deeper in the research area and explore more dimensions regarding the managers' experience of the phenomenon. Seeing that the phenomenon is rather unexplored, due to its actuality, it was possible through a qualitative method to have an open view and let the participants guide us within its frames. A qualitative method also allows more flexibility (Tjora, 2012), something that we perceived as beneficial in exploring the research area.

Semi-structured interviews are used for our data collection since we wanted the process and interviews to be countered by flexibility. By conducting semi-structured interviews, the participants get the chance to reply more openly and creatively (Tjora, 2012), which goes well with our exploratory aim. It allowed us to have a partial structure as well as giving the participant the needed space to emphasise what was important to them (Bryman, 2011). The choice of not having open interviews was to be able to put some answers provided in perspective to one another, alongside with us having an aim of our research rather than

only a wish to research the area. Semi-structured interviews could answer more specific questions of interests and bring more value to the study (Bryman, 2011).

Participants

The informants in the study consisted of 12 managers, and additionally one informant for a pilot interview (see Table 1). The managers represented different organisations and branches in Sweden, with varied specific tasks, as well as their official titles due to the structures of the organisations. The nature of the organisations varied, as well as the size and structure. Both the public and private sector are represented. The size of their teams varies between 3-170, we decided not to account for it in the table due to secure the anonymity of the participants.

Table 1
Description of participants

Participant	Role
A	Middle manager
B	First line manager
C	First line manager
D	Middle manager
E	First line manager
F	First line manager
G	First line manager
H	First line manager
I	First line manager
J	First line manager
K	First line manager
L	First line manager
M	First line manager

First line managers became the focus of the study due to them often having a more operative role and main responsibility for their personnel, tending to result in a more direct interaction with the personnel than managers on a higher level. Thus, the changes brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic affected the employees' working environment and context, which the first line manager had the daily responsibility for. First line managers need to look after the wellbeing of their employees as well as making sure that it is business as usual. Hence the choice of focusing on this managerial group. 11 of the informants were first line managers

and two higher middle managers, but with similar functions regarding close interaction with the employees, hence the choice of inclusion in the study.

Due to the aim and focus of the study we did not consider any gender aspect of leadership, therefore the gender distribution was not taken into consideration.

The managers were chosen through convenience sampling, where we contacted friends and acquaintances in different parts of Sweden requesting potential participants that would meet the participation criteria. Through the snowball effect we were able to receive some additional participants.

Inclusion criteria

The main criteria for participation was that the individual had close personnel responsibilities and interaction, preferably and presumably to have a first line manager position. We used Hales' (2005) definition “those positions representing the first level of management to whom non-managerial employees report” (p. 473) to define who accounts for first line managers.

The managers should not have been performing leadership from a distance on a regular basis before the pandemic started, due to us wanting to intercept the effect of the pandemic practice. To managers who have previously been performing a lot of leadership from a distance, the changes in conditions might not pose the same struggles that we viewed as valuable to explore.

The managers should have worked the majority of the last year from a distance to their team in order to participate, meaning the work must not have been performed from the managers' home, but from a distance to the team. The current level of distance work varied where some participants still had the possibility of entering the office from time to time and others were fully remotely, 2 out of 13 participants had not been at the office at all since the start of the pandemic. Others had the possibility of scheduling office days, which meant that only a designated amount of people could sign up to certain days. This meant that some were able to meet a few members of the team at times in the office, however, no one was able to meet their whole team at the same time. Some started having full time remote work as soon as the first restrictions emerged during spring 2020, while others were half-time at the office and at home. However, since the new restrictions in the fall 2020, almost everyone had been full time at home. This criteria made some occupations not possible to participate in the study, due to them not being able to perform their work remotely.

Another criteria was that the participants should have had a managing role ahead of the pandemic to be able to review the change in the practice. Thus the managers' team

remains mostly the same during the past year. However, some of the managers received new titles and some changes in their team during the past year.

Due to the lack of access to the exact organisational structure it is difficult to know the individual's managerial position as well as the level of distance work, therefore we decided to let the participants determine themselves if they fit the inclusion criteria.

Procedure

Interview guide. In order to conduct our semi-structured interviews we developed an interview guide that structured the course of the interviews (Kvale, 2007). The interview guide included an outline of the topics we viewed as relevant to research in relation to the leadership and distance. It also contained suggested questions, however, it was up to our judgement as interviewers regarding how closely we should stick to the guide. The guide worked as a support rather than being a set outline of how the interviews should be structured (Tjora, 2012). The character of the interview determined how closely we stuck to the guide and in what order the questions were asked, hence the flexibility in the interviews. In case the interview got into a hold or if it would become quiet, we had more specific questions prepared. Based on theory and previous research we identified topics and variables in relation to leadership making out the foundation of the questions in the interview guide. The identified topics were: distance, identity, role expectations, resources, demands, communication and trust.

The objective of the interviews was to create an open conversation about the managers experiences of the current situation and its influence on their practice and leadership. Therefore we chose to form open questions asking the interviewees to describe their view of the concept leadership and their experiences. Throughout the interviews we kept in mind to not form leading questions to steer the interviews. By performing interviews we are aware of the intersubjectivity (Tjora, 2012), that a reflexivity between us and the informants during the interview situation arises.

We chose to see the interviews as a conceptualisation of the managers' leader identity due to them being able to present themselves, their role and behaviour freely. The leader identity concept was something that we wanted to approach from their unconsciousness. We believe that if we asked the managers to describe their leader identity we would not get to their true nature as a leader. Instead we asked questions around it, e.g. asking them to describe what leadership is, following up with other questions of how and when they exercise their leadership and if they are able to exercise the leadership they want to despite the pandemic. We developed contrast questions making them consider the changes in the

situation before the Covid-19 virus and now during the pandemic.

After each interview we used the flexibility that a qualitative method provides and looked over the questions and reevaluated the formulation in case of possible development.

Pilot interview. In advance of commencing the data collection a pilot-interview was executed. This was in order to get a better view of the field to decide which areas of the phenomenon to explore further. We also found it valuable to review the reasoning of someone in a leading position. The interviewee was a middle manager of a smaller team also meeting the other inclusion criteria of participation. The pilot interview clarified some challenges that had emerged through the rapid changes of the working conditions for the manager and helped us confirm the relevance of our interview guide. The different conceptualisations of the ambiguous concepts became more obvious in this stage, which was a good insight in continuing the study.

Contact. The participants were contacted through email where we presented the aim and purpose as well as the significance of the study. They were asked to participate in an interview if they had time and interest to do so. When the managers confirmed participation, we sent out an information and consent letter explaining the purpose of the interview along with information concerning ethics and anonymity. It contained the information regarding how the interview would be conducted, recorded and transcribed, its usage in the thesis and that the writers and supervisor would be the only ones accessing the recordings. They were also informed about them and their organisation remaining anonymous throughout the thesis and that all information being conducted are confidential. The information letter also informed of the participation being voluntary and one can choose to disrupt the interview at any point or refusing to answer a question without explanation.

The interviews. Due to the current situation of the pandemic we did not offer the interviews to be in person, since we felt that it was not appropriate according to the recommendations from the Swedish health authorities. Instead the interviews were conducted as a video call through Zoom. We chose Zoom as our main tool of communication due to it being the program we were most familiar with and having a license from Lund University with Zoom, enabling us to schedule meetings without a time limit on the meetings. Due to some technical issues we had to be flexible and open to use other similar tools. Some interviews were conducted over FaceTime, Skype or Microsoft Teams as a consequence of the participants not being able to access Zoom. We made the consideration of the different tools and concluded that they had the same functions and should not change the experience of the interview per se. It was important that the tools provided the interview with the same kind

of setting. We also regarded it as valuable for the participants to feel comfortable with the digital tool being used.

The main functions necessary for the interviews were that we could hear and see each other, hence the decisions of making video calls. We wanted to establish a feeling of closeness, even if not being in the same room, as well as create a safe and intimate space. This enabled us to get a sense of the reactions of the person we interviewed as well as being able to present a calm and reliable impression. This was important to empower the participants to open up about their experience, but also for them to see that we listened and took in what they said.

Before we started to ask the formulated questions, the participants were verbally informed about the purpose of the study, that their participation was anonymous and that the data will only be of use to the study. They also had to give their consent to being recorded so that the interview could be transcribed. By recording the interview we were able to fully concentrate on what was said and the dynamic of the conversation instead of taking extensive notes that might interrupt the free flow of the conversation (Kvale, 2007). The length of the interviews varied from 45 minutes up to an hour.

We decided to both take part in every interview, one being the interviewer in charge of regarding the interview guide and the other taking notes and trying to catch the shades of the answers being attentive to follow-up questions and reactions. The goal was to try and catch not just what they said but how they said it. Being two is also a way of avoiding interview bias. We sat together using one laptop to connect to the meeting showing us both at all times. This was a choice to increase the feeling of intimacy and transparency. The interview guide was used as a support with questions and aspects aimed to be covered. Due to the context of being on the Swedish labour market the participants all spoke Swedish, thus the interviews were conducted in Swedish. The quotes presented in the result are translated by us, where both reviewed that the meaning of the quotes in English corresponds with what was said in Swedish. However, by translating there is always a risk of missing nuances in the language, however, we tried to catch the essence.

The interviews were recorded by using the record function on one of our phones and transferred to the computer to be saved down on a USB. Zoom and the other various digital tools we used to carry through the interviews has a recording function. Through careful consideration the choice fell on not using it due to it also recording by video as some might feel insecure about this and there were more ethical aspects to revise. We believed that by

only recording the sound the participants would feel more comfortable with giving sincere answers as well as it is easier for us to maintain control over the material.

Analysis

Before analysing the data we transcribed the interviews. We chose to transcribe the ones that we were not in charge of to be able to assure an increased credibility. No specific coding language was used when transcribing since we were foremost interested in what was being said. However, pauses and initiations were involved as we also wanted to regard how it was said. By transforming the conversation into text, we could highlight nuances of statements as well as communicate the meaning of the interviews (Kvale, 2007). By transcribing the interviews and not only using notes and memory we can ensure a more secure data collection. We viewed it as essential to consider and review what the individuals consider as leadership due to its ambiguousness (e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). By listening to how they resonate around what leadership is and questions concerning how they exercise their own leadership we wanted to reach their perceived leader role and identity. To do this we listened to what was said but also considered what was not being said, as in aspects often used in defining leadership for example.

We chose to use thematic analysis when we analysed our data since it is a method widely used and applied across epistemological and theoretical approaches. We found the flexibility of the approach as beneficial due to its ability to provide detailed and rich accounts of data. Through thematic analysis we interpret the different aspects of the managers experience, but also identify patterns within the data. We identified four themes representing different patterns important to answer our research questions and aim (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A theme captures the important aspects of the data, often representing some kind of pattern, however the prevalence is defined by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were derived from the codes and categorisation of the data (see table 2.0). We wanted to examine the managers underlying assumptions, conceptualisation and ideologies and therefore chose a latent approach when analysing the data. Hence, when we identified the themes the analysis was conducted through interpretation and not only description (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The analysis was performed through five steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, we familiarised ourselves with the data by repeated reading and searching for patterns. Secondly, we separately started to generate some initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By reducing the data into more comprehensible size it simplifies the analysis (Kvale, 2007). The goal was to generate codes close to the data and not from the theory (Tjora, 2012). Thirdly, after the data

had been coded, we compared our codes and started to categorise. We made mind maps and organised the codes into broader categories. In this stage the codes are divided into groups relevant for the aim (Tjora, 2012). We used coding to attach one or more keywords to a text segment and categorisation provided us with a systematic conceptualisation (Kvale, 2007). Fourth, we revised the categories and compressed them into four overarching themes. We re-read our data set as well as compared our codes once again in relation to the themes (Bryman, 2011). Fifth, we defined the themes and identified the ‘essence’, this was done in comparison with our research questions in mind. Lastly, when we had identified the themes we chose quotes which explained the meaning and essence of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes have been reevaluated through the process of the thesis where we have had to go back to the data set in order to make sure they capture the essence.

Table 2

Exemplifying the stages used in the thematic

Since we wanted to understand the managers' practice and leadership within, we also used meaning interpretation as a tool of analysing in order to go beyond what was being said to understand the deeper meaning, read 'in between the lines'. Interpretation has a hermeneutic tradition where separate passages of the text are established through a process determined by the text's meaning. It ends when the meaning becomes sensible and coherent (Kvale, 2007).

Ethical considerations

The study followed the ethical requirements given by the Swedish research council concerning information, the usage of data, confidentiality and consent. The participants have given their consent to participation in the study in writing by email, by confirming the interview after receiving the information letter. This information was also repeated in the

Quote	Code	Category	Theme
"Hard if you like to socialise and meet other people, and as a manager and leader I believe a great part is about the meeting with the employee."	Getting a feeling	Socialising	The importance of fika
"You cannot see peoples reaction so you do not know, if you're sitting in a room you feel if someone is in a bad mood or having a bad day"	Nuances	The physical meeting	The importance of fika
"What I am missing is what happens in the energy"	Sensing	Socialising	The importance of fika
"Cause you still need to meet"	Interpret the restrictions	The physical meeting	The importance of fika

beginning of the interview before we started asking our questions since we wanted to assure that they understood, resulting in giving consent regarding the conditions again.

Since the initial contact to participants were made through acquaintances, some of them had a working relation to someone we knew. This was something we took into consideration prior to the interviews, however we concluded that the relation was far off, along with that we do not collect any sensitive information. The information is confidential and their participation not represented in any form in the thesis, the relation was also known by the participants. The individuals' participating in the study cannot fully be claimed to be anonymous due to the fact that we got the contact through acquaintances. However, since we do not write any sensitive information that could help to identify who said what, it was not possible to identify what each individual accounted for. In this sense the organisations and their participation are anonymous in the thesis.

Trustworthiness

Validity and reliability cannot be addressed in qualitative studies in the same way as in quantitative studies (Shenton, 2004), thus we used constructs more related to qualitative research to address the trustworthiness of the study. These constructs are credibility, dependability, and transferability.

Credibility is met through accounting for and being aware of our data collection being intersubjective. The interpretive nature is built on a fully neutral position is not possible to achieve since it does not exist (Tjora, 2012). By accounting for our constructivist interpretational position to understand the phenomenon we try to be transparent. By presenting the participants in Table 1.0 we want to provide the reader with an overview, however since the study is anonymous we are not able to provide a more detailed description. By being two researchers we were able to achieve higher credibility in that we individually interpreted and coded the data, to later on go on and compare our interpretations. This should provide a deeper confirmation of the interpretations. To confirm and provide further transparency of our interpretation we use long quotes to demonstrate the data.

We have tried to be as rigorous as possible in the explanation of the conduction of the study in order to provide an in-depth description of the methodology. This increases the dependability due to showing the stability of the data (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen & Kyngäs, 2014). As researchers we adapted an auditing perspective throughout the process in order to make sure that a complete and visible review of the process was provided (see table 2.0). Our supervisor also functioned as a revisor in this process (Bryman, 2011). Through providing this we can show how the research is conducted and how it

corresponds with previous research and theories (Shenton, 2004; Tjora, 2012).

The aim is to explore the experiences of a number of the participants, and not generalise the results to a broader population. However, by discussing the interpretations of their experiences through previous research we hope that the study can provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

Result

In reviewing the experience of how the managers try to make sense and handle their practice and the leadership within from a distance, the four following themes have been identified: What am I doing?, The importance of fika, The curse of confirmation and The ambivalence.

All managers described a change in their working environment and working conditions, consequently the new uncertain situation has brought them to question how to perform within their role. "What is expected and how to perform in the best way possible, from what we believe". - manager H. What is conceptualised within their roles as managers differs due to the organisational structures and conditions. According to this study's view of management and leadership, leadership is a part of the manager role. In order to get the full conception of their experience of the new working situation, we saw it as important to understand the managers' own definition of leadership. Throughout the interviews the managers presented different views of what a leader is and how a leader should be, for example guiding the team towards a common goal, being in charge of the working environment and generally motivating their team as common attributes that they ascribed to leadership.

I think it is about creating prerequisites for my organisation to deliver towards the goals we are supposed to deliver, having fun along the way and make people grow. Taking responsibility for both delivery and people is leadership I think. In some way transfer, help to transfer an organisation, a result or an individual but foremost to create prerequisites and point direction and be there along the way. - manager H

Many of the managers strived towards being someone who the employees can rely upon and brainstorm with, in order to develop and reach the common goals. How this is done varied, some emphasised their leadership on the social and relational aspects of the role, some focused more on the tasks and results and others aimed towards development and innovation. One manager shared a clear differentiation between leadership and management, with the explanation of management focusing more on task-related questions.

The leadership is split. You have both the management and then you have the leadership. And the management is super clear, it is the boring things. Making sure that people get paid and everything is in accordance with the systems...

In contrast to leadership which were ascribed more soft attributes such as to inspire and motivate the employees.

... Then there is the leadership, it is about creating prerequisites for the employees... And the guiding, it is a lot more gentle. I think it is also about being aware and having an instinctive feel, you become a better leader if you know your employees. - manager L

Other managers did not do this differentiation and presented every aspect of their practice as leadership.

It is about explaining the assignment to the employees, making it clear, putting it in a frame but also to facilitate, enable, and create prerequisites to handle the assignment. There can pop up things along the way on many different levels, both on an organisational but also on a personal level. It can be an employee that needs rehabilitation. - manager J

Several of the managers expressed a wish and aim to perform a leadership that they themselves want to receive from their own superiors, to be a leader that they want to have. This is raised as a yardstick for the performance of leadership within their practice.

What am I doing?

The new digital setting has, according to the managers, affected how they perform their practice. Most managers expressed an increased consciousness in choices and actions, since it was not possible to rely on the traditional order of their work tasks. The description of the new situation varied where some expressed a change in focus of their leadership whilst some rather tried to continue on as usual, although, all agreed that the new circumstances forced them to find new approaches to the same tasks as they had before.

I think that as a leader you get to actively reflect a lot over all these things and you definitely need to think more actively, you can say that you need to be more aware of your leader role, what you're doing. When you're at the office things can happen much more naturally. You're

there physically, but when you're working from home you need to think things through a bit more, "how is this going to work?", "how should I structure our meetings?". - manager K

Due to the new situation and context some of the managers expressed that they struggled to understand how they should perform within their role. All agreed that the manager-employee interaction had changed due to the change in working context. They experienced that they had to do things differently when the routines at the office no longer existed. Some of them felt insufficient and in some cases even redundant.

Communication was one aspect the managers highlighted as important to be more conscious of. Due to being on a physical distance from each other they described an overall importance of a clearer and straighter communication, both in relation to work but also in a personal and private sense. Most of the managers struggled to show availability, and therefore felt a need to express that they were present even though the employees could not see them. They experienced that some employees did not interact in the same way as they did when they were at the office. For example, some noticed that their employees tended to wait to contact them to ask questions and instead bring it up if they went to the office. The communication was perceived as more artificial, which also affected the natural flow of information as it was not possible to overhear the information going around. This forced the managers to initiate more official information channels to assure that their employees got the necessary information.

The leader needs to have a role of bringing up things that might have been talked about in one meeting during the day but later are brought up to be shared with everyone. That's something I would say you need to think about in the role you have now, that information is only shared in meetings, actually... Not just in meetings but using digital tools to share information, so that is something you need to think of in the leader role. - manager K

At the same time as they experienced greater difficulties communicating information to their team, there was a feeling of occasional alienation due to not getting an overview of their team but also the entire organisation.

The meetings were another aspect of communication that was brought up to have been affected by the physical distance. Instead of meeting the team in a setting where the manager could observe and interact with their employees in a natural way, everything happened digitally. Some expressed that this tended to make the meeting more effective, but the usual chit chat before and during the waiting until everyone had arrived did not take

place. The general perception was that the meetings became impersonal and more task-focused. The managers enunciated that the dimension regarding the social interaction was lost and it was expressed as a great concern, due to the social aspect of the work context going missing, both from their personal- and team-perspective.

Another thing in these meetings is that they become extremely task-focused. Like in this situation, we don't sit and chit-chat but instead go straight to the questions at hand. You miss the interpretation of the mood and how everyone is feeling, and I'm pretty task-oriented person which means that it is easier for me to miss it if I don't make an effort. Sometimes you remember that you didn't say hello but just went straight to the problem. I think that's the biggest challenge, being able to reach people in this digital-meeting-inflation that affects everyone. - manager M

You can lose some of the relational aspect when you sit in the digital meetings. You have to give a bit of yourself, but it doesn't go as deep, it becomes quite flat. So I guess that's what makes it more efficient, you get straight to the point. And that I notice even when I have check-ins with employees once a month, often over teams or the phone, it's the same thing, it becomes bam bam bam. You lose a bit of the human side of it. - manager E

Some expressed a feeling that the digital setting and tools created stress and prevented them from practicing their leadership in the same manner as before. It also contributed with new responsibilities in handling new digital situations.

I've occasionally experienced a digital stress, to set up staff meetings on Teams and I tried to use the functions there, breakout rooms and other things. But I've had to learn on YouTube how to do it, because we haven't received that help. And sometimes when you don't get it to function it has been pretty stressful, but it has worked... But it's a bit hard keeping an eye on the digital part when you are the one in charge of the meeting. - manager J

The managers who described a familiarity with the digital tools did not perceive it as complicating the prerequisites to perform their leadership. However, those managers relying on inspiration and vision to motivate their employees explained that the digital setting limits creativity and innovation, which interfered with their leadership.

It's harder to have workshops where we are really creative together. Brainstorming and boiling it down to a few takeaways and so on is really difficult now, and I think it has

changed in that way. Cause we can't do it as well and as often anymore. When you gather a group you would've sketched on a whiteboard and talked, that isn't possible. We've got meeting room-boards and stuff but it's a very inconvenient tool and I think many have issues getting into those environments and don't know what to do with their post-its and they fly here and there. It doesn't feel like there are any good solutions for the creative work. - manager I

The importance of fika

As mentioned above, social interaction becomes more difficult to maintain in the digital context. The majority of managers expressed that their team performed their tasks well remotely. However, there was an emphasis on how the physical interaction serves a great role in the social and personal aspect of the work.

Some of the managers expressed a concern regarding the fact that it is much more difficult to notice the wellbeing of their employees when only interacting with each other through a telephone or a computer screen. They perceived a loss in overview and difficulty in noticing different nuances of the wellbeing as they would at the office, based on the perception that the employees did not raise possible struggles and frustrations as easily when working remotely. For example, one manager expressed it easier to noticing the nuances at the office:

It is easier to be able to hear the nuances, when it is a bit too much [at the workplace] and then you really have to get a sense. And it's important to see, does anyone have problems at home, have someone broken up with their boyfriend, are you getting a divorce, do you have the kids every other week? Those things play a part. The private life affects so much. - manager L

Several managers felt the need of meeting their employees physically, which resulted in them making their own interpretation of the restrictions given by the FMH. They expressed a feeling of security in the physical meetings due to the perceived insight and feeling of being able to read the nuances of their employees. These individual interpretations could take different forms, for example walk-and-talks, scheduled office time or meeting up in a neutral place for a fika. The wish was to catch the warning signals regarding the wellbeing, both private and work related, which they experienced missing remotely. Some tended to call their employees more often, even if they did not have anything specific to ask them.

Hell, I want to know, how are people feeling? And then you call to check, but you don't really get that feeling. If you meet in person you are able to get a feeling of "this person is doing good, and this one is not". - manager D

Most of the managers implemented more regular meetings and checkpoints, however, some continued as it was before the pandemic and did not implement more contact than usual.

It is harder to read the wellbeing of the team, hence one has to have more checkpoints with individuals, or in smaller groups where the individuals feel comfortable to talk, in order to make sure everyone is well. Because there have been occasions where I have seen people be unwell and then I've thought that I could have avoided it if I had more checkpoints, then we wouldn't have been in this situation. - manager I

The communication is described to be more forced, and it is difficult to create the same intimacy as it becomes quite 'flat'. However, one participant provides another view, describing how the digital tool enables intimate conversations due to not needing to go through many practicalities to be close to one another, in the sense of seeing each other and being able to talk undisturbed.

Some managers raised a concern regarding the difficulty to build and maintain team-spirit. They explained that the more easy and soft interaction that occurs in a physical setting is important since it is then the employees create a relationship with each other besides work. It is easier to focus on specific tasks instead of talking about other things as you might when having a fika. Additionally, in some of the organisations the employees could schedule the days they wanted to be at the office, some tend to schedule the same day as close colleagues, which one manager said resulted in a creation of subgroups. Some managers described how their team has adapted well to the new situation and worked as a team through it, while others describe how they have been struggling more.

Several managers tried to implement social activities digitally to maintain team-spirit, like virtual fika and having a drink after work. Even though, to what extent the manager adapted to the new work context varied, some did not try to create new ways for the employees to meet each other and socialise virtually, but rather relied on traditional approaches, such as meeting physically.

When you sit around a fika-table and talk and laugh, and you pull your jokes, it becomes an easy tone. That tone is difficult to implement in a digital meeting. And sometimes I try and I

wish that it was in the same way. I try to get us there but it's difficult for people to be spontaneous and laugh, and that is the case in this team. There's a challenge there. Sometimes I feel that I am the only one sitting and trying to be funny, and they just think that I'm super boring, and that feels a bit lame. I don't experience that when I sit around a table at the office. How should I solve this? How can I make the others talk more and not only work related? There are probably several activities one can do... - manager G

Some managers were more prone to adjust and rethink their leadership so that it was better suited for the digital setting, however others tended to be more conservative and instead waited for the situation to go back to normal, pre Covid-19.

The curse of confirmation

In digital meetings, the managers described that 'something' goes missing. Sometimes they got the feeling of holding a monolog since it was not possible to interpret what the other participants were thinking or reacting. "It becomes like a two-dimensional world. It's harder to get messages across..." - manager D. Even though they are able to see each other through video calls, they cannot see the body language of the ones they are talking to, the encouraging nodding and confirming hm-ing goes missing.

... and sometimes it becomes a bit of a cliché when you speak digitally since I'm the only one, I don't get a lot of objections or comments, it easily becomes that I'm the only one speaking, and then you don't get anything back which makes it difficult to understand how people are doing and so... - manager G

To understand how their message had been reciprocated the managers could only rely on the employees using words to clearly express their thoughts and concerns. In this sense it becomes essential for the communication to be more straight. One participant describes how words are perceived as more definite in a digital context. This is also confirmed with the experience of the employees' withholding from asking questions and taking contact with the manager. Since the managers expressed a lack of overview of both the group and the situation, alongside that the employees constrict themselves, some managers described a concern and feeling of not being able to reach out with their message. "I think the introductory presentation becomes harder and to get a sense of how it's received, which questions are there on my general message, what is it that I want?" - manager F. It was difficult to show and share a message or goal in a way providing them with the confirmation that the team has understood as well as being motivated.

Some managers share an image of being lonely in the sense that they had to take a lot of responsibility, both regarding work and a social aspect. Several expressed a will for the employees to be more active in the new context, both contributing to the social activities and team spirit but also providing confirmation. However, the managers said that it can be harder to stay focused and provide an engaged and attentive appearance. It is easier to zone out from meetings or multitask during others' presentations.

The ambivalence

Throughout the interviews an ambivalence occurs between what the managers say and the description of what they do. This ambivalence especially refers to control and expectations.

When describing their own leadership an emphasis is on not appearing controlling or governing, but instead as a majority explain, providing 'freedom under responsibility'. Several participants described their own leadership by contrasting oneself from being governing and controlling and using words such as trust, freedom and self-leadership, aiming to create an environment for the individuals to perform on their own. One participant described his/hers leadership style as being a modern manager:

I see myself as a pretty modern manager, cause I'm not that governing and I'm not that interested in details, as long as people do what they should I'm satisfied. I think most managers are like that today, but at the same time you have seen where it doesn't work. Much freedom under responsibility but at the same time I keep an eye on things, more than you may think. As long as people are doing what they should I do not really interfere. - Manager G

The participants provided an image of themselves as not having the need to keep an eye on their employees, yet many of them mentioned in passing how they are still able to see if they are doing what they should, for example seeing if they are online or using other tools to observe performance. This was presented in a way of monitoring of the work, but not in a controlling manner. One of the managers described the will to be "a fly on the wall" when someone is not replying to an email for half a day, when not having anything in the calendar.

Due to not meeting their employees on a regular basis the managers felt a need to check in with them more often. However, at the same time they did not want the employees to feel like they are calling only to see if he/she is working. Instead, the actual incentive is said to be to check on their wellbeing or just in general see how they are holding up. "... it's my feeling, they don't show it, but it's my feeling when I call, 'I don't call you to control you

just so you know’.” - manager E. On the other hand, one manager said that they did not contact his/her employees if it was not necessary as he/she did not want to interfere with their efficiency of the work.

I can feel that there is a risk that I bother them a bit unnecessarily, since normally I might have rather caught them when I knew that they had just finished something, and not started anything new, now I don't know if I bother them mid concentration. Even if I always ask the question on Teams before “can we talk?”. But when the boss asks that question it is very easy that you prioritise, but if I could have been there I would have had the opportunity to see that “Okay, now the person just left and has not started anything else so I can take the chance to pop in. - manager F

The relationship to the employees is described to vary a lot between the managers, some want to have little interaction while others want to use the manager to brainstorm or as a regular support.

Between the participants the feeling of having new expectations on their role varied. Some explained how the expectations remained the same from both the organisation and employees, but the ways to meet them had changed. They had to find new solutions in the new context they have been forced into. Consistent from the participants were the description of certain elements of their leadership being more difficult or even impossible to actualise due to the distance. Some managers expressed a wish for a better understanding from the employees.

If we say it like this, I don't expect them to do a hundred percent at home because I understand that it isn't really possible. I have said that it should be good enough when you're at home. But it is just as the expectations of me are a hundred percent. They might also have to think about that I have bigger challenges as a manager, but it is just like no understanding exists at times. - manager G

There seemed to be a general strive towards being an attentive leader, to catch signals and nuances from the team. However, this was one element expressed as no longer possible to do in the same extent, but the leaders still want to be perceived as available. This is one example of how the expectations on the role as leaders had changed, even if the task still remained the same. Other examples, such as motivation and teamwork as well as being present and providing the employees with support and guidance, were expressed as being more difficult to perform from a distance.

Half of the managers described that they could perform the leadership they wanted from a distance, but at the same time several aspects described as characterising their leadership, for example team spirit, mediating a message, working with innovation and participation, became more difficult. The other half felt hampered in their leadership.

But I experience that you expect that a manager should be everywhere. He should have the answer to everything and he should solve everything. It actually feels like that...

...then I feel “wow, you should probably have someone else as a manager because I can’t live up to all this” I cannot live up to everything, have answers to everything. It has to be something in between. - manager D

Despite the fact that the managers perceived obstacles in the new context and that they had to ‘force’ their employees into the digital setting, all of them expressed that it also brought some positive changes, the organisation had to develop and adjust to the digitalisation much quicker.

Discussion

The results account for the experiences of the participating managers, their stories of how they try to make sense of their practice from a distance, and how their leadership is exercised within this practice. From this we can derive that ‘something’ goes missing in the new digital context. This ‘something’ is important for the managers to perform their leadership and can be interpreted as not getting an overview and losing the ability of reading nuances. Social interaction is described to be much more difficult in a digital context, at the same time as the importance of the physical meeting are enunciated. The managers want confirmation, both of their role as managers but also as just being ordinary people. They try to make their practice comprehensible in the new situation through more communication, but the leadership they present and the leadership they actually practice is contradictory. They strive to practice leadership, but it seems to be easier to be a manager remotely.

Through our constructivist interpretation and previous research and theory we will review these findings through their leader role and identity, and the contemporary leadership discourse. Our perspective and approach for the study alongside the previous research results in a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants while discussing our aim and research questions: How do the managers make sense and handle the new pandemic practice? How do the managers perceive that the distance influences their leadership in the new practice?

The implemented distance, and the change in context it implies, has resulted in an reevaluation in both questions “What should I do?” and “Who am I?” within the managers. We argue that the distance has exposed a tension between the role, identity and discourse, creating difficulties for the manager to make sense of their practice, where identity work seems to be a way to decrease this tension and handle their pandemic practice (see figure 1).

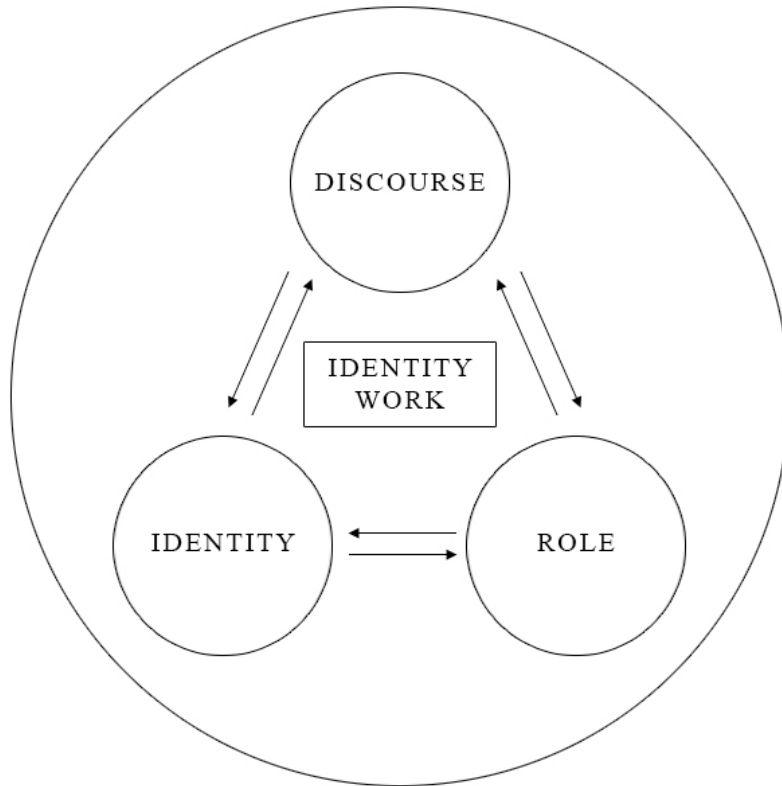


Figure 1
The presented relationship between the three concepts and identity work
Making sense of the situation

The pandemic has changed the reality and in order to make sense of the new situation, which the managers are supposed to act and practice within, they try to understand the new expectations. The distance also adds an intangible dimension to the already ambiguous leadership concept. We have identified that the managers try to understand their pandemic practice by relating to the questions: Who am I? What should I do? Their sensemaking relies on their previous experience of how to perform their leadership (Ericsson & Rakar, 2017; Weick, 1993) and perceived expectations. However, these experiences are based on how they acted before the pandemic, i.e. not performing remote leadership, which makes it more difficult to make sense of the situation.

Introducing a new practice

The pandemic has made the structure and external frame of the work more vague, which means that the individual will apply their own interpretation of their work and role. The first line manager role is the formal role of the participants meaning they have responsibilities, facilitating conditions for the employees and handling business activities (Hales, 2005; Yukl, 2013). Despite that they are all employed as managers, the organisation expects the managers to exert leadership, hence it becomes an indirect work task since it is a part of the role expectations, due to leadership spreading to all levels of managers (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). We argue that the new context has affected the leader role of the managers since it has created new expectations and demands. The definition of role is what someone is expected to do, the functions they have and tasks to perform (Alvesson & Gjerde, 2020), for this reason it can be viewed that the managers have the same role as before the pandemic. This is also in coherence with the explanation from most of the managers. However, an uncertainty of the task requirements and role expectations have occurred due to the external changes but the norms and beliefs of leadership behaviour remain the same (Yukl, 2013). We argue that the new context has made the expectations harder to live up to, thus creating new demands such as being available and facilitating communication in order to meet the organisational goals and perceived expectations. One way to view this is that the same expectations in such a different context must imply new expectations, in addition this indicates there have been changes in what they relate to in their leader identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson & Gjerde, 2020).

Many of the managers expressed not being able to perform the leadership they wish. Aspects that symbolised their leadership such as being present, fun, social and so forth are attributes that they no longer can rely upon. This exposed a tension in the question of “Who am I?” in a digital context. A discrepancy has occurred between the discourse of leadership and the leadership that actually is possible to exercise, creating a confusion in how to handle the practice.

The managers perceive that the new digital setting hampers their performance of leadership and has created changes which have affected their role as leaders (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). They have had to adapt to a new way of working, which might have contributed to the confusion of how to handle the practice since they had to rapidly become accustomed with different digital tools in order to perform their work. This created stress for some of the managers as they were not given much support from the organisation. The managers who relied more on inspiration and vision in their leadership seemed more frustrated with the

digital setting than those managers whose leadership had more managerial characteristics. We argue that the stress and frustration might have been decreased if the organisation had provided the managers more support and knowledge of how to use the new digital tools (Contreras et al., 2020) as well as it could have a positive impact on the managers wellbeing (Zeike et.al., 2019).

The new presence

One of the most important aspects of leadership for the managers was to show presence, which is a great challenge in the new context. By losing the physical interaction in conversation and observation, the mutual experience of the managers is that their leadership suffers. The managers seem to put great faith into their social abilities, enunciating the importance of the physical meeting. They perceive that ‘something’ goes missing in the new context, and they rely upon this ‘something’ exercising their leadership and how to understand their surroundings. However, as it goes missing the managers struggle to make sense of their practice. Our interpretation is that they do not know how being present looks like in this context. Hence, implementing more communication in order to handle the tension between not being able to be present in this new practice and behave according to the role expectations. They perceive that communicating more frequently and clearer is the solution for the lack of overview and increases the feeling of closeness to their employees (e.g. Newman et al., 2020; Newman & Ford, 2020; Solstad et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2008).

Being available and present are still expectations on the managers, however, it is important to take into consideration that these expectations have not been adapted to the new context due to the process of sensemaking. Much of the description of how the managers perform their leadership seems to be a description of what kind of leader they want to have, wanting to lead as they wish to be led. These expectations can be argued to have been ascribed to the employees since most of the managers behave after these perceived role expectations to live up to their desired leader identity. Thus, it can be argued that the managers are trying to be an ideal leader (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

In order to make sense of the new practice and handle the tension between their leader role and the perceived role expectations of “What should I do?”, the managers had to reevaluate their identity and the question “Who am I?”. This resulted in contradictory actions.

The ambiguousness of leadership

In previous leadership research, as well as in this study, the definition of leadership varies. Due to this ambiguousness a difficulty in sensemaking is created, generating contradictory actions. The view of leadership determines the leader identity and how well the

managers perceive themselves to live up to the image created (Hammond et al., 2017). The leadership discourse affects the individual possessing the leader role (e.g. Gjerde & Ladegård, 2019; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006) as well as what the role implicates and the behaviour related. The discourse of what a leader is supposed to be is reflected in most descriptions from the participants, with the influence of a will to be a ‘modern’ leader (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). However, their actual actions contradict the description of what they say they do, adding on a contradictory aspect to the ambiguousness of the discourse around the concept.

In coherence with the discourse, the managers portray leadership as something that implies providing freedom under responsibility, steering towards a common goal, being available, not interfering, monitor the performed tasks, monitor the wellbeing, motivate and work with innovation as well as development. These are actions that also frequently occur in the contemporary discourse and as Gjerde and Ladegård (2019) argues, creating an ideal that is impossible to live up to. The managers often described their own leadership with an emphasis on flexibility and the term self-leadership was accentuated. The managing style was even described as being “a modern manager” and not interested in detail or to control the employees, which previously has been viewed as ‘bad’ leadership through micro-management (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003a). However, it is important to consider that being a modern manager is promoted in the discourse and that might be one of the reasons that the managers want to be perceived as one. It seems to imply doing as little as possible, and trust that the employees manage themselves to a high degree, in a strive for them to perform just like the manager. Some managers described their leadership by contrasting oneself with being controlling and governing and instead focusing on trust. Through this description it seems important to create distance from the negatively attributed characteristic and instead try to strive for trust. Thus, being a ‘modern’ leader is what is considered being a ‘good’ leader. The managers seem to be using previous experiences based on the traditional ways of working, in order to make sense of the new practice (Weick, 1993), creating a tension between the expectations and what the managers can do to live up to in the ideal.

Contradictory actions. Nonetheless, the description of being a ‘modern’ leader contradicts the actual actions of the managers remotely. The new digital context and the uncertainty it implicates, has made it more difficult for the managers to get an overall perception. To decrease the uncertainty most managers implemented more checkpoints, one-on-ones, virtual and physical fika, follow-ups, calling unforeseen just to chit-chat, walk-and-

talk or physical meetings at the office. Thus, these strategies of communication can be seen as tools to handle the discrepancy between the managers' action and their perception of their own leader identity. However, these tools contradict their strive after 'freedom under responsibility' and self-leadership, due to the frequent check-ups for assurance. The implementation seems to be based on two reasons; (1) the first being the need to indicate that they are doing their job and (2) the second reason to feel in control of the situation. They aim to show their availability, presence, and behave in accordance with their leader role and identity, but at the same time it appears like some kind of subtle control.

(1) By not being able to physically show their presence at an office, more communication compensates for the distance and displays that the managers are still doing their job. The managers want to act in accordance with their role by trying to provide the right prerequisites for the employees, as well as provide support and guidance in need and therefore tend to check in on how their employees are doing both workwise but also their wellbeing. However, the managers behave according to the function they ascribe themselves in a normal setting and not remotely. This creates a contradiction of being a modern manager, and doing as little as possible, and the need to show their presence. (2) Due to the uncertainty the majority of the managers want to get some kind of control over the situation. Even if the managers express that they want to exert a leadership that is based on flexibility, freedom, trust and not control their employees, the managers are actually more controlling by implementing more communication. Even if it is done out of concern for their employees' wellbeing, it can appear misdirecting and controlling when for example calling unforeseen. However, there is a fear of appearing controlling but also an awareness that their behaviour might be interpreted that way. To some extent the managers actually admit keeping an eye on their team's performance through digital tools, where one even has a desire to see what is happening when the individual cannot be reached. This is said after describing one's leader style as based on trust, showing the contradiction.

Through these strategies it can be argued that an indirect control over the individuals has been practiced to handle their practice. Even if the managers express that they want to exert a leadership that is based on flexibility, freedom, trust and (explicitly) not control their employees, control becomes a way for the managers to handle the new practice.

Realise your limitations. It can be argued that the leader role is harder to fulfil in the new context. Since most of the managers share an experience that working from a distance becomes more task-oriented and it is difficult to exert a leadership that is based on trust and flexibility. Even if they thought they acted from their leader role, trying to maintain their

leader identity, their actions were more of managerial characteristics. Instead other roles existing within the manager role (Mintzberg, 1973), which focus on how to fulfil the tasks at hand and administrative functions are easier to exert remotely. However, it is important to consider that some managers do not seem to have the same opportunity in their role to exert leadership, thus their managerial role is focusing on more operative tasks. This goes in accordance to Mintzberg (1973) who claims that the roles within the managerial roles are applied differently. This argues that the organisational structures and conditions provide different opportunities for the managers to perform leadership, indicating that for some it might be easier than others.

As most managers did not differentiate between management and leadership, it can be discussed that it was due to the fact that they wanted to identify themselves with performing leadership rather than being a manager since it is often described as something positive and idealised (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). This is an indication of the ambivalence and contradiction in identity that exist between the role of being a manager and the role of being a leader. It raises the question if the managers really are modern leaders or that the strive to be hampers them in their management (Fairhurst, 2012), creating intangible and impossible expectations on their role as managers.

The two-sided confirmation

The distance has created an uncertainty regarding how to make sense and handle the new practice. Alongside this uncertainty there is a lack of awareness of how the new context has affected the managers leader role and their own needs in their practice. They express a wish that their employees would provide them more with confirmation regarding their handling of the new pandemic practice, however, we argue that this need for confirmation is two-sided. The managers need confirmation on their leadership within their managerial role in order to make sense of their new role expectations. Being a manager is one identity part of the self-concept (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), but they also seem to seek confirmation of being ordinary people and their individual needs.

To understand how the distance has affected the managers' leader identity, we have chosen to examine the concept based on the three different levels of self-construct (Lord & Hall, 2005; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). We argue that the managers seek confirmation on all three levels. On the individual level they seek confirmation as ordinary people, that they are human. On the relational level they need confirmation on their role as leaders, which is produced and reinforced through social interaction. On the collective level, the managers are confirmed through their managers' official role both within the organisation but also their

team, for example in the sense that they are managers in the organisation and leaders within their team. These levels and different kinds of confirmation will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Being a leader. Both employees and supervisors have a responsibility to confirm the managers' leader role, this would indirectly grant the managers' leader identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; DeRue et al., 2009). Based on the contemporary discourse, the managers holds a formal leader position (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006), thus they are institutionally granted the leader role (DeRue et al., 2009), however, it also needs to be socially granted since identity is a socially created construct (Brown, 2015; Lord & Hall, 2005; DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

It can be argued that the managers want to be given the confirmation that they are successful at their job, and behaving in accordance with the role expectations, to consequently be granted their leader role. However, the perceived expectations seem to be created from the managers' own beliefs and thus probably based on the leadership discourse and own preferences of leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). These expectations are the foundations for their behaviour (Yukl, 2013). The behaviours and actions are done in a longing for confirmation of doing the right thing, and that they have made sense of the practice. The managers do not experience that their employees confirm their leader identity. Instead, they present an experience of being lonely in their role and hesitant if they are understood. Grants from employees can create motivation for the leader to experiment with their identity (Lanka et al., 2019), which might be necessary to handle the new context.

It can be discussed that it is the lack of granting that has contributed to that some of the managers do not seem to be motivated enough to change their traditional ways of working and accept that the same atmosphere and conversation cannot be fully replicated digitally. Even if the employees did grant the managers' leader identity, it might be affected due to the virtual context and the difficulty it brings to deliver clear messages (Newman et al., 2020; Solstad et al., 2019; Avolio & Kahai, 2003; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Due to the lack of physical interaction, both grants and claims can be difficult to accomplish in a sufficient quality necessary (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

Even managers are ordinary people. The expressed wish for the employees to show more clear interest and be more confirming, also refers to taking responsibility during digital social interaction. Not being able to review what the employees think regarding what was said or if they considered the manager's joke funny leaves them with a feeling of not knowing how their message has come across and feeling a bit stupid. Even if the manager

strives to live up to a fantasy of being supernatural (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006), it appears like they are just like the rest of us, which is more evident in the new pandemic practice. The needs expressed are to be given comments of what they say, laughing and encouragement when trying to be funny and an occasional nod. The increased amount of communication might also be due to the managers own social needs and to receive confirmation of oneself. The social expectations of their manager role and their leader identity seems to be more related to their own perspectives and their own human needs remotely. This shows that the individual needs also play a part in them performing their practice.

Revising, forming, maintaining or strengthening who I am

Since a pandemic has shown to be a demanding situation on many levels, it is no surprise that the managers question what it means to be a leader (Brown, 2015). Due to the implemented distance and how it has influenced the leadership, the tension regarding the managers' role and identity have been exposed through the ambivalence. In order to make sense of the new pandemic practice, we argue that the managers have had to engage in identity work. Through not being able to perform in accordance with the leader identity, identity work becomes salient to be able to handle the practice and context and also meet the new role expectations (see figure 1).

The managers do not have the same prerequisites to meet the new expectations and perform their leadership remotely, which for some have created a discrepancy between role expectations and their identity. In order to decrease the discrepancy the managers perform identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), but in different ways and for different reasons. Either to display role-appropriate characteristics or that the individuals have a desire to uphold a coherence of their internal identity (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Both reasons are based on the leadership discourse which determines how the leader should act, hence, the current leadership discourse determines identity work (Brown, 2015; Hammond et al., 2017). The identity work performed is to act and look as expected (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Even if the discourse functions as a foundation for the managers to build their leader identity on and strive towards, it can also force the managers to behave a certain way and hamper their identity work (Fairhurst, 2012; Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). For example, when the feeling that 'something' goes missing in the digital context it can be interpreted as 'something' sustains the internal coherence of their leader identity. It seems to be the feeling of overview and sense of the situation that they refer to as 'something', but exactly what this implies is not clear to many of the managers, more that you miss the

nuances and the reassurance it provides.

In the new context and the loss of ‘something’ the managers need to find new ways to satisfy their needs. It can also be argued that this makes them feel more distanced emotionally (Wilson et al., 2008), due to the strive to be aware of the employees’ wellbeing. Thus, the loss of ‘something’ that is needed in the performance of their leadership might also be necessary to feel like they are confirmed in not just their performance, but their being. To replace ‘something’ is a way to maintain coherence. In the loss of reading signals the need for verbal confirmation becomes evident. However, this probably differs depending on the managers’ own needs and difference in self-concept, where some show a larger social need than others.

The managers also have to relate to the role expectations from both their superiors and their subordinates, indicating they are ‘sandwiched’ (Alvesson & Gjerde, 2020). These expectations differ, their superiors might expect that they foremost perform according to their manager role, ensuring the employees performance meets organisational goals. But the subordinates might expect the managers to exert more leadership, confirmed with their experience and explanation of being present. This indicates that they do not only have to make sense of their practice in a new context, they also need to do it in the sense that they are both a subordinate and a manager, which probably creates more expectations to meet up to since several different inputs creates a struggle between the different leader identities (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

This study shows that the identity process occurs differently for the individuals and is a way to handle the new pandemic practice. Some accept the current situation and try to adapt their leadership and actions to the new context, by doing less leadership and more management. This can be more of revising and forming a leader identity, being able to fit in the new pandemic practice. Others strive towards maintaining or even strengthening their leader identity as certain behaviours are accentuated, such as remaining the funny and social manager, or trying to remain visible in an invisible environment. The managers who valued performing their leadership tended to seek and create opportunities to do so (Lanaj et al., 2020), and to keep a hold of the leader they aim to be. Thus, the qualities that seemed important for them in their self-concept of being a manager and aiming to perform leadership becomes even more important. Identity work can be concluded to be performed by all managers to make sense and how to handle the pandemic practice and their leadership, but the process of understanding “what should I do” and “who am I” varies.

Limitations

This study has some possible limitations considering the participants, data collection and context. Firstly, the study has a limited material with only 13 participants in a Swedish context. However, our intention is not to generalise our results, only to receive an understanding of a phenomenon through our participants' experiences. By using others' work and research we try to carry a discussion that becomes interesting beyond the specific practice. The size of the managers' teams varied a lot which could explain the different experiences. Secondly, due to the interviews being conducted through video calls there were technical issues from time to time, which could affect the natural conversation. In digital interviews it is not as easy to create an intimate environment as eye contact, body language and reactions go missing. However, we experienced that we were still able to have honest and open dialogs.

We noticed that we were influenced by previous interviews but tried not to let it affect the outcome and instead deepen the understanding, which can be argued to be in accordance with our abductive approach. The length of the interviews can be discussed as being on the short side in order to reach the participants' identity. The aim of the study was to through the usage of identity understand the managers practice and performance of leadership, hence the full conceptualisation of the self-concept was not necessary. Instead, it is seen as a tool in our interpretation to understand their experiences.

The concepts, role, identity but also leadership and management are concepts that are in some sense rather similar. We strived to be clear and separate the concepts, but since they are closely related and differ in conceptualisations it can give rise to a degree of questioning. However, it confirms the ambiguousness and difficulty to relate to the concepts in the practice of management.

Due to the managers being part of different organisations, their work-tasks differ as well as their official roles which might also influence their perceived expectations. The organisational prerequisites were not fully captured in this study, which arguably would affect the perceived understanding of the practice since it is closely tied to the working context. However, we viewed it as of value to study the phenomenon of distance leadership and the managerial practice in a broader sense.

Implications for further research

Leadership is a popular subject and due to its ambiguousness constantly researched. We saw a general will among the participants to talk about their experiences in this situation. Our study investigated the perspective of first line managers, however it could be of value to

see how managers from different levels experienced the change in context and practice.

This study was conducted in a Swedish context. Sweden is one of the countries that have had the least strict recommendations concerning the Covid-19 virus. It would therefore be of interest to explore the experience from managers with other restrictions.

The qualitative method, explorative approach constituted us to find a large range of results that could be researched more concentratedly. A discussion around if the level of identification with the leader role occurred, and if it can implicate how you deal with the distance and the experience of it. The new situation has exposed a level of uncertainty within the managers, a stress over using new digital tools and frustration of the unknown. To follow up on this result it can be seen as valuable to further study the wellbeing of the managers in this current situation.

This study aimed to review managers' perceived experience, which resulted in us not doing a case study. However, several interesting aspects related to organisational conditions emerged, for example the organisational culture, the view of leadership and structure. This study only touched upon some organisational prerequisites, we distinguish a need to develop it further.

We see that the discourse frames the prerequisites and experience, and thus is important to consider in the approaching leadership research.

Conclusion

Using role, identity and the contemporary discourse this thesis can conclude that the rapid changes the pandemic has evoked an uncertainty for managers in how to handle their new practice in the pandemic context, which also influences their perceived leadership. In order to make sense of the new pandemic practice this study presents that they turn to their own previous experiences and needs as ordinary people based on the 'normal' working life. This alongside the strive to live up to the same expectations as in a normal setting creates new role expectations to handle. Within the managerial role the managers are expected and expecting to perform leadership, trying to attain a modern leadership. This leadership is however, to many of the managers, no longer possible to exercise due to the loss of 'something' since the attributes and qualities they rely upon in their leadership have gone missing in the digital context and changes in social interaction. This has created a discrepancy between the managers' wanted leadership and the leadership that actually is possible to exercise, resulting in an ambivalence and contradictory actions. By implementing more interaction the managers try to handle the practice and make the ambiguous leadership visible and comprehensible, but it results in a misdirected subtle control.

The distance has enforced a confusion in how to handle the practice and in the question “What should I do?”. This confusion of what the right behaviour is in the context consequently affects the managers leader identity, where they perform identity work in order to handle the struggle of “Who am I” within the new practice. The identity work this implies displays differently, some striving to maintain leader identity as before the pandemic by strengthening attributes they ascribe important to their self-concept. Others revise and form a leader identity adapted to the new context, accepting that the situation requires more management. Thus, to make sense and handle the new practice some try to revise the new practice to their leader identity, and others try to revise their identity to the new practice.

Through previous research, the managers’ role in a normal context is marked by contradictions, trying to adapt to the discourse and the expectations from the surroundings. Thus, adding the dimensions of distance creates more challenges for the managers to make sense of when handling their practice. Through this study it can be concluded that the managers perceived that performing leadership is hard and performing leadership from a distance is even harder, where management seemed more easy.

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