



SCHOOL OF
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MANAGEMENT

What Makes a Conversation Difficult?

*Investigating the Role of Content and Interpersonal
Relationships in Managerial Conversations*

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Abstract

Dealing with difficult conversations is recognised as being one of the most challenging aspects of the managerial role. Scholarly research within this field is primarily normative in its nature where difficult conversations are still poorly understood from managers' point of view. This thesis aimed to explore and analyse how middle managers perceive difficult one-on-one conversations in terms of their content and the interpersonal relationship between them and their employees. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Swedish middle managers who come from various backgrounds and represent a variety of job roles, sectors, industries, genders and work experiences. Thematic analysis was utilised to investigate recurring themes in their answers.

The results indicate that it is not only the content and the interpersonal relationships that can make a conversation be viewed as difficult but also various other factors along with the interplay between them. In regards to the content of the conversations, it was found that content is not the most influential factor regarding how managers perceive difficult conversations. In essence, it is other factors involved with the content that decide how challenging people regard it. In addition, the study found that interpersonal relationships play a bigger role than the content. The managers expressed that having a balance between formal and close relationships is the most preferable when engaging in challenging conversations with an employee. Lastly, it needs to be acknowledged that difficult conversations are a complex phenomenon and how one perceives them is highly subjective.

Keywords: difficult conversations, management, content, interpersonal relationships, middle managers

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1. Introduction

In this chapter, we will begin by (1) introducing the background of the study's research topic, followed by (2) addressing the existing research gap in the literature. Subsequently, we elaborate on (3) the problem area and the aimed thesis contribution as well as on (4) the research purpose and the research question of the thesis. Lastly, we outline (5) the demarcations of the paper and (6) the chapters in this thesis.

1.1. Background

Dealing with difficult conversations and conflicts is one of the most common and challenging aspects of the managerial role (Ferguson, 2015; Manzoni, 2002). In fact, it has been shown that 32% of employees are involved in conflicts on a daily basis (Psychometrics Canada Ltd, 2015) and that around 2.8 hours per week are spent managing them in the workplace (CPP Inc, 2008). As it has been stated by Farrell (2015), organisations by their very essence arouse conflict where people need to mediate differences, performance, and personal behaviours. Thus, successful managers realise that challenging conversations are imperative in managing organisations and happen regularly (Bradley & Campbell, 2016; Farrell 2015).

In a managerial context, difficult conversations often occur when managers interact with their colleagues. One typical constellation of these conversations encompasses discussions taking place between the manager and the subordinate (Bradley & Campbell, 2016). Such conversations can be defined by their challenging nature, either due to the topic of the discussion itself, the other individual involved, the emotions present, or the characteristics of the situation (Turaga, 2015). For instance, the discussions could range from addressing poor performance, tackling inappropriate behaviour to handling sensitive personal issues. Delivering such negative feedback can be very unpleasant and evoke a variety of feelings, it can potentially make people feel uncomfortable, or detrimentally affect relationships and productivity every day (Manzoni, 2002). Furthermore, conversations like these can often entail defensiveness, friction, and defiance (Bradley & Campbell, 2016).

Therefore, a common problem is that managers are avoiding or delaying difficult conversations. They refuse to acknowledge the arising problems in the organisation and are failing to address these discussions until it becomes too late, making it even harder to tackle them (Turaga, 2015). However, it is only human to avoid these types of unpleasant conversations as emotions can run high – it is no wonder that this is a common occurrence (Farrell, 2015). As one study has shown, managers often feel uncomfortable when communicating with their subordinates (Solomon, 2016). A survey that was conducted by Harris Poll/Interact revealed that 69% of the managers feel uneasy and discomforted when conversing with their employees (Solomon, 2016). Furthermore, over 35% of the managers confessed to being uncomfortable when delivering direct feedback that concerned the subordinates' performance if they believed that the subordinate might react negatively. Moreover, the study also found that managers struggle with face-to-face conversations and overall addressing difficult conversations (Solomon, 2016). Hence, managers, in general, need to be better at immediately taking action and dealing with difficult conversations.

Even though almost all of us have negative associations toward difficult conversations, we often forget the positive effects they can have at the workplace (Farrell, 2015). For instance, it could encourage dialogue and discussions between the various levels of the organisation. Additionally, they offer an opportunity to openly speak about a problem or situation, enhancing the bond between the employee and manager. Furthermore, they could strengthen collaboration by offering a chance to come up with solutions together. Lastly, challenging conversations provide an opportunity to discuss organisational values and to align employees around expectations that are explicit and clear. Thus, dealing with difficult conversations has numerous positive outcomes such as boosting morale, fostering collaboration and a positive work environment (Farrell, 2015).

1.2. Research Gap

Difficult workplace conversations is a well-researched topic that embeds various fields such as conflict management, communication strategy, human interaction and emotional intelligence (Katz & Flynn, 2013; Kieron, 2005; Primer, 2008; Goleman, 2011). Notably, the healthcare field stands out on the theme of difficult conversations where a great number of articles have discussed how hospital staff, especially nurses, communicate in their daily work and address

difficult conversations both towards their patients and colleagues (Overton & Lowry, 2013; Clark, 2015; Bradley & Campbell 2016; Warnock, Tod, Foster & Soreny, 2010; Lamiani, Barello, Browing, Vegni & Meyer, 2012). Thus, there is only a limited amount of peer-reviewed studies that have investigated the phenomenon in other workplace settings than hospitals (Kippist & Duarte, 2015). Furthermore, research within this category primarily consists of self-help books where providing strategies and recommendations to managers on how to deal with difficult conversations has attracted the most attention (Stone, Patton & Heen, 2010; Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2012; Vijaybaskar, 2019; Cloud & Townsend, 2015; Kofman, 2014). Nevertheless, there seems to be an opportunity for further research within this sphere.

Among the published articles about difficult workplace conversations several investigated difficult conversation topics from a normative angle (Beezhold, Bendi & Pinto da Costa, 2016; Kofman, 2014; Stone, Patton & Heen, 2010; Manzoni, 2002) and only a few examined it through the conduction of surveys (Learning Consultancy Partnership, 2012 cited in Turaga, 2015; Jones, 2016). Therefore, there appears to be a lack of research that has examined managers' perception and thoughts of difficult conversation topics more in-depth and that have used interviews as a research method. Furthermore, several studies have examined the managers' relationships with their subordinates (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Bryman, Collinson, Grint, Jackson & Uhl-Bien, 2011; Morrison & Nolan, 2007; Sias, 2005; Tallodi, 2019) but none of them has investigated how these relationships can impact the managers' perceptions of difficult conversations. Thus, we believe that the existing dominant normative literature could be supported with more scientific evidence and empirical data from managers' own experiences.

1.3. Problem Area and Aimed Thesis Contribution

As several researchers have highlighted, the avoidance of difficult workplace conversations is problematic in numerous aspects. For instance, delaying difficult conversations could create several negative outcomes in the organisation such as decreased productivity, dysfunctional teamwork, increased employee turnover, and damaged workplace relationships (Garfinkle, 2017; Overton & Lowry, 2013). Therefore, dealing with challenging discussions is crucial for successful managers and is needed to manage organisations efficiently (Bradley & Campbell, 2016; Farrell 2015).

This study aims to contribute to the existing area of difficult conversations by addressing both the content and the interpersonal aspects of challenging conversations as well as the interconnection between them. In this thesis, interpersonal relationship refers to the closeness and interaction between the manager and the employee in the workplace. Furthermore, when mentioning content, we refer to the subject of a discussion.

We believe that by raising awareness of these factors and their interconnection, which, in general, have not been covered, managers can be better equipped to deal with challenging conversations as they would have an improved overall understanding of them. Moreover, we hope that this increased awareness would encourage managers to handle difficult discussions more willingly and easily. Lastly, this thesis would like to contribute to future research about difficult managerial conversations by providing research data that could be seen as a starting point for forthcoming studies.

1.4. Research Purpose and Research Question

Overall, our aim and purpose with this research are to explore and analyse how middle managers perceive difficult one-on-one conversations in terms of their content and the interpersonal relationship between them and their employees. In particular, when it comes to the content, we are interested in discovering the range of difficult topics middle managers have addressed and we aim to explore which of these are especially difficult from their point of view. In regards to interpersonal relationships, we want to investigate how managers' different types of relationships with employees could have an impact on the difficulty of the conversation. More specifically, we are interested in exploring middle managers' opinions about what specific type of relationship with an employee can make a difficult conversation easier to have. Therefore, our key research question included is:

- *How do middle managers perceive difficult conversations based on their content and interpersonal aspects?*

1.5. Demarcations

This thesis focuses on difficult conversations in a managerial context. Difficult conversations can take place in various kinds of forms and situations. For example, they can be non-verbal, verbal, written, informal, and formal (Wilkomm, 2018). However, in this thesis, we will only investigate verbal, one-to-one communication between managers and their employees. Therefore, other types of communication will not be mentioned in this research. The reason for not including all the different conversation types is mainly due to the fact that we wanted a specific and clear focus in the thesis where only a limited number of aspects were investigated.

Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that there is a range of managerial levels and roles in organisations. Despite this, the sample is narrowed down to middle managers. By targeting middle managers, we hope to increase the chances of gaining unique perspectives on challenging conversations as they hold a special bridging position within organisations. Generally, they are seen as the ‘implementers’ in the organisation who carry out the agenda made by the top management and are responsible for the targets set by the top management, making them especially exposed to difficult conversations (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014). Thus, this study is not going to explore managers on other levels (e.g. frontline managers, top managers) and their perceptions and experiences regarding difficult conversations.

This study concentrates on managerial discussions between middle managers and the closest employees working under them which could encompass both supervisors and a group of frontline workers. A wider focus was chosen due to the fact that middle managers usually are not only responsible for the supervisors, but for the workers below them as well. Therefore, conversations taking place between the middle managers and their own managers (top managers) will be excluded.

Lastly, this research is exploring how middle managers perceive difficult conversations in Sweden. Hence, this thesis will not examine how middle managers discern challenging conversations in other countries. This decision was made based on the fact that we had limited time and resources, therefore, we acquired participants in the most convenient way, by utilising our network which mainly consists of Swedish managers. Another theoretical implication related

to this study is that we will not investigate international and cross-cultural issues linked to difficult conversations due to the fact that the research is conducted in Sweden with Swedish participants.

1.6. Thesis Outline

This research paper is divided into six chapters. The introductory chapter is followed by Chapter 2, the Literature Review, where recent research and key concepts relevant to the study such as middle managers, difficult conversations, the content of the conversation, and interpersonal relationships are addressed. Chapter 3 introduces the Methodology of the thesis where the research design, data collection method, data analysis method and research quality are described in detail. In Chapter 4, the empirical data collected from the interviews are presented. Chapter 5 includes the discussion and analysis of the empirical findings. Lastly, in Chapter 6, the study's conclusions, practical implications and limitations are addressed alongside recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

In this chapter, we will continue by (1) illustrating what characterises the role of middle managers who are in the focus in this study, (2) introducing the field of difficult conversations, (3) presenting research and theories regarding the content of a conversation and lastly (4) detailing studies and models concerning interpersonal relationships.

2.1. Middle Managers

Literature has made several attempts in trying to define the job title ‘middle manager’. However, it is surprising that there is no explicit, general definition. A few existing definitions in the literature of a middle manager are; a person who is responsible and in charge of a department or a unit, but who is not in the command of the whole organisation (Cambridge University Press, 2021), a job role that connects the top and bottom levels in the organisational hierarchy (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014) or a unique position that is stationed between the top management and the frontline managers and workforce (Williams, 2019). A reason why the definitions to some degree vary could be due to the fact that the middle manager role often could intertwine with other levels of management. For instance, a number of middle managers may have wider responsibility areas and duties that overlap with those of the senior management. Thus, in some cases, the lines could be blurred where there is no clear and exact classification of where they belong in ‘the middle’ (Williams, 2019). For example, in organisations with flat organisational structures, they could be found on one level whereas in organisations with vertical organisational structures they could be found on more than one level (*see Figure 1 and 2*).

Another matter worth mentioning is that there is no person who explicitly has the job title ‘middle manager’. To label someone in this way is thus somewhat narrow-minded since a job role often involves more complexity than that (Osterman, 2008). However, ‘project manager’ is probably the most known job title belonging to the field of middle management (Cambridge University Dictionary, 2021). Moreover, there are some frequently mentioned descriptions of what characterises the middle managerial role. First of all, they are often described as managers who need to possess human skills since communication and interaction with people on various levels are part of their daily realities (Mintzberg, 2011). Furthermore, middle managers are

commonly distinguished as the ones who are the ‘implementers’ in the organisation as they execute the strategic decisions taken by the top management and accordingly ensure that the frontline workers fulfil their roles (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014). Although they do not have a voice in the organisation’s course, they do take several important decisions that are affecting the organisation (Osterman, 2008).

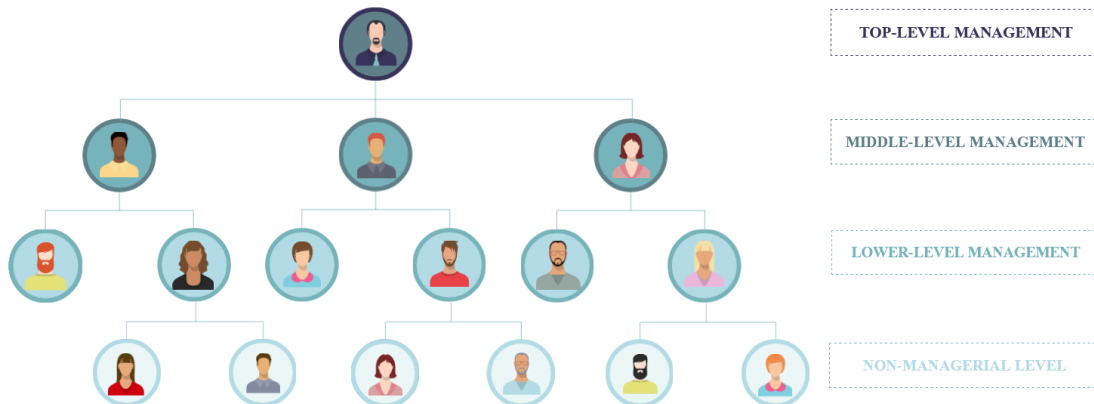


Figure 1: 3-Management Levels in an Organisation (adapted from iEduNote 2021)

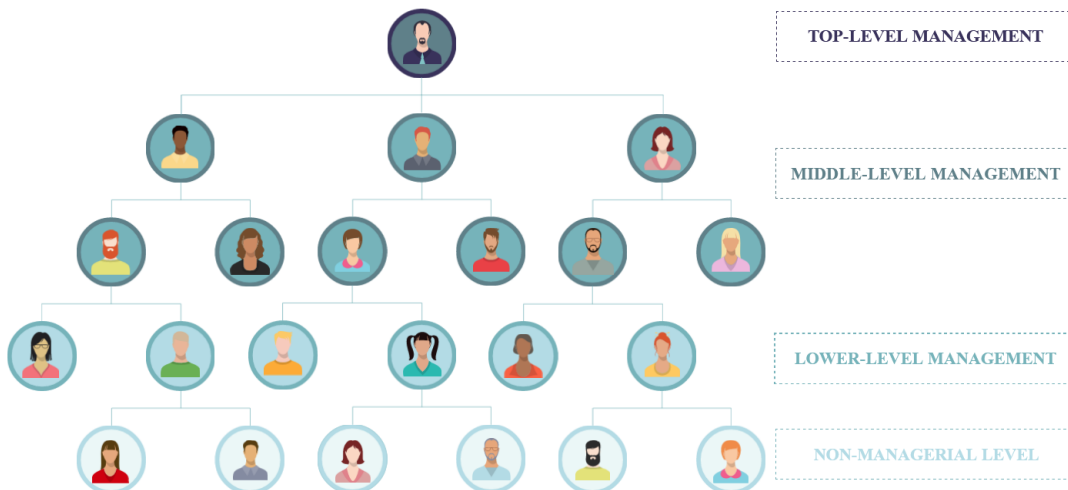


Figure 2: 4-Management Levels in an Organisation (adapted from iEduNote 2021)

2.2. Difficult Conversations

Difficult conversations at the workplace have been defined by various scholars over the years. While each of these definitions are unique in some aspects, they have an underlying theme that is

common to all of them – the emotions and feelings characterised by disharmony and unpleasantness in these conversations. In essence, difficult conversations are often described in terms of conversations that can evoke discomfort or anxiety (Patterson et al., 2012), where emotions and information need to be managed in a sensitive manner (ACAS, 2014) and are hard to talk about (Farrell, 2015). Feelings such as anger, pain, frustration and anxiety are common to have from both parties, where they may feel that their self-worth and acceptance is at risk (Turaga, 2015). In addition to the emotions involved, difficult conversations could also be rooted in the content of the conversation, the other present individual or a specific situation (Turaga, 2015). Thus, we need to acknowledge that there are numerous factors involved and it is the dynamic structure of them that can make a conversation either easy to approach or demanding.

2.2.1. Why Conflicts Could Emerge

Several authors have examined the underlying reasons why conflicts could emerge between people which could be applied to difficult conversations as well. In essence, a conflict can precede, happen during or can be the result of a difficult conversation. For example, one underlying factor for conflicts and difficult conversations that could be found in the literature is differing perceptions. A great extent of difficult conversations that occur at the workplace could often be related to the situation where two differing worldviews are clashing (Stone, Patton & Heen, 2010). Essentially, it could be that the persons involved do not have the same perception of the same event or matter. Moreover, why people have different perceptions could be due to (1) they have contrary information about the same event or problem, (2) they have various interpretations of the same incident or issue. Thus, their interpretations can come from divergent life experiences that have moulded their view of how they look at people and workplace problems (Stone, Patton & Heen, 2010). Similarly to Stone, Patton and Heen (2010), Rabinowitz (2002) emphasises that a difficult conversation could be a result of an unintended deficiency in communication and reasoning. For instance, it could involve: not having enough information at the right time, a misunderstanding about what a person has said, relying on past experiences, different ways of thinking and lastly, personality types that clash. Another factor mentioned by Turaga (2015) is when a lack of honesty exists between the individuals, namely when the parties hide their real inner voices and merely discuss with their superficial ones. However, after a

period of time, they can not hide their inner voices anymore in their conversations and all of a sudden they will end up in a difficult discussion with conflicting arguments.

2.2.2. Influencing Factors Related to Difficult Conversations

Existing literature has examined various themes and factors that could make a one-on-one conversation be viewed as difficult. A recurring theme that could be found in the literature is the importance of **preparation** when having a difficult conversation. For instance, Farrell (2015) argues that a manager should determine the aim of the conversation and prepare for how the employee would react, to make the conversation easier to deal with. Moreover, there is advice ranging from having simple and clear statements in mind, writing down your main points to carefully selecting the time and place (Leebov, 2010; Knight, 2015; Clark, 2015). Numerous studies also highlight the importance of **training and practice** in the successful handling of difficult conversations (Overton & Lowry, 2013; CMI, 2015). It has been advocated that managers should receive assistance and coaching in dealing with these types of conversations to build their confidence and to gain more knowledge within this specific area (CMI, 2015; Farrell, 2015). To practice in the form of case studies and role-playing have also been found as two beneficial practising methods (Polito, 2015; Farrell, 2015).

Managing **emotions** is another topic that is frequently discussed in the normative literature. A conversation could be perceived as difficult due to the various emotions managers have to deal with, where they at the same time must stay professional and polite (Farrell, 2015). Moreover, as managers, they both need to be in control of their own emotions (ACAS, 2014) and those of the employees' (Beezhold, Bendi & Pinto da Costa, 2016). As an illustration, a manager needs to be mentally prepared to handle negative emotions and act in the situation if, for instance, an employee storms out of the room (Doherty, 2018). Another perspective that could have an impact on how a manager perceives a difficult conversation, is **the mindset** of the manager. Several researchers stress the importance of having the 'right mindset' when engaging in challenging conversations (Knight, 2015; Stone, Patton & Heen, 2010; Ury, 1993; Manzoni, 2002). By framing the situation in a more broad, positive and less binary way (e.g. win-or-lose way), managers can ensure that the discussions will take a more productive turn and beneficial outcome for all parties (Manzoni, 2002). Keeping an open mind and exploring the manager's and

the employee's perception of the situation and how all sides' perspectives differ have also been highlighted by Stone, Patton and Heen (2010) and Ury (1993).

Another theme that also takes a notable place in the normative literature as a factor that is vital for the proper management of difficult conversations is **empathy**. For instance, Knight (2015) and Leebov (2010) argue that managers should approach sensitive subjects in an empathic and compassionate manner. Showcasing empathy should not be underestimated since it could have a positive impact on the other person's well-being and reduce the likelihood that a conflict may occur as a consequence of the discussion (Jorfi, Jorfi, Yaccob & Shah, 2011). The demonstration of caring about the subordinate's feelings, active listening and the use of non-judgmental language has also been mentioned by multiple authors as crucial skills (Knight, 2015; Doherty, 2018; Leebov, 2010). Additionally, several authors have addressed the relevance of using confident **body language** when handling difficult conversations. Managers should, for example, sit straight and look in the individual's eyes and use encouraging and open gestures to signal that they are paying attention to what the person is saying and that they are actively engaged in the conversation (Polito, 2015; Doherty, 2018).

2.3. The Content of the Conversation

A common recurring theme in the field of managerial and difficult conversations is the content in these conversations. In other words, what these conversations are about. For instance, authors have addressed various kinds of conflicts, explored different kinds of conversations and challenging topics to discuss (Beezhold, Bendi & Pinto da Costa, 2016; Kofman, 2014; Stone, Patton & Heen, 2010; Tallodi, 2019). Most of the existing literature that has been dividing conversations into these various types has thus both similarities and differences.

2.3.1. Different Categorisations of Conversations

In the literature, numerous models are presented that examine the types of conversations that could occur between people. In the following section, five different models will be addressed and compared. One model developed by Beezhold, Bendi and Pinto da Costa (2016) proposes to categorise conversations into four different dimensions based on their content – the *personal*, the *value*, the *instrumental*, and the *interest*. The personal aspect involves emotions and feelings

regarding the employee's identity while the value element addresses the personal and cultural principles and beliefs that can be in conflict with those in the workplace. Moreover, the instrumental dimension is occurring when a disagreement arises regarding organisational processes and structures. Lastly, the interest is concerning limited resources and the fight for them, for example, funding.

Another scholar who has looked into different types of conversations is Kofman (2014). He presents three types of conversations that could make us feel threatened and generate conflict. One category of conversation Kofman (2014) proposes is similar to Beezhold, Bendi and Pinto da Costa's (2016) personal aspect but he labels it as the *self*. The self relates to the personal dimension of a conversation where a person's identity and self-regard is at the centre of interest. It involves questions about the employee's self-image, feelings and the consequences of their actions. Further, he mentions the *task* conversation and the *relationship* conversation. The task relates to the impersonal dimension of a discussion where the attention is on a specific problem. It addresses questions like what is happening, why something occurred, and who made mistakes and who did not. Lastly, Kofman (2014) relates the relationship to the interpersonal dimension of a conversation where the focus is on the sentimental connection between the manager and the subordinate. It centres around issues such as how the participants of the discussion feel towards each other, how they perceive their emotional bond, and if they are collaborating efficiently and respecting each other.

In like manner, Stone, Patton and Heen (2010) have identified three distinct conversations that could be challenging, where every one of them has its own obstacles and difficulties. The first one is the *What Happened?* conversation which is practically the same as Kofman's (2014) task conversation since it also addresses, just as the name implies – what occurred or what should occur in the future. The second one is the *identity* conversation that concerns the individual's self-worth and standing up for one's self. For instance, the negotiation about salary is not about the monetary value, rather, it is related to the individual's dignity and self-respect. The third conversation is the *feelings* conversation and it occurs when there is a situation with a lot of emotions and tension in the air but the parties have a hard time sharing them with one another.

Correspondingly, Tallodi (2019) discusses three themes that could potentially cause conflict between two individuals – the *relationship conflict*, the *task conflict*, and the *process conflict*. Although Kofman (2014) also has a category named relationship, Tallodi (2019) has another viewpoint of the concept. She defines the relationship conflict as an interpersonal disagreement between people where for instance, values and personal preferences are clashing. The task conflict also differs from the other researchers' descriptions, since Tallodi focuses more on the differing perspectives in terms of the aim and purpose of work. Moreover, her classification of process conflict could be linked to Kofman's (2014) task conversation and Stone, Patton and Heen's (2010) What happened? conversation. Similarly to the other two authors, Tallodi (2019) addresses the process conflict as a conflict about how labour should be done.

2.3.2. Prominent Themes in Difficult Conversations

In parallel with exploring challenging one-on-one conversations and the content surrounding them more broadly, authors have also delved into more specific and sensitive themes that constitute them. Notably, two recent studies are worth mentioning. One study conducted by Learning Consultancy Partnership (2012 cited in Turaga, 2015) has examined what types of conversations UK managers most fear. On top of the list, we can unexpectedly observe that the majority of the managers felt that it is difficult to deliver any form of feedback to an employee. Moreover, 23% of the managers said that they had difficulties in handling issues connected to a subordinate's behaviour. Other results show that 20% of the managers had problems addressing a subordinate's performance and an additional 20% did not feel comfortable discussing personal hygiene. A similar survey by Fractl (cited in Jones, 2016) investigated how 1.100 individuals perceived challenging conversations at their workplace. However, it should be emphasised that this survey not only covered managers' but also their subordinates' and their clients' opinions about difficult workplace conversations. In this study, three conversations, in particular, stood out – negotiating wages, tackling a difficult personality and an individual's lack of accountability.

In addition to the topics mentioned in the previous section, authors have addressed conversation topics such as private and health concerns (Gallo, 2021; O'Hara, 2018; Waller, 2019), firing and letting someone go from a position (Shepherd, 2012; Turner, 2004; Benedetti, 2006; Karl & Hancock 1999) and employees who are in conflict with each other (CMI, 2015; SHRM, 2020;

Jehn, 1995). Thus, personal concerns can be closely related to health, since they could cover a range of areas such as when employees have a sick family member, have financial troubles or are close to burnout.

2.4. Interpersonal Relationship

2.4.1. Introducing Interpersonal Relationships

The term ‘relationship’ has a multitude of meanings attached to it by different scholars, but no one, agreed upon, concrete definition (Tallodi, 2019). However, most academics assent that interpersonal relationships, in essence, are characterised by the interactions transpiring between the members of a relationship (Berscheid, 1999; Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987; Tallodi, 2019). Miell and Dallos (1996: p. 3.) define relationship as ‘*diverse complex and intricate webs of interactions*’.

Furthermore, relationships are a vital part of our existence – it is not surprising that it is a field that is well explored (Berscheid 1999; Dutton & Ragins, 2007). Relationship research attempts to discern what aspects affect the interactions of individuals, or how one person’s acting and behaviour influence the other’s actions and attitude (Berscheid 1999; Ferris, Liden, Munyon, Summers, Basik & Buckley, 2009). Moreover, historically speaking, relationships studies have mostly focused on evolutionary psychology and attachment theory. Within these spheres, affiliation (Hill, 1987) and the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) have been two areas of interest. Furthermore, out of the various types of relationships, family and romantic relationships have received the most scrutiny and recognition from researchers (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). However, relationships in organisational life have not gathered much attention despite the fact that most of our days are spent at the workplace interacting with other people. Thus, these interactions are highly influential over our well-being and quality of life (Dutton & Ragins, 2007).

2.4.2. The Significance of Interpersonal Relationships

As mentioned before, interpersonal relationships are woven into the fabric of our lives – all of our existence is framed within a social context (Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Jackson-Dwyer, 2014). As evolutionary psychologists argue humans are social animals, our behaviour is driven by biological mechanisms that prompt us to form connections with others (Berscheid & Regan,

2005; Jackson-Dwyer, 2014). All of us feel a need to belong, we are intrinsically motivated to forge and sustain strong positive interpersonal relationships, to seek company, and to affiliate with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hill, 1987; Jackson-Dwyer, 2014).

In an organisational context, interpersonal relationships are especially important as they have a considerable impact on companies – on a personal and organisational level as well (Tallodi, 2019). Positive organisational relationships promote and facilitate an amiable, friendly working environment as well as well-being among employees which in turn can result in beneficial effects, such as increased performance (Hoffman & Ash, 2010; Losada & Heaphy, 2004; Tallodi, 2019). On the other hand, negative interpersonal relationships in an organisation can provide a strong source of pressure. They can manifest in various forms such as feeling unaccepted, underappreciated and unrewarded by colleagues (Siegrist, Strake, Chandola, Godin, Marmot, Niedhammer & Peter, 2004), interpersonal discordance between the employees (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson, 2005) and receiving inappropriate personal treatment (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001). Overall, they are generally considered to be the most potent cause of stress within a workplace setting (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler & Schilling, 1989; Dijkstra, Beersma & Cornelissen, 2012; Tallodi, 2019).

2.4.3. Interpersonal Relationship Types

As mentioned before, humans are fundamentally social creatures – in practically every society, the formation of relationships are paramount and intrinsic (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Thus, it is no wonder that there is an immense array of relationship types and classifications present in the real world and the literature (Jackson-Dwyer, 2014). For example, people can establish themselves into a variety of group formations, such as two-person groups (dyads), family and workgroups, and even bigger groups (Caporael, 1997; Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Furthermore, depending on the social context and the differing facets of the relationships, interpersonal relations can be categorised as either *social/impersonal* or *personal* (Radley, 1996: p. 26; Tallodi, 2019). Personal relationships encompass closer bonds, while social relationships refer to more impersonal connections with acquaintances and strangers. Furthermore, in personal relationships, the parties regard each other as unique individuals who do not simply fill a role or satisfy a particular need (Lafollette, 1996). Whereas, in impersonal relationships at least one of the parties

relate to the other merely because the other person occupies a role or fulfils a need. Moreover, who in particular fills in a role or meets the need does not matter for either party in an impersonal relation. However, according to Lafollette (1996), there is an overlap between these relationship types – most relationships are an amalgam of impersonal and personal features. Thus, they can be viewed as two ends of a continuum where impersonal relationships fall to the lower end and personal relations to the upper end of the continuum.

In organisations, a considerable part of interpersonal relationships lean towards the ‘social’ end of the continuum – they are usually formal and vertical (Harris & Hartman, 1992; Tallodi, 2019). They are characterised by supervisor-subordinate bonds where the supervisor has power over the subordinate. As a way of illustration, where they can provide instructions to the subordinates which the employees are supposed to follow. However, horizontal interactions between peers and colleagues are also present in formal organisational structures. Organisational peers can become more than co-workers, they can develop close friendships with each other (Morrison & Nolan, 2007). Particularly so, because business organisations provide a fertile ground for friendships as a multitude of *similar* people are placed in *close proximity* to each other which are the most pertinent factors of friendship development and interpersonal attraction. Therefore, it can be said that workplace friendships are not only probable but virtually inevitable. Hence, *blended relationships* are prevalent in organisations where the members of the relationship fulfil dual roles, for example, the functions of close friends and work associates as well (Morrison & Nolan, 2007).

Lastly, even though these friendships might be beneficial for the employees and the organisations likewise, they can cause various difficulties that stem from the contrary expectations of the dual role of close friends and work associates (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Morrison & Nolan, 2007). For instance, tension can arise from the conflicting expectations of *impartiality* and *favouritism*. On one hand, work associates are supposed to treat everyone equally without personal bias. On the other hand, friends are expected to support and treat each other specially. Thus, these opposing expectations can lead to conflict within each member of the relationship as well as between them. Other contradictory expectations that might cause tension are *closedness* and *openness*, *connection* and *autonomy*, and *judgement* and *acceptance*. Work associates are required to treat

information confidentially, work together with one another closely and intensely, and in certain cases provide critical commentary to each other. Meanwhile, friends are expected to be completely open and honest with one another, maintain a certain degree of autonomy to preserve the friendship, and be mutually accepting and understanding. Therefore, conflicts can manifest from these components as well (Bridge & Baxter, 1992).

2.4.4. Elements of Relationship Quality

Interpersonal relationships in a workplace context are unique with far-reaching implications for the people in those relationships and the organisations in which they form and take place as well (Sias, 2005). Workplace relations serve as decision-making, influencing, assisting and emotional support systems and as such, the quality of these affiliations has significant ramifications for both the employees and the companies (Sias, 2005). Therefore, it is important to identify which factors influence and determine the quality of a workplace relationship. In the following sections, some of these elements will be introduced.

Interactions encompass what is taking place between individuals, for instance, their actions, reactions, and dynamics (Miell & Dallos, 1996; Tallodi, 2019). Interactions are noticeable, complex and comprise various aspects – communication, behaviours and patterns of action. They should be understood as a series of actions between individuals who follow a pattern (Dalton, 1961; Kelley, 2000; Tallodi, 2019). When people interact, each individual's behaviour influences the other's consequent behaviour within an interaction. During these interactions, individuals react to momentary circumstances by responding behaviourally. The behavioural reactions given are determined by the person's present internal state, conceiving a 'behaviour space' which consists of one's social motives, beliefs, characteristics and emotions toward the relationship and the situation. Furthermore, when people interact multiple times over a period of time, each interaction affects the subsequent ones (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987; Reis, Collins & Berscheid, 2000; Tallodi, 2019). During this sequence of interactions, the individuals undertake 'imaginative work' – they expand on, attain knowledge of, and possibly alter their actions (Radley, 1996; Tallodi, 2019). Moreover, people can unconsciously accumulate positive experiences which they can consequently rely upon in any period of disagreement or conflict

(Tallodi, 2019). Thus, it is of high importance how individuals behave and act during interactions as they have an influence over the quality of relationships and any potential conflict.

Both verbal and non-verbal communication are a crucial part of interactions as well since they reflect how the parties view and make sense of the world and their relationships (Tallodi, 2019). For instance, in supervisor-subordinate relationships, how the instructions are created and communicated and how personal styles are manifested in interactions, influence the quality of the relationships, potentially causing supervisor-subordinate fit or misfit. According to Huston and Robins (1982), the quality and change of a relationship can be perceived from three interdependent factors – the subjective conditions, the subjective events, and the interpersonal events of the relationship. Subjective conditions refer to one party's comparatively consistent beliefs and attitudes towards the relationship and the other, which are more apt to stay stable when the parties are in a closer personal relationship. Subjective events refer to one member's momentary emotions and thoughts such as the frustration felt due to the impressions of the other's negative intentions. Lastly, interpersonal events refer to behaviours or their sequences (Tallodi, 2019).

In summary, the aspects influencing and determining the quality of a workplace relationship are patterns of action, behaviours, imaginative work, communication, and the relationship's parties' beliefs, attitudes towards each other and the relationship, including their momentary emotions and thoughts (Tallodi, 2019).

2.4.5. Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory is the most universally accepted theory concerning supervisor-subordinate relationship quality (Sias, 2005). The LMX Theory argues that supervisors develop a variety of relationships with their different subordinates and that these connections differ in relation to quality (Bryman et al., 2011; Sias, 2005). Generally, high(er)-quality LMX relationships (in-group relationships) are defined by higher levels of mutual trust, respect, responsibility, influence and negotiability among the relationship members. They exceed the contractual agreement between leader and member, they function more like a partnership. They involve tangible rewards, namely training opportunities, and intangible

benefits, such as the supervisor's respect and trust, which are not applicable to lower quality leader-member relationships (Bryman et al., 2011). Furthermore, high-quality LMX relationships are also characterised by greater levels of self-disclosure, openness, intimacy, willingness to share sensitive information, and depth and breadth in communication (Duchon, Green & Taber, 1986; Fairhurst, 1993; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989; Sias, 2005). On the other hand, lower quality supervisor-subordinate relationships (out-group relationships) are restricted by the clauses of the employment contract, they are more transactional in their nature (Bryman et al., 2011). They lack high levels of trust, intimacy and self-disclosure and the communication between low-quality LMX relationship partners involve less depth and breadth (Fairhurst, 1993; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989; Sias, 2005). For instance, interactions between leaders and members in low-quality relationships are comparatively limited and perfunctory. In addition, the communication between them is more likely to revolve around disciplinary statements, like criticism, and performance monitoring. As a consequence, the subordinates can become alienated from such interactions, resulting in the avoidance of their supervisors (Fairhurst, 1993; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989; Sias, 2005).

2.5. Conclusion Literature Review

This chapter started by introducing the study's people of interest – middle managers. Essentially, their role in organisations could be described as a bridging position between the top management and the frontline managers and workforce (Williams, 2019). They are characterised as the ones who execute strategic decisions taken by the top management and ensure that the frontline workers fulfil their roles (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014). However, there is no clear and exact classification of where they belong in 'the middle' (Williams, 2019).

Thereafter, we delved into the field of difficult conversations. To give an example, the reason why difficult conversations could occur between individuals could be due to several matters: people having differing perceptions of the same reality (Stone, Patton & Heen, 2010), miscommunication, different ways of thinking, clashing personality types (Rabinowitz, 2002) or the lack of being honest (Turaga, 2015). Moreover, there is a great number of factors that has been discussed in conjunction with difficult conversations where some of them are: preparation, training and practice, emotions, mindset, empathy and body language (Farrell, 2015; CMI, 2015;

Doherty, 2018; Stone, Patton & Heen, 2010; Leebov, 2010; Polito, 2015).

Moreover, another interest in this research concerns what kind of content could constitute a difficult conversation which has received much attention in the literature. Numerous authors have investigated different kinds of conversations that could occur between people. For instance, Beezhold, Bendi and Pinto da Costa (2016) propose to categorise conversations into four different dimensions based on their content: the *personal*, the *value*, the *instrumental* and the *interest*. There have also been studies investigating what conversation topics managers most fear where some general patterns were found to be: tackling a difficult personality, individuals lack of accountability, discussing wages and personal hygiene (Turaga, 2015; Jones, 2016).

Lastly, we discussed interpersonal relationships that are connected to this study's interest in how the relationship between the manager and employee could affect a conversation. First of all, it is important to acknowledge that every individual feels a need to belong where we are intrinsically motivated to seek company and to affiliate with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hill, 1987). Thus, it is not surprising that people often strive for strong, positive relationships with other individuals regardless of the environment. Moreover, relationships could also emerge in a workplace setting where they can manifest in the forms of social, personal and blended relationships (Morrison & Nolan, 2007). The quality of these relationships is determined by several factors including patterns of action, behaviours, imaginative work, communication, and the relationship parties' belief and attitudes towards each other (Tallodi, 2019).

3. Methodology

In this following chapter, we will provide a comprehensive overview of the study's methodology by introducing (1) the research design, (2) the data collection method, (3) the data analysis, and (4) the research quality more in-depth.

3.1. Research Approach

3.1.1. Qualitative Research Approach

In this thesis, a qualitative research approach was employed in order to gain in-depth, contextualised and descriptive answers to how middle managers perceive the difficulty of a conversation based on its content and interpersonal aspects (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Qualitative methods were found to be the most suitable for the research as they allowed the exploration of different meanings that participants assign to their lived experiences (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019). Furthermore, these methods enabled us to focus on formerly unexplored processes and subjects with an orientation towards human subjectivity and social context. Thus, they are particularly suitable for studying emergent fields or poorly known settings and providing richer data connected to a specific context (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019).

3.1.2. Research Design

The research process of this study began by choosing a main field of interest – difficult workplace situations. Literature was then explored to get a deeper understanding of the sphere and to narrow down to a specific focus of difficult conversations where the areas of topic and interpersonal relationships were found. From the literature review, a theoretical framework was built based on the relevant theories and models identified. Relating to the thesis' research aim, qualitative data collection was deemed to be the most suitable method where semi-structured interviews were chosen. The theoretical framework was further used to develop the interview questions. At the same time the interview guide was designed, the recruitment of interviewees (middle managers) was in process, to provide us valuable perceptions and experiences of difficult conversations. Moreover, when all the semi-structured interviews were done, thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data.

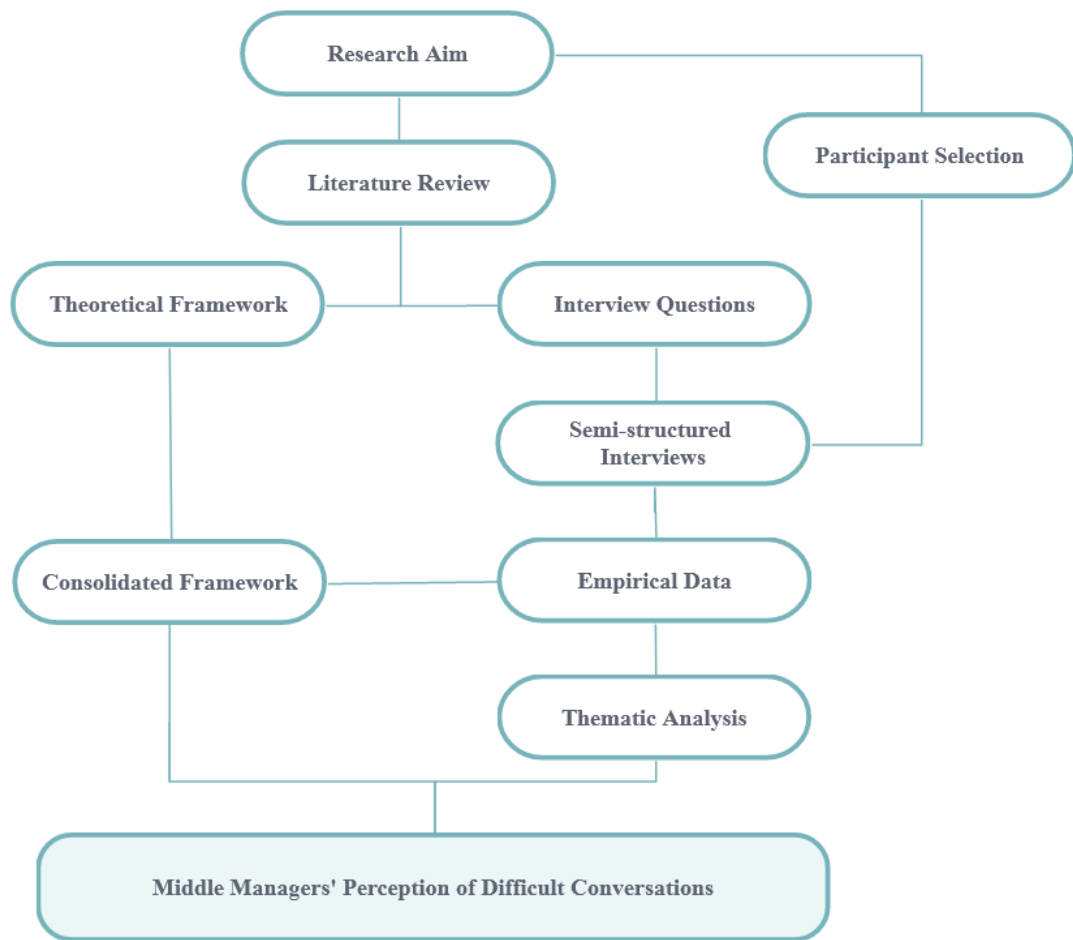


Figure 3: Research Design of the Study

3.1.3. Abductive Approach

To enhance our qualitative research further, an abductive approach was utilised which can be seen as a mix of deduction and induction. Taking an abductive approach allows researchers to use an innovative and selective process to investigate how the collected data support established hypotheses or theories (Kennedy, 2018). Furthermore, it enables researchers to examine how the collected data may require a change in current understanding. Thus, abduction calls for an iterative interaction between (1) data collection and analysis and (2) data and theory (Kennedy, 2018). For example, this study had deductive elements where the theoretical framework and interview guide were developed based on theories and previous studies found in existing literature (see Figure 3). Furthermore, the research also used inductive elements as the

theoretical framework was continuously examined and modified to resolve unanticipated or baffling data in parallel with assessing the relevancy of concepts related to the study. In other words, jumping back and forth between data and theories was needed. Furthermore, the continuous thematic analysis of data suggested probable hypotheses to consider further. Therefore, abduction was particularly suitable for research that aimed to reevaluate established theories and aspired to investigate familiar concepts from a new, unknown viewpoint.

3.2. Data Collection Method

3.2.1. Sampling

In this study, non-probability sampling techniques were applied which are described by Sekaran and Bougie (2016) as especially common when researchers are affected by restricting factors and when generalisability is not of the greatest interest. Thus, due to the limited amount of time and resources available, non-probability sampling methods were found to be the most suitable. Convenience and snowball sampling were further selected to ease the recruitment of participants (Lavrakas, 2008). Convenience sampling enabled the gathering of data from individuals who were adequate and available to contribute (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). To reach the most possible number of potential interviewees who would be available to participate in the shortest amount of time, we posted recruitment messages on our LinkedIn news feeds as well as in the LUSEM Alumni - Lund University School of Economics and Management LinkedIn group. Furthermore, we reached out to specific individuals that we have identified as potential sources of rich information through our personal contacts. Lastly, snowball sampling presented us with a chain where each participant was able to nominate another potential interview candidate for the study (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019).

3.2.2. Participant Selection

The participants of the study were chosen based on four main criteria. Firstly, they needed to be Swedish citizens and work in Sweden. Secondly, they needed to occupy a managerial position as a middle manager – they had to be situated between the top management and the frontline managers and workforce (Williams, 2019). Thirdly, they needed to have a full-time position as a middle manager and lastly, have a paid job.

In this research, the sample consisted of 10 middle managers who all fulfilled the criteria mentioned above. This sample size was found to be adequate since data saturation was reached. In essence, the information was repeated by the interviewees by the end and no new themes emerged from the data (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

The participants' managerial position, industry, job sector and years of managerial experience are found in the table below. Note that the interviewees' names are not presented with respect to their anonymity. As seen in the table, the interviewees came from a range of different industries and sectors with managerial experience ranging from 2 years up to 16 years. Additional information that is not mentioned in the table, is that six of the participants were female and four of them were male.

PARTICIPANT NO.	POSITION	INDUSTRY	SECTOR	MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCE
A1	Head of Digital & Business Development	Finance/Business	Private	5 years
A2	Value Stream Manager	Manufacturing	Private	16 years
A3	Unit Manager Personnel and Competence Supply	Healthcare	Public	6 years
A4	Debt Collection Manager	Finance	Private	3 years
A5	Care Unit Manager	Healthcare	Public	4 years
A6	Area Sales Manager/Regional Manager	Construction	Private	7 years
A7	Customer Experience Manager	Aviation	Private	2 years
A8	Business Area Manager	Business	Private	6 years

A9	HR Manager	Manufacturing	Private	7+ years
A10	Business Development Manager	Construction	Private	20 years

Table 1: Interview Participants

3.2.3. Semi-structured Interviews

As the primary data collection method semi-structured, in-depth interviewing was chosen as it enables interviewees to elaborate on topics that they deem important or fascinating and allows the researchers to regard the world from their subjects' point of view (Berg & Lune, 2014; Chambliss & Schutt, 2019). Furthermore, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews permits the researchers to draw comparisons between the interviews by asking an array of structured questions as well as seek areas of interest spontaneously introduced by interviewees (Berg & Lune, 2014). The interviews allowed us to gain a more textured understanding of the participants' emotions, attitudes, actions, experiences, and perceptions (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019).

A total of 10 interviews were conducted online, on video platforms including Teams and Zoom, to allow synchronous face-to-face conversations (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). All of them lasted for approximately an hour. Each interview was recorded with the interviewee's permission and later transcribed verbatim and anonymised. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in English by both of the researchers. Virtual interviews provided additional beneficial elements to the study as well. For instance, by conducting the interviews virtually a more diverse set of participants were able to be recruited, increasing the richness of information gathered (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018). Furthermore, online interviewing both granted more flexibility and saved more time and cost than traditional face-to-face interviewing would have done (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2019).

3.2.4. Interview Guide

During every interview, an interview guide was followed (*see Appendix 1*). The interview guide was designed by the researchers and was developed through the use of theories mentioned in Chapter 2. The interview guide consisted of five main sections and an introductory section where a few questions were asked about the participants' managerial background. The first main section consisted of some general questions about difficult conversations and the second section contained questions relating to the interviewees' relationships with the employees who are under them. The third section included questions regarding the various content that could be addressed in a conversation and the fourth had questions relating to the interconnection of content and interpersonal relationships. Lastly, some concluding questions were asked (*see Table 2*).

Furthermore, all the questions in the interview guide were formulated in an open-ended way to allow the participants to freely describe their own perceptions without trying to lead them into a specific given answer. During the interview period, between the sessions, some interview questions were slightly modified, mainly to clarify them further. In addition, as more participants were interviewed, the more patterns emerged in reference to the interviewees' perceptions of our research topic. Therefore, a few more questions were added throughout the interview process relating to these identified patterns.

SECTIONS IN THE INTERVIEW GUIDE	EXAMPLE QUESTION
General Questions	<i>What characterises a difficult workplace conversation in your point of view?</i>
Interpersonal Relationships	<i>Does your relationship with an employee influence the difficulty of a conversation in your opinion?</i>
Content	<i>Are there some topics that are especially difficult in your opinion between you as a manager and a subordinate?</i>
Interconnection of Interpersonal Relationships and Content	<i>What type(s) of relationship can make a difficult conversation topic even harder to discuss?</i>

Table 2: Interview Guide Structure

3.2.5. Literature Review

To guide and complement the primary research, data was collected from existing literature. Books, journals, articles, and websites about subjects such as difficult conversations, the content of conversations, interpersonal relationships and middle managers were perused to inform and strengthen the research paper. The literature was selected based on several criteria to adhere to the quality and scientific requirements of the research (Hox & Boeije, 2005). The criteria included were (1) close fit of collected data and research question, (2) peer-reviewed status, (3) publication in well-known journals, (4) recent year of publication, and (5) number of citations (Boslaugh, 2007; Hox & Boeije, 2005). Appropriate data which fulfilled the previously mentioned criteria were obtained through search engines such as Google Scholar and Lund University's library webpage (LubSearch).

3.3. Data Analysis Method

Thematic analysis was conducted to examine the qualitative data that was collected from the interviews. The use of thematic analysis was found suitable as it enabled a systematic and flexible approach to the analysis of the collected data (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010). It allowed (1) the coding and classification of the data presented in the interview transcripts, (2) the sorting of the identified initial codes into common themes, and (3) the interpretation of the emerging themes by seeking common points, overarching patterns, relationships, and theoretical constructs. Moreover, the utilisation of thematic analysis facilitated the abductive approach of the study. The analysis of the interview data happened iteratively – initial and emerging codes and themes were revisited, revised, refined and scrutinised throughout the research (Alvesson, 2011). It was a continuous process that happened alongside the interviews as well as after the completion of them.

Overall, the thematic analysis started with the familiarisation of the data which was achieved by taking notes during the interviews, transcribing the recordings verbatim and reading the finalised

transcripts individually (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Afterwards, the identification and generation of codes began which was eased by a list of anticipated themes that were gleaned from the literature (Given, 2008). In the following step, the categorisation and classification of codes into themes began which were reviewed and reconceptualised as the analysis progressed. Moreover, the relevance of the themes to the research question and the relationship among the categories were considered throughout the analysis (Given, 2008). Lastly, the data and the emergent themes were visualised and conclusions were drawn to answer the research question (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

3.4. Research Quality

3.4.1. Validity and Reliability

There are conflicting views about how to measure a study's research quality when using qualitative research methods. For instance, some researchers use terms such as reliability and validity whereas others use terms such as credibility and trustworthiness (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). In this thesis, the two criteria reliability and validity were chosen to evaluate the study's research quality and trustworthiness. The reason for choosing these terms is due to the fact that they are most commonly used in research.

In general, reliability refers to *'the extent to which an experiment, test or any measuring procedure yields the same results on repeated trials'* (Carmines & Zeller, 1979, p. 11). Moreover, validity concerns *'the extent to which any measuring instrument measures what is intended to measure'* (Carmines & Zeller, 1979, p. 17). With regards to this study, reliability and validity mainly refer to the overall authenticity and legitimacy in the interviews.

To ensure validity and reliability in the research, several strategies were utilised. Firstly, regarding the sample, continuously throughout the recruitment process of interviewees, we aimed to choose a broad spectrum of middle managers, representing different genders, sectors and years of managerial experience. Thus, by getting a variety of viewpoints on the topic, the study could be viewed as providing a more comprehensive picture of reality, enhancing the research validity (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Shenton, 2004). The choice to limit the sample to

Swedish citizens could also be seen as an advantage since factors that might influence the results, such as cross-cultural differences, were able to be excluded (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

In regards to the interviews, we strived for intersubjectivity where all the interview questions were formulated in an open-ended way to allow participants to freely describe their own perceptions. By doing this, we minimised the risk of bias and ensured a higher level of validity in the interviews (Cypress, 2017). The recording of the interviews also allowed us to enhance reliability and not fall into the trap of relying on imprecise memory (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Furthermore, intercoder reliability was also used where the data was analysed independently – we identified codes and patterns to subsequently compare our conclusions. This method can be seen as securing reliability in the thematic analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Shenton, 2004).

Using social networks such as LinkedIn and personal contacts to reach participants has its flaws, since we only covered a small scope of potential participants. However, it could be seen as a logical way of getting interviewees, especially when the research has time constraints and limited resources. Nevertheless, the study's non-probability sampling method has its limitations since it can not ensure that the sample is representative in relation to its actual population. In other words, we can not be certain that the sample of middle managers is equal to the total population of middle managers working in Sweden. Thus, a probability sampling method could be seen as more preferable in which the participants are chosen based on random selection (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019). Moreover, due to the thesis' fairly small sample size and non-probability sampling method, the degree of generalisability could thus be questioned (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019). However, Sekaran and Bougie (2016) argue that it is unusual and rare for a sample to be an exact replica of the population which could be viewed as lending support for this research.

One weakness with virtual interviews is that we were not able to exercise the same amount of control of the interview situation if we compare it with a real-life meeting, where the researcher and participant are present in the same room (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). As an illustration, we could not control where the interviewees chose to have the interview, which implied that we could not secure a quiet environment that allowed maximum concentration and was free from interruptions. Furthermore, technological issues such as unstable Internet connection and unsatisfactory audio quality could also be seen as some 'disturbing' factors we experienced.

Another disadvantage with virtual interviewing is that it could be more difficult to interpret the interviewees' body language and non-verbal cues, to observe if they are, for instance, confident, nervous, or insecure compared to in-real-life interviewing (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019). In summary, virtual interviewing did not enable us to exercise the high amount of control as we wished for, which could have affected the reliability and subsequently the validity of the research.

3.4.2. Ethical Considerations

In order to adhere to ethical standards, information sheets (*see Appendix 2*) and consent forms (*see Appendix 3*) were handed out to interested participants prior to the interviews. The information sheets contained details about the study, such as the topic and purpose of it, as well as information about what participation in it would involve. As an illustration, the participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded to ease transcription and that the audio recordings would be kept until the completion of the study. It was also highlighted that the transcripts and any resulting findings would be anonymised. The participants were required to sign the consent forms to indicate their willingness to participate in the study and to acknowledge that they have understood what their taking part in this research would entail. Moreover, at the beginning of each interview session, the participants were reminded again of the terms of their involvement. Additionally, as the research topic could be deemed as sensitive, countermeasures were taken to mitigate any potential problems that could arise from it. For instance, it was emphasised multiple times to the interviewees that answering to any question can be declined without any consequence.

4. Empirical Results

In this following chapter, the findings that emerged from the interviews will be presented. We will begin by discussing our results with regards to (1) the elements of difficult conversations, (2) the content of difficult conversations, (3) interpersonal relationships and lastly, we will introduce (4) the other influencing factors of difficult conversations.

4.1. The Elements of Difficult Conversations

To begin with, a few recurring themes were identified in relation to what the participants associated with difficult conversations. Some interviewees related difficult conversations to *‘addressing an issue or a problem’* while others referred to it more as a *‘conflict or disagreement’* between people. Furthermore, many of the participants were connecting difficult conversations to **emotional elements** such as being personal and sensitive. Particularly one matter stood out which was the managers’ uncomfortableness of addressing issues connected to the **employees’ private life**. Furthermore, they also discussed in broader terms that feelings are often involved in difficult conversations when they as managers do not know how the employee would react or perceive a message. For example, they can hurt someone's feelings or upset the person. They described their own feelings during these conversations in terms as not being comfortable, having anxiety, being frustrated and a few of them referred to *‘a rock in my stomach’*. Thus, based on their explanations, the sensitive aspect of difficult conversations could play a role both on the employee's side and the manager’s side. Another prominent theme among the participants was **preparation** where they described that they need to prepare to a larger extent when having these types of conversations. In reality, they do not happen spontaneously or naturally at their workplaces – instead, the majority of the interview participants usually prepare either by having a manuscript ready or by visualising different scenarios in their mind of how the other person might react.

When posed with the question of how often they have difficult conversations at their workplaces, nine out of ten interviewees stated that they do not happen very regularly. Their answers ranged from *‘a couple of times per year’*, *‘around every third month’* to *‘once a quarter’*. Moreover, some managers explained that the frequency of conversations could depend on the situation, for

example, if the company goes through an organisational change or is impacted negatively by the economy. It was not easy for them to assign a number to how frequently difficult conversations occur as a couple of them mentioned that they tend to crop up periodically:

'Maybe every third month, if I'm going to rule it for a whole year. Usually, they come, like I can have nice peace and quiet for half a year and then all come at once. Then it could come like every third month and everything is normal again. Normally it comes in cycles.'

- Participant 3

4.2. The Content of Difficult Conversations

4.2.1. The Range of Difficult Conversations

Throughout the research process, a definite and surprising pattern emerged about one of the primary interests of the study – the content of difficult conversations. Most of the topics deemed as difficult by the middle managers were recurrently mentioned throughout the interview sessions and could be grouped into two categories – task and person-oriented discussions. These frequently brought up topics included addressing work performance, skills, work-life balance issues, health and well-being, behaviour and personality, conflicts between colleagues, salary discussions, and laying off/firing employees. Moreover, the managers pinpointed that work performance issues are addressed on a more regular basis than other topics where, for example, it is common to have discussions with employees who are underperforming and not reaching a specific goal that has been set.

Despite the several common themes among what the managers identified as difficult conversation topics, how difficult they found them differed from person to person. In some cases, what one manager believed to be a challenging subject, another manager found comparatively easy. Furthermore, every manager recognised to some extent that what they labelled as a difficult conversation subject might be easier or harder depending on certain factors. Even more interestingly, when asked about what kind of challenging conversation topics have they encountered as managers, they oftentimes answered by describing factors or situations that make conversations difficult instead of stating a clear subject.

TASK-ORIENTED TOPICS	PERSONAL TOPICS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work performance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Not reaching KPIs/goals ○ Not developing skills ○ Lack of potential to advance in the company ○ Changing work responsibilities ● Layoff/Firing ● Salary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work-life balance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Health and well-being ○ Problems connected to private life ● Behaviour and personality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Misbehaving ○ Conflict between colleagues ○ Mentality and way of thinking

Table 3: Frequently Mentioned Difficult Conversation Topics

4.2.2. The Most Difficult Conversation Topics

Even though the managers mainly touched upon other factors closely related to content, three broad topics still stood out from the rest: **layoffs/firing, behavioural and personality issues, and work-life balance problems.**

'I think the hardest one is to say you have to let someone go, either it is because you don't have work for them any longer just that they have like temporary work form and you have to tell them that unfortunately I can not have you with me anymore (...).'

- Participant 3 (Layoffs/firing)

'Then I don't know there's no right or wrong, and when it comes to your personality, I mean let's we are like we are, I mean, but I don't think that's difficult but, it's more about behaviour of them that could be more important.'

- Participant 9 (Behaviour and personality issues)

'I think that when it kind of leaves the area of work and kind of tiptoes into more private areas... I think that is probably the most difficult.'

- Participant 2 (Work-life balance problems)

Most notably, the managers regarded problems surrounding an employee's health and well-being

as exceptionally difficult conversation subjects. Other topics that were highlighted as especially difficult were issues relating to drug and alcohol abuse, stealing, and harassment. However, all the managers stressed that these problems are exceedingly rare in a workplace setting. Thus, these topics were discussed in a more hypothetical sense where most of the managers have not had to engage in difficult conversations that had these issues at the core of their content.

Peculiarly, layoffs/firing, behavioural and personality issues and work-life balance problems were considered to lead to especially difficult conversations not only because of the subjects themselves but because of other various factors as well that go hand in hand with them. More specifically, we identified **empathy** and **the blurred lines between the private/personal life and the professional life** as closely related themes and factors. For example, multiple managers mentioned that they find firing or laying off someone remarkably tough due to the fact that they empathise with the employee, they acknowledge that it will affect the employee's life and family in significant ways which are often negative:

'When it comes to the point that now I have to let you go and we can't give you another chance is the toughest one because I have a lot of heart for all of my employees. I think of their kids, all the money they could lose and all of that stuff. I think more broadly than work-wise. (...) I think that it is difficult to let someone go because you can't know what is going to happen to them afterwards.' - Participant 3

Similarly, the managers explained that discussions addressing work-life balance issues are particularly challenging partly due to the empathy they have towards the employee and partly due to the blurred lines between private and professional. For instance, if the employee has ill-health or has some kind of trouble at home that results in decreased work performance. The managers expressed that these matters are hard to discuss because they understand the hardships the employee is going through. Furthermore, they shared that they feel like they breach the employee's private space which usually should be separate from the workspace, turning the conversations into very sensitive and personal dialogues where they have to be careful of what they say:

'There's kind of a thin line between what is job-related and what is private because of course, I shouldn't care about people's private life. But when the private life kind of affects the job life, then I need to take it up as a manager also.' - Participant 2

'I think it is difficult when I know when there is something outside of work that is causing the issue. Like, you have a problem at home that makes it difficult for you to perform at work because then I go from my work world into your personal world and that is difficult. (...) But it is a difficult conversation because I know that it is not easy for you. I think it is difficult then because I am your boss, not your psychologist.' - Participant 1

This is the case for conversations that involve discussions about behaviour and personality as well. The managers find them considerably difficult because they again enter into a grey zone where they have to distinguish what is personal or inherent to the employee and what is not. If the managers are unable to find the fine line between letting people be who they are and marking when they have actually passed the limit, the conversation can really easily get personal which, if not handled correctly, can quickly lead to conflicts. Furthermore, the willingness to change from the employee's side is almost non-existent in these cases – it is extraordinarily hard to modify a personality or a behaviour:

'A personality is something very fundamental. I mean the possibility to change it may be limited. It's also hard to do when it comes to personality issues to draw the line between what is a personal trait and what is something else.' - Participant 4

'Either severe correctional conversations where somebody actually does things that are not good. And not in the execution part, but perhaps if they have the wrong values, and they sort of act outside the corporate value system. That is tough because then you have to go into a discussion with somebody that has one set of core beliefs and you have to either adjust their beliefs or say that whatever you believe, this is not OK within our company, can you change?' - Participant 10

4.2.3. Mentality and Mindset

Lastly, another theme stood out from the rest in relation to the content of difficult conversations – the **mentality and mindset** of the employees which can have an influence over any conversation

topic. Several managers stated that an ordinary conversation could turn into a difficult one when they and the employee are *'not aligned'*, *'on the same page'*, *'have different views or values'*, or the employee *'is not committed to work'*. Thus, the interviewees reflected on the issue of differing mindsets from multiple perspectives. On one hand, they expressed that several topics, especially the subject of work performance, can become more difficult to discuss if the person has a differing view about the issue or an incorrect self-image:

'But discussions regarding you can improve this, I am not satisfied with this, how do we work together happens quite often. And that could be more or less difficult, depending on the employee: how open are you to feedback, do we have the same view on the reality, some employees are very easy since we maybe think the same. Sometimes we have different perspectives and then it is much more difficult since we need to align our thoughts.'

- Participant 1

'The most difficult ones are the ones where we are so far from each other in the way we think or... I think you handle this situation this way and "No, I didn't. I handled it in this way", like we are so far apart from each other. I think that one is the most difficult one, not so much based on the relationship but the point of view we have making it difficult, trying to come together.'

Participant 3

On the other hand, the managers also discussed the problem of clashing mindsets more in relation to work ethic. Several interviewees conveyed that if someone does not have the willingness to change, lack the motivation to improve and is not committed to their work then it can make a difficult conversation harder to handle:

'If the person is willing to change or not. If you can see, look into the mirror, to take responsibility for what you can change yourself or not. That's a big difference for me [ed.: between having an easy conversation compared to a difficult one].' - Participant 6

'If I have an employee that isn't committed to work, I'm pretty open about that – if you not committed to work and if you don't feel that this is what you really want, and I see other people really putting their lives and soul into their work, and then I see a person not doing that. Damn it is a hard conversation, but I think it's better to talk about things that are really hard. In that

case, I said, isn't it better for you to actually take another job, to move away from this and do something else. And that is a hard conversation.' - Participant 5

Lastly, the interviewees argued that conversations that involve employees with who they are *'not on the same page with'* or who are *'not committed to their work'* can become more challenging due to several reasons. For instance, these conversations could drain more energy as they would require more effort and patience from the managers' sides. Furthermore, some managers also described that these conversations usually take significantly longer compared to having a conversation with an employee who has the same mindset and mentality as them.

4.3. Interpersonal Relationship

4.3.1. Manager-Employee Relationships

Overall, a common pattern was found among the managers which was that they all had similar types of relationships with their employees. In essence, they have both closer and formal relationships at their workplaces. The only difference was that they described these relationships by using different words and terms. As a way of illustration, one interviewee defined his relationships with employees as either *'professional'* or *'personal'* and another interviewee expressed it as either *'friendly'* or *'strict'*. Moreover, most of the managers mentioned that they would not state that they have any *'bad relationships'* with their employees at the workplace.

4.3.2. Close Relationships

During the interviews, the participants were asked to reflect upon their perceptions about their closer relationships with their employees. These close relationships were characterised by various managers as being on a more personal and friendly level that often exist between them and the people just below them – the direct reports. The managers also expounded on what factors could play a role in the formation of these closer bonds. Some examples were found to be when the manager and employee share the same interests and core values, for instance, due to similar age or comparable life situations. Furthermore, the majority of the managers stated that they have a better relationship with employees who are committed to their work, who are willing to change and improve. Thus, it can be said that the **mentality and mindset** of the employee plays a significant role in the building of close relationships. This was an interesting finding

since the participants also touched upon the theme of mentality and mindset in relation to the content of conversations we addressed before.

A recurring discussion among the managers was that there is always a risk of floating into having a *'too close'* relationship with an employee. More or less all the participants stated that being too close to a subordinate can cause several problems when having work-related conversations with the person individually. In the quote below one interviewee illustrates the experience of addressing an issue with a colleague who she is being *'too much of a friend'* with:

'I'm trying to be one in the group so to say. But that's also to some parts challenging, because if you're too much of a friend with colleagues, then it can be even trickier to get into those difficult conversations. I mean, it could be a person that you really like, and that you have a cup of coffee with almost everyday, and you come along really good on a personal level. And then you see that that person performs really badly or there are some other kinds of problems arising. Then if you're too much of a friend, those kinds of conversations can get really tricky.' - Participant 8

Moreover, the issue with being too close with an employee could also cause problems in terms of how the person receives feedback. For instance, the participants brought up that it is common for the employee in this relationship type to take the manager's feedback more personally and not view it as something strictly work-related. Instead, in this situation, the employees can start to think that the manager does not like them anymore and that becomes their worry. Several managers also illustrated that they had divided feelings towards addressing an issue with an employee they had a closer relationship with. A participant shared the experiences of on one hand feeling guilty because of hurting her friend's feelings but on the other hand knowing that she is doing what she is obligated to do as a manager. Along with this, she stated that bringing up an issue could jeopardize the closer relationship:

'When I started I had great relationships with all of them. But when I saw problems and addressed them, those relationships can not be as they were in the beginning. Sometimes it could feel that I have mistreated them but at the same time, I think I am right. Sometimes I feel like I am not fair to my colleagues.' - Participant 3

The participants also described that it is important to not be too close since at the end, *'this is a job'* where these types of conversations need to be managed. At the same time, most of the interviewees mentioned that we are all human beings and therefore, it is not so strange that we feel closer to some people than others. Thus, they explained that it could be harder to bring up some topics when you are closer to someone because you want to treat them well. This matter is illustrated by a quote below:

'You can kind of hesitate to take up the discussion of difficult things or things that you see that they're not maybe performing totally well or they always show up late for some meetings and everything... That's one of the reasons why I felt that you have to be a little bit strict with some relationships. Because it can be easy to feel that you don't want to bring up some difficult subjects if you are too close. Because then you feel it's more like a friend – you have to go easy or whatever.' - Participant 2

Another difficulty many participants discussed when being too close to an employee, is that you usually share more information with one another. As an example, the managers stated that they usually know the person well and what the individual is currently going through on a private level. Thus, this could cause a dilemma later on when having to address an issue with the employee since the manager might feel more empathy and sorry for this person. Some interviewees described that it could be even tougher to let go of someone when they feel connected to the employee and have *'background facts'*. For instance, it could be that they know that the employee has a sick mom or is in a challenging economic situation. In the quote below one interviewee shares his experience of **blending the private life and work-life** with a close employee:

'That is the problem when you are really close, you mix your personal life, and I know stuff about their lives because they trusted me with information. You mix everything. With distant relationships we are very much task-oriented then it is less likely for us to end up in a difficult conversation, you don't go into other different things in your life that might affect the distance.'
- Participant 1

Another matter linked to the previous discussion is that many managers also expressed that it could be problematic to have better relationships with some people at work since you need to treat everyone equally as a manager. Therefore, this could be another reason why it is not ideal to have closer relationships only with a few colleagues. Two participants painted a picture of this below:

'I would say that you would get along better with some people than others. I really try not to make that affect any decisions or who I am and how I treat my employees, but of course, I have to actively think in that direction I would say. Because of course, it comes naturally, for example, that any like instant thoughts that I would like to delegate a certain task that I know would be fun. Then of course I have to try to think democratically and so on. But I really try to keep it impartial.' - Participant 4

'I think it's important to build relationships. That said, I take extreme care not to be friends with part of the group outside of work. And I've done that forever, more or less. I worked with some great people and I really like them, but I've tried not to be friends outside of work. 'Cause if you choose one or two in a team of 10 then that will destroy the mix in the group. Because then there will be arenas where some are excluded. That is always the case.'

- Participant 10

4.3.3. Formal Relationships

Throughout the interview sessions, the managers reflected upon their views about formal relationships at the workplace as well. Formal relationships were described by the interviewees as more '*distant*' and '*strict*' relationships that exist on a more professional level – they are more work-oriented than closer relationships. The managers also expressed that formal relationships usually occur between them and people who do not directly report to them, they do not have formal relationships with those who they work closely with.

During the interviews, the participants touched upon several disadvantages of having '*too formal*' relationships with the people under them. One mentioned difficulty is the lack of knowledge about the other party. For instance, the managers described the issue where they do not know how the other individual prefers to communicate and interact. They expressed that due to this lack of knowledge they are unable to predict how the other person would perceive the

message delivered by them or how the employee would react to a certain situation. Therefore, they believe the *'risk of error'* is higher in conversations that involve people with whom they have more formal relationships. Consequently, it could affect the conversations' quality negatively and make them even more difficult:

'So of course, a formal relationship where you don't really know much about the person you're talking about that also affects the information you have about how they prefer to interact. And the risk of error, so to say, it's much, much higher in that kind of setting. And I will usually tread much, much more carefully into such a conversation than I would do with someone that I know more of how we like to interact. If you need to tread carefully, of course, it also affects the quality of the conversation maybe. That I will probably not dare to go into depth with such a conversation in general, I would say.' - Participant 4

Lastly, a few managers touched upon the perceived advantages of this lack of knowledge that characterises formal relationships such as being able to set feelings aside and being able to be more direct and to the point. However, they mentioned that these advantages are quite fleeting, they only provide short-term alleviation, making conversations even more difficult in the end:

'Talking to this person, it was easier to deliver the message and the feeling was, you know this feels good, like there at that moment, but then afterwards... Again, since I don't know this person so well, it brings me post anxiety, sort of like, how was this perceived? You know, I wonder if the person feels okay. So you sort of need to do a check-in just because you want to make sure that it landed well.' - Participant 7

4.3.4. The Balance Between Close and Formal Relationships

Throughout the above sections, the focus has been on the managers' most prominent relationships with their employees, notably their formal and close relationships with their subordinates. Moreover, it has been illustrated that both of those two relationship types can cause problems when having difficult conversations. In this section, the paper is going to continue by delving into what relationship type the managers found to be the most prevalent and ideal at their workplace in relation to difficult conversations – **the close yet formal relationships**.

The middle managers described this relationship type by using phrases such as *'professional, good relationship but not too personal'*, *'relatively professional'*, *'personal but not too personal'* and *'not too friendly but not too distant'*. Thus, close yet formal relationships can be characterised by having elements of both close and formal relationships where trust and friendliness are prominent but on a more professional level. Essentially, these relationships are defined by a middle ground that can be found between closeness and formality (see Figure 4). They are neither *'too close'* nor *'too formal'* in order to avoid any difficulties that can stem from these qualities:

'If my relationship is too friendly perhaps, then it can make a tough conversation even tougher. If my relationship is too weak, it can make a tough conversation tougher as well. So something in the middle, of course, is what I strive for.' - Participant 4

'I think the ones that you are not too friendly but not too distant [ed.: can make a difficult conversation easier]. I think the ones in between, the ones that you have quite a lot of easy conversations with, you know how they are as a person but still not too close. But also not the ones who are so far away or not so close, that they do not want to discuss anything more than the task. You don't know the person so you don't know how they are gonna react or so. I would say something in between, you know them well enough how they're gonna handle the situation and handle the feedback but not too close so they think it is personal instead of being about the task.' - Participant 3

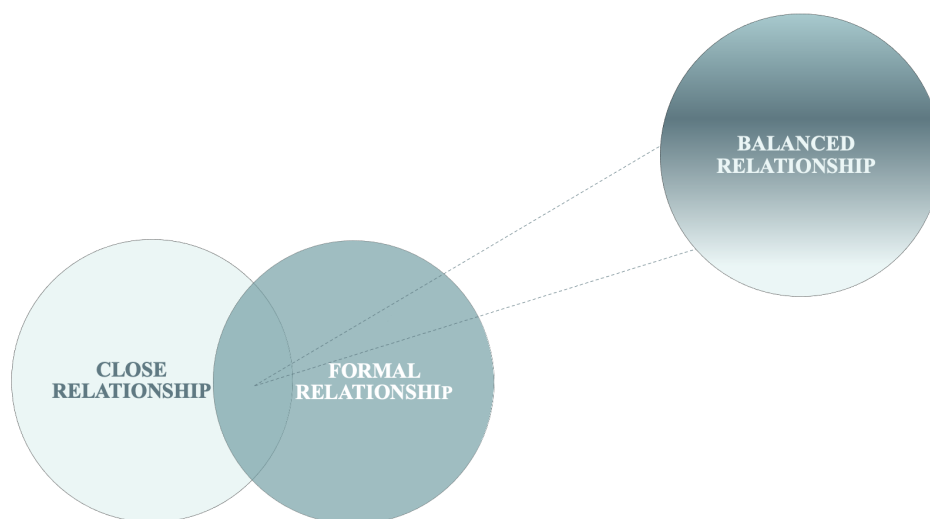


Figure 4: The Balance Between Close and Formal Relationships

However, for each person, the line for this slightly differs – what they deem to be too personal or too distant, where they find the balance between them. Nevertheless, some common themes still emerged relating to where they draw this line. In general, it can be said that the managers show more restraint on their part, they expressed that they are usually more private than their subordinates. For the majority of the managers, this means that their colleagues can share much about themselves and their private life. Moreover, this is even encouraged to some extent since there are several benefits that come with it. For example, it helps to build trust, allows the manager to gain knowledge about the employees, and helps improve teamwork, making difficult conversations easier to have overall:

'I really try to learn more about my employees than I share myself perhaps. And one of the reasons why I do that is to facilitate harder conversations. Because I find in general that the more you know about a person, the more you know maybe about how they like to interact and what kind of communication they prefer.' - Participant 4

On the contrary, the managers expressed that they are more restrictive, they try to isolate their private and professional selves by sharing less private information about themselves. As an illustration, they withhold certain information about their personal life that might influence the employees negatively. Furthermore, they do not invite their colleagues to their homes and they do not meet them outside of a work setting as they can never know what will happen to the employees, for instance, they can be fired or they can commit a serious offence:

'I have a really close relationship because I know everyone in detail. (...) But I had to have a sharp line for myself – what's professional, what's private and I don't mix it. I wouldn't invite them to my house in my spare time. That's where I draw the line, because of that experience I had before. You never know what will happen with a team member, which situation you can end up in.' - Participant 6

In summary, a total of four patterns were found in the managers' descriptions of how the ideal relationship should look like when having difficult conversations. The characteristics are as follows: (1) it is beneficial to know your employees and how they prefer to communicate and

interact, (2) be a part of the group but do not be afraid to step up and show the employees that they have crossed the line, (3) be open towards your employees but be restrictive with your own private life, (4) do not socialise with your employees privately after work. Therefore, one could say this described relationship type is ideal when having difficult conversations as it combines the benefits of close and formal relationships and neutralises the disadvantages of both.

4.4. Influencing Factors

Throughout the study's data collection, we identified several factors that the interviewees mentioned both when they answered the topic-related interview questions and the relationship-related interview questions. Thus, we found that it might not merely be the topic or the manager-employee relationship that can make a conversation difficult. These other factors are going to be presented here.

4.4.1. Experience and Routine

One of the themes which managers kept bringing up in connotation with difficult conversations was experience and routine. All of the managers stated directly or indirectly that experience and routine had a significant influence over how difficult they would perceive some conversations over the years. For instance, most of them mentioned that when they started out as managers and thus had less experience, they had more trouble with certain discussions or that they found more conversations difficult than now:

'I was completely new in my role, so that was challenging. But I learned a lot from that, which I carried with me. Now that experience makes almost any situation quite, not easy, but I'm more comfortable in these situations now because of that.' - Participant 6

'I think it's more being more experienced, more aware when you feel this is not right, then you actually do things about it. When I was younger, perhaps I didn't act on that feeling because all the people I was managing often were older than I was, more experienced. And I said: okay, so maybe I'm wrong. And then you let it slide for a little bit, cause you think you're wrong. Then in the end it shows itself you are not. Cause bad behaviour is bad behaviour whatever.' - Participant 10

Furthermore, a few of them highlighted some specific emotions, such as uncertainty and feeling drained, that surrounded conversations and made them more difficult when they did not know how to deal with challenging discussions as they have lacked experience:

'[Ed.: A difficult conversation] can be quite energy-draining if you're not used to it. (...) So now I have done it a few times, so it doesn't drain me as much. I know how I must prepare before this kind of conversation or meeting every time and that makes everything very much easier for me.'
- Participant 6

Lastly, some of them indicated that conversations can become more difficult if you do not encounter them routinely if they are not *'high-frequency, high-cadence'* discussions that are part of the job:

'For me, we always come into discussions where we don't agree and we have to say: no, this is what we are going to do. That happens on a daily basis but that for me is just a part of the job, that is not a difficult part.' - Participant 3

4.4.2. Company Culture and Support

Company culture and support was also a prominent theme when discussing difficult conversations. Many managers conveyed that a lack of strong company culture and support – such as the absence of *'well-described behaviours and values'*, *'clear goals'*, *'black and white system'* and *'good support from HR'* – can negatively influence their perception of challenging discussions. For example, multiple managers shared their experiences regarding the support they received from the company in general or when they had to deal with an especially difficult conversation like stealing from the company. They emphasised that the support they received from the company in the forms of guidance from HR, peer consulting, coaching and training modules, among other things, were invaluable for them as they made dealing with difficult conversations much easier and made them feel more confident and secure:

'[Ed.: If a topic can be perceived as difficult] also depends on of course how good support you have in the company from HR. If you have your different kinds of support packages, etc. (...) I

think that if you feel secure as a manager, if you have good HR support is very important.’ -
Participant 2

Lastly, some of the managers referred to the fact that company culture can also have a significant impact on what difficult topics they can encounter more regularly at their workplace. For instance, one of the participants mentioned that the company the interviewee works at is extremely value-based, therefore, work performance needs to be addressed more frequently than any other subject. Another participant highlighted the interconnectedness of company culture and experience by discussing that most conversations are easier for her because giving and receiving feedback is a common occurrence at her company, it is routine, due to the organisation’s strong feedback culture:

‘So we have a strong no blame culture and we have a culture of giving feedback between direct reports and managers within the team across departments like everywhere. I would say that this is something that we work on and it's built-in our culture to give feedback which makes it perhaps easier to have a difficult conversation or any type of conversation really, because you're used to it.’ - Participant 7

4.4.3. The Degree of Objectivity

Another frequently brought up theme by the interviewees was the degree of evidence when having a discussion. A majority of the managers expressed that a conversation with an employee could be significantly harder when they do not have either facts, documentation or proof to support their arguments. As an illustration, they prefer to rely on the use of concrete measures with which they can point out what is right or wrong objectively, but in some situations that is not possible. For instance, a few of them mentioned that suspicions about an employee are difficult to approach because they have not, themselves, explicitly seen or heard the person do the specific action or behaviour. Thus, as a result of this, they do not know how to take a stand on the issue. Two participants shared their experiences on the matter as follows:

‘One of the male employees was a bit too close to a female once and it was somewhat of a grey area. That kind of conversation is hard because there are no eyewitnesses and so on.’
- Participant 4

'I think, more personal things – that maybe you suspect that someone is, for instance, being subject to violence in their home or something like that [ed.: are especially difficult]. That you don't have real proof or evidence, you just kind of get the feeling or suspect.'

- Participant 2

A similar situation mentioned by another interviewee is the circumstance when there is gossiping taking place at the workplace. The participant found this problematic from a problem-solving standpoint since it is a matter between two individuals and not something for the manager to straighten out. The quote below paints a picture of how an interviewee perceives gossip:

'Another difficult thing is when people are telling stuff about others, that is also quite difficult. I mean, then I have to discuss it with both of you and I get the man in the middle and I don't get any facts. I don't see another solution than you two guys getting along together.'

- Participant 1

5. Discussion

In this following chapter, a comprehensive discussion of the empirical results in relation to the literature and theories will be presented. We will start by discussing (1) the content of difficult conversations, (2) the interpersonal aspect of difficult conversations and (3) blurred lines between private and professional life, empathy and mentality and mindset. Lastly, we will conclude by (4) a general discussion of the findings.

5.1. The Content of Difficult Conversations

In the interviews, we asked among other things, what kinds of difficult conversation topics the participants have encountered in their managerial roles (*see Table 3, p.33*). It is interesting to investigate these topics in relation to the literature, especially the Conversations Models introduced in Chapter 2 (Beezhold, Bendi & Pinto da Costa, 2016; Kofman, 2014; Stone, Patton & Heen, 2010; Tallodi, 2019). For instance, when looking into these models, our findings can be applied to some of the authors' categories of conversations. Notably, our results about work performance issues can be correlated to several models that also discuss this type of a discussion – it can be related to Kofman's (2014) *task conversation*, Tallodi's (2019) *task conflict* and to some extent Stone, Patton and Heen's (2010) *What happened? conversation*. Similarly, Beezhold, Bendi & Pinto da Costa's (2016) *value conflict* regarding clashing personal values and beliefs can fit into the study's findings concerning behaviour and personality issues. However, we can not find a specific model that covers the entire range of difficult conversations identified in this study.

The research results suggest a broader categorisation of difficult conversations as nearly all of the topics the participants mentioned could be categorised as either task-oriented discussions (e.g. conversations about work performance, skills and salary) or person-oriented discussions (e.g. work-life balance issues, health and personality issues). Thus, based on the study's findings, we indicate a weakness in the existing Conversation Models – they do not cover all potential difficult conversations a manager could encounter. In essence, the authors only mention a limited number of conversations that are relatively narrow and specific in their scope. Another matter worth mentioning is that we can not make assumptions about difficult conversations merely

based on classifying their content. In reality, difficult conversations could also be seen as something deeply personal rooted and subjective where humans perceive and understand situations in a range of different ways. Thus, on one hand, these classifications could be regarded as impractical. On the other hand, the classifications of topics could be viewed more as an assistance and guidance of what types of conversation topics a manager could encounter.

Even though we discovered that the content of the conversation did not have the strongest impact on the perception of difficult conversations, we identified three conversation topics that emerged throughout the interviews: **layoffs/firing**, **behavioural and personality issues**, and **work-life balance problems**. An interesting matter is that these topics are moderately in line with what prior articles and surveys have discovered. To illustrate, a survey by Fractl (cited in Jones, 2016) also found that a difficult personality could be one of the most difficult topics to address. Similarly, a survey by Learning Consultancy Partnership (2012 cited in Turaga, 2015) detected that managers believed behavioural issues were challenging to address. In the same matter, several authors have discussed the issue of firing or letting an employee go at the workplace (Shepherd, 2012; Turner, 2004; Benedetti, 2006; Karl & Hancock 1999). Work-life balance problems have also been covered in a more general sense by Gallo (2021), O'hara (2018) and Waller (2019). Nevertheless, it needs to be emphasised that this study has a unique combination of the most difficult conversation topics. As far as we know, these three topics together, as a constellation, have not been suggested by any author before.

5.2. The Interpersonal Aspect of Difficult Conversations

When discussing interpersonal relationships with the managers' direct reports at the workplace, it became apparent that the participants perceived interpersonal relationship types subjectively. They oftentimes classified and defined these relationships slightly differently by using words such as '*friendly*'/'*strict*' relationships and '*close*'/'*formal*' relationships, supporting the literature which states that there is an immense array and categorisation of relationship types (Jackson-Dwyer, 2014). Furthermore, even though they used similar terminology, they defined the boundaries of the different relationship types differently. In spite of these, several similarities could still be drawn between the participants' workplace relationships.

Firstly, nine out of ten participants referred to their relationships in terms of closeness. The managers differentiated between close and formal relationships with their direct reports by the presence or absence of friendliness, trust, better communication, knowledge about the other person and information sharing. Parallels can be drawn between this categorisation and the literature which also discusses analogous classifications and definitions. For instance, Lafollette (1996) and Tallodi (2019) classified workplace relationships as either impersonal or personal depending on the social context and the various factors of the relationships. Personal relationships were referred to as relations encompassing closer bonds, while impersonal relationships were described to be more distant and detached (Radley, 1996; Tallodi, 2019; Lafollette, 1996). Thus, the managers' close and formal relationships can be viewed as consistent with the literature's personal and impersonal relationships respectively.

Furthermore, Lafollette (1996) argues that there is an overlap between close and formal relationship types, that most relationships are a combination of impersonal and personal features. This point of view was reflected in the participants' answers as well. All of the interviewees stated that they strive for, and for the most part have, both elements of close and formal relationships with their direct reports. The participants believed that maintaining a golden mean between not being too close and too formal is essential as it makes difficult conversations easier to handle. However, for each interviewee what they deemed to be too close or too formal and where they found the balance between those slightly differed (*see Figure 5*). Nonetheless, all of them still agreed that the balanced relationships (the close yet formal relationships) carry the benefits of both close and formal relationships while they avoid the disadvantages that can stem from having purely one of these relations. As a way to illustrate, the interviewees detailed how this mixed relationship type allows them to get to know the employees better and to build trust between them which overall makes difficult conversations less challenging to deal with.

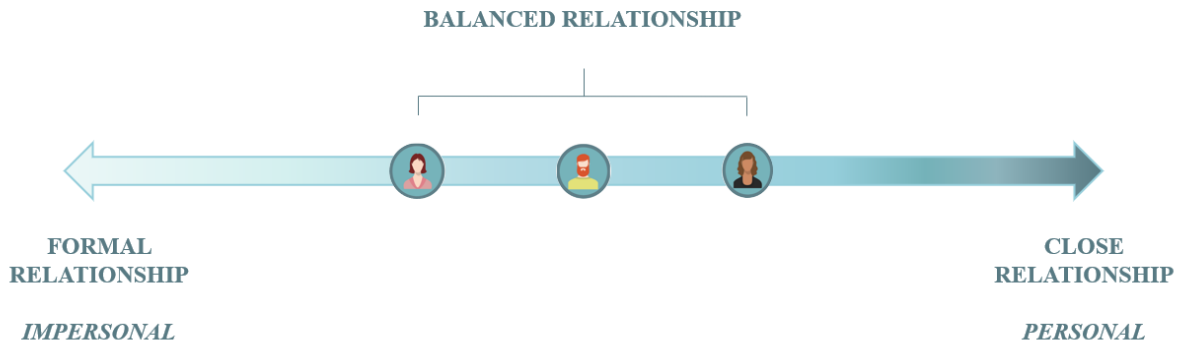


Figure 5: The Spectrum of Manager-Employee Relationships

Even though we could not find articles that explicitly discuss the connection between interpersonal relationships and difficult conversations, a few that indirectly considers it supports this view. For instance, Bridge and Baxter (1992) elaborated on why being close friends as well as work associates can be disadvantageous at the workplace and from what factors the conflicts can emerge from. The authors brought up very similar points to the interviewees, such as the struggle to balance impartiality and favouritism, judgement and acceptance and closedness and openness. The managers expressed how the conflicting responsibilities of being close friends as well as work associates and the disappearance of clear boundaries between the two roles and the organisational hierarchy could lead to difficulties. As an example, many of the managers discussed that it is challenging to give critique to a friend, they would worry how negative feedback would affect their friends' feelings and in turn their relationship.

Lastly, even if the participants have not directly discussed the quality of their relationships, it can be surmised that they have higher quality relationships and that they believe these higher quality relations potentially can make difficult conversations easier. For instance, they characterised their relationships with their direct reports by higher levels of openness, willingness to share information and deeper communication which are indicators of high(er) level LMX relationships according to Fairhust and Chandler (1989), Sias (2005) and Duchon, Green and Taber (1986).

5.3. Blurred Lines between the Private and Professional Life, Empathy and Mindset

As mentioned before, the general conclusion based on our findings is that there appear to be various factors that interplay and make a conversation be perceived as difficult. In spite of this, our data indicated three main themes that appeared to play a bigger role in difficult conversations. The first theme detected was the blurred lines of private and professional life, which relates to the issue where the manager can not separate or draw a clear line between the employee's private and professional life. The second theme centred around the manager's feeling of empathy towards the employee and the third theme was concerning the employee's mentality and mindset which refers to the person's way of thinking. Interestingly, the participants touched upon these three aspects both when they answered the topic-related interview questions and the relationship-related interview questions.

Blurred lines of private and professional life was one of the prominent themes the managers continuously referred to. For instance, with regards to content, they described how they deemed topics that touched upon the employee's private sphere as especially difficult. The participants expressed the difficulty of separating work life from personal life and tackling a person's decreased work performance caused by private matters. Likewise, this could be related to the relationship aspect as well. The participants demonstrated how having close relationships could make a conversation harder due to their intimate knowledge about an employee and the person's private life.

Empathy was another frequently mentioned discussion topic throughout the interviews. As an example, the participants stated that conversation topics that are closely related to and usually evoke the feeling of empathy could make a conversation harder. The situations where they '*feel sorry*' for an employee was described as being challenging. These situations could range from letting someone go from their position to when there is someone who is suffering from mental health disorders. In parallel, the managers illustrated how they often feel more empathy towards the people with whom they have a closer relationship. For example, some managers expressed that it could be even tougher to let go of someone when they feel '*connected*' to the employee and have '*background facts*' on them.

Furthermore, **mentality and mindset** also appeared as a central theme in connection to difficult conversations. As a way of illustration, nearly all the participants argued that an ordinary conversation could turn into a difficult one when they and the employee were *'not on the same page'* or *'not aligned'*. Particularly, this was mentioned in relation to the subject of work performance where the discussion can become more difficult if the person has a differing view about an issue or an incorrect self-image. In addition, many managers discussed that a good start for any kind of difficult conversation is when their relationships with employees are built on the same core values, view on organisational commitment and perceptions of how to understand the world. Hence, this illustrates that the mentality and mindset could also be connected to the interpersonal aspect. To conclude, these three themes could be viewed both from a content perspective and relationship perspective. Nevertheless, we do not see the point of categorising these themes and linking them either to topic or relationships. Instead, we propose viewing these themes as broad categories that could have an impact on difficult conversations overall.

Moreover, an interesting aspect to investigate further is whether our suggested themes correlate with what the literature has paid attention to. In regards to empathy, the literature has mainly focused on how the manager should be empathic and compassionate towards the employee when addressing an issue (Knight, 2015; Leebov, 2010; Jorfi et al., 2011). However, the manager's own feeling of empathy has not received much recognition. On the other hand, empathy could be closely linked to emotions which over the years has been a well-discussed topic (Farrell, 2015; ACAS, 2014; Beezhold, Bendi & Pinto da Costa, 2016; Doherty, 2018). For instance, Farrell (2015) mentions how difficult conversations could be challenging due to the various emotions the manager has to deal with where they at the same time must be polite and professional. Thus, this supports our interviewees' statements where they mentioned how the difficulty of a conversation can change according to the degree of emotions present. For example, they expressed that the more they feel empathy and other related emotions, the harder a conversation is to handle. Hence, the emotional aspects of difficult conversations should not be underestimated.

Furthermore, our results concerning mentality and mindset have strong similarities with Stone, Patton and Heen's (2010) discussion concerning peoples' different ways of understanding reality.

The authors address how conflicts could emerge because of the differing perceptions about, for example, a situation or matter. Similarly, our participants have expressed this issue where they perceive it difficult when (1) the employee does not have the same worldview as them, (2) the employee is lacking work motivation and organisational commitment and (3) the employee has a skewed self-image. However, viewing mindset as a concept, the literature has only taken the approach of investigating the manager's mentality in terms of openness where not much attention has been on the other person involved in the conversation (Knight, 2015; Stone, Patton & Heen, 2010; Ury, 1993; Manzoni, 2002). Lastly, it is surprising that one of the study's most central themes – the blurred lines between private and professional life – has not been considered by many authors.

5.4. Influencing Factors

In the previous section, three factors closely related to both content and interpersonal relationships were presented – blurred lines, empathy, and mindset. Hereby, the study will continue with the presentation of other factors that are more generally related to content and interpersonal relationships and influence difficult conversations in a more generic sense.

Throughout the interview sessions, the managers touched upon various contextual factors that altered their perception of difficult conversations, such as the **degree of preparation, training and practice**. For instance, the participants stated that challenging discussions to the most extent involve some kind of preparation, they do not happen spontaneously like ordinary conversations. Moreover, all the managers expressed that their perception of difficult conversations is also influenced by their degree of experience and training. In essence, these findings could be supported by the literature whereas numerous self-help books bring attention to these mentioned areas (Farrell, 2015; Leebov, 2010; Knight, 2015; Clark, 2015; Overton & Lowry, 2013; CMI, 2015). As an example, several authors advise managers to prepare mentally by imagining how the employee would react or by jotting down key points in order to deal with challenging conversations more successfully (Farrell, 2015; Leebov, 2010; Knight, 2015; Clark, 2015). Similarly to our results, numerous studies also recommend managers to build their confidence and gain more knowledge about difficult conversations by practicing and receiving assistance

and coaching to enable them to handle challenging discussions more effectively (CMI, 2015; Farrell, 2015).

Two additional factors we discovered throughout the interviews were the **degree of objectivity** and **company culture**. As an example, the managers expressed that the more support they receive from the company, in the form of training, clear organisational values and goals, the easier challenging discussions become. However, the literature has not brought much attention to these two aspects of difficult conversations. For instance, the degree of objectivity has not been mentioned in articles to a large extent. Likewise, the strength of company culture has only been covered more or less indirectly, when mentioning the importance of coaching received (CMI, 2015; Farrell, 2015).

Moreover, the literature, mainly self-help books, appears to have left out some factors relating to the topic of difficult conversations. We believe this could be due to the authors' aim of giving actionable advice to managers. Thus, this could explain why the authors rarely have touched upon contextual factors that are more dependent on the situation or the organisational practices. For instance, the degree of objectivity could be seen as depending on either the company's guidelines or on the specific situation which the managers' can not control. Essentially, the literature has inspected factors from a slightly different angle than what the participants have presented us in this study. In summary, we believe the literature, in general, has not examined factors holistically, they have not investigated them as interrelated parts of a whole system that decide if a conversation will be perceived as easier or harder.

5.5. General Discussion about the Findings

Based on our empirical findings, we discovered that it is not only the content and the interpersonal relationships between the managers and employees that make a conversation difficult. Even though our interview questions were formulated towards being either content-related or relationships oriented, the participants always touched upon other interrelated factors which we have identified as recurrent themes such as the mentality and mindset of the employee, the degree of objectivity, and company culture and support. Hence, based on the participants' answers, we identified that it is the dynamic structure of these various factors and

the interplay of them that could make a conversation be viewed as difficult. This also means that the content and interpersonal relationships interplay. As an illustration, the managers believed that conversation topics that involve empathy can make conversations difficult regardless of the type of relationship. An interesting aspect, if we compare the results with the literature, is that the existing material about difficult conversations often simplifies the connection between these factors. In general, the authors rarely touch upon how the factors are complementing and synergising with each other which this study has highlighted.

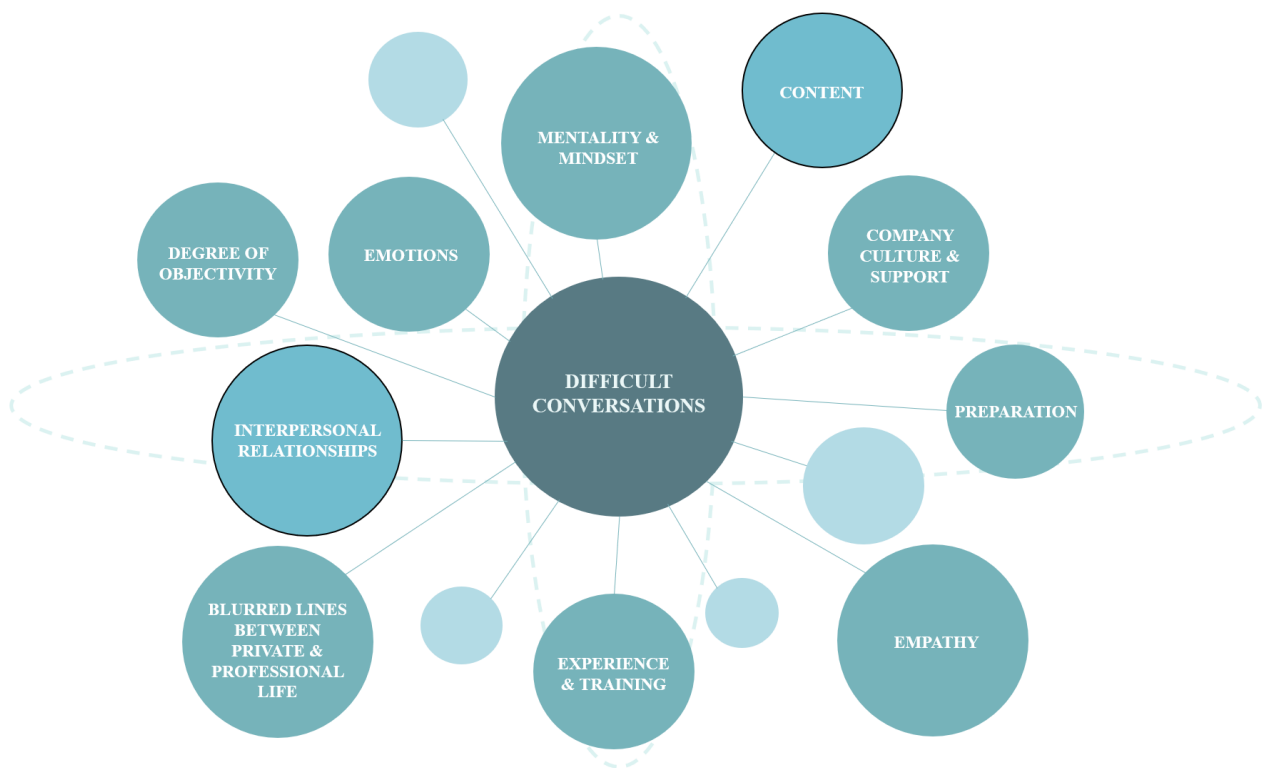


Figure 6: The Interconnection of Various Factors

Furthermore, the data showed that the content of the conversation did not have the strongest impact on difficult conversations, although we detected three topics that to a certain degree stood out. This result was unexpected, especially since the literature has brought much attention to the content of the conversation where it is easy to believe that the content should be one of the most influential factors in a difficult conversation. Regarding the area of interpersonal relationships, we found that it had a stronger impact on the interviewees view on difficult conversations

compared to the content. Thus, this finding is based on the fact that the interviewees mentioned less interrelated factors when they discussed interpersonal relationships compared to when they discussed the content of the conversation.

6. Conclusion

The thesis aimed to investigate and explain: *How do middle managers perceive difficult conversations based on their content and interpersonal aspects?* By exploring middle managers' perceptions about difficult conversations from multiple perspectives, the study was able to provide a deeper understanding of this research field. Ten Swedish middle managers from various backgrounds were interviewed to gain a comprehensive picture of their experiences and realities regarding challenging conversations. Based on the participants' retellings, the results indicate that middle managers' perceptions of difficult conversations are influenced by a multitude of interrelated factors. Several additional interconnected factors beside the content and interpersonal relationships were identified such as the blurred lines between private and professional life, empathy, mentality and mindset, experience, company culture and support, degree of objectivity, preparation, and emotions. Thus, the study's findings suggest that it is not only the content and the interpersonal relationships that can make a conversation be viewed as difficult but various other factors as well.

When exploring the first part of the research question concerning the content, it became apparent that there is a spectrum of topics the participants identified as difficult. These topics ranged from task-oriented subjects such as work performance issues and salary discussions to personal oriented topics such as health issues and misbehaving. Three broad topics stood out as they were uniformly recognised as especially difficult subjects – **layoffs/firing**, **work-life balance issues** and **personality and behavioural problems**. Notably, the majority of the discussions were concerning how various factors could affect what the managers deem as difficult conversation topics. The most prominent factors were empathy towards an employee, blurred lines, and differences/similarities in mindset. For instance, they perceived work-life balance issues as especially difficult to address as they felt like they breach the employee's private sphere, they touch upon personal and sensitive issues which usually should not be mixed with work. Furthermore, the managers expressed how feeling empathy towards the person in this situation can make the conversation even more challenging. Therefore, it can be concluded that the content is not the most influential factor regarding how managers perceive difficult

conversations, it is other factors involved with the content that decide how challenging people regard it.

In the investigation of the second part of the research question which concerns interpersonal relationships, it was found that the participants have both close and formal relationships with their employees. However, the managers expressed that the majority of their relationships fall somewhere in between close and formal relationships. The participants considered this relationship type to be ideal when addressing an issue. The reason for finding **the mix of formal and close relationships** the most suitable is due to that (1) they know their employees better as they interact regularly, e.g. they know how the employees prefer to communicate and interact, (2) they still can stay in the boundaries of their managerial roles, and (3) they can maintain distance between their professional and private lives. Thus, they can avoid the pitfalls of purely close relationships, such as being too emotionally attached to the employee and mixing their private and professional lives. Furthermore, they are also able to avoid the disadvantages of solely formal relationships where there is a risk of not knowing how the other person would react in different situations. Lastly, the managers also expressed that in general they have better relationships with those who they share a similar mindset with. Thus, **blurred lines between private and professional life, empathy and mindset** also play a prominent role in interpersonal relationships similarly to the content.

The study has identified numerous interplaying factors that could influence middle managers' perceptions of difficult conversations. Some of these factors were related to the context and situation such as the degree of clear objectives and goals in an organisation, some to the individual such as the manager's experience or employee's mindset, while others were connected to the relationship between the manager and the employee. However, it needs to be acknowledged that how a person perceives a difficult conversation is highly subjective. In reality, what can be viewed as a difficult conversation can vary between individuals. For instance, feelings and emotions which are integral parts of difficult conversations are profoundly personal. With that being said, difficult conversations are a complex phenomenon that should be always viewed as a part of an intricate system.

6.1. Practical Implications

The study's results indicate what factors could play an important role in middle managers' perceptions of difficult conversations. Thus, the findings of this research could contribute to organisations and managers by providing a deeper understanding of the full spectrum of difficult conversations. Moreover, by gaining a broader viewpoint and more awareness about this topic, managers and organisations would be able to handle difficult conversations in a more effective manner.

For instance, we suggest managers strive to form not too close nor too formal relationships with their employees as the results indicate that maintaining a balance could ease the difficulty of a conversation. Furthermore, trying to preserve an emotional distance to a certain extent from their employees could also be seen as beneficial when having challenging conversations. In addition, the findings propose that preparation and training could be valuable for managers when addressing an issue. Moreover, this study could be relevant and important for organisations as well. The results of this research advise organisations to provide support in the form of coaching as well as clear guidelines. Preferably companies should design and implement transparent employee conduct policies and well-defined work performance objectives.

Nevertheless, it needs to be acknowledged that difficult conversations are complex and thus, the perceptions of them can differ from person to person. Therefore, managers are encouraged to reflect upon their own views and what they deem to be especially influential on their perceptions about difficult conversations. Furthermore, this research could provide managers adequate help to start their reflections by presenting a solid framework that takes into account multiple factors related to difficult conversations.

6.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

In this research, several factors were shown to play a role with regards to how difficult conversations are perceived. However, it is important to highlight that we can not be certain or confident which of these factors have the most influence. Thus, further research is needed to explore the dynamics of factors that could be involved in difficult conversations. It would be especially interesting to examine which factor(s) could play a greater role in peoples'

understanding of difficult conversations. More studies that take a quantitative approach on the matter could hence be favourable.

This study has been conducted in Sweden with Swedish middle managers and to be able to make more generalisations about middle managers' perceptions of difficult conversations, more research has to be conducted. In addition, in order to make national and cultural comparisons, researchers need to make sure that the sample and its participants have various kinds of nationalities and backgrounds which represent the reality. Moreover, it would be interesting to examine other managerial levels – people who are supervisors and top managers, to discover how often they have difficult conversations compared to middle managers and if they perceive difficult conversations differently.

One of the main findings in this study was that the employee's mentality and mindset played a role in difficult conversations where, for example, the participants described it as challenging when *'the employees are not aligned'* with them. Hence, it would be interesting to investigate further if individual differences, in particular, personality differences have an influence on the perception of difficult conversations. For example, to examine how different personalities are communicating and understanding each other, if they clash or if they somehow can complement each other. Demographic variables such as age, gender and race could also complement existing research, to investigate if it is easier or harder to have a conversation depending on the demographics of the individuals involved.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Before the interview starts

- Background information:
 - Managerial background, e.g. total years of experience as a middle manager
 - Information about current position

General Questions

- How often would you say that you have had more challenging/difficult conversations with your subordinates?
- What do you associate with difficult conversations? What comes to your mind when you think of difficult workplace conversations?
- How would you define or describe a difficult workplace conversation? / What characterises a difficult workplace conversation in your point of view?
- What are the major differences between having an easy conversation compared to a difficult one in your point of view?
- How do you usually feel when you participate in difficult conversations?

Interpersonal Relationships

- Can you explain what your workplace relationships look like? What kind of relationships do you have at work?
- Do you have better relationships with some employees than others?
 - Why do you think so?
- What characterises 'better' and 'worse' workplace relationships in your opinion?
- Does your relationship with an employee influence the difficulty of a conversation in your opinion?
 - Why?
 - Can an ordinary conversation turn into a difficult conversation if you have it with someone with whom you don't have a good relationship with? → Why?
 - Can an ordinary conversation turn into a difficult conversation if you have it with someone with whom you have a more distant and formal relationship? → Why?

- Can an ordinary conversation turn into a difficult conversation if you have it with someone who not only is your colleague but also your friend? → Why?
- Did a specific person come to your mind when you were thinking about/answering the previous questions?
 - If yes: Can you describe your relationship history with this person? How would you describe your relationship with them?

Content

- What kind of difficult conversations have you encountered as a manager?
- What topics do you think are easy to discuss with an employee (don't make a conversation difficult)?
- What are some topics that happened frequently at your workplace that could be perceived as difficult?
- Are there some topics that are especially difficult in your opinion between you as a manager and a subordinate?
- In general, why are some topics more difficult than others in your opinion? What factors make a conversation difficult?

Interconnection of Interpersonal Relationships and Content

- Does the type of relationship between you and someone else make an already difficult conversation content-wise even more difficult in your opinion?
 - What type(s) of relationship can make a difficult conversation topic even harder to discuss? → Why?
 - What type(s) of relationship can make a difficult conversation topic easier to discuss? → Why?
- Do you think the content of the conversation can make a difficult conversation - that is difficult due to the relationship type - even more difficult?

Concluding Questions

- What is your general advice on how to best handle difficult workplace conversations?

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Title of project: What Makes a Conversation Difficult? - The Importance of Topic and Relationship in Managerial Conversations

Invitation and brief summary:

You are being invited to participate in a thesis project that is exploring middle managers' perceptions of difficult conversations. We have contacted you because you are associated with the topic of interest in some way and because we would like to know your insights on it.

Before you decide whether to participate in this research, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it would involve. Please take your time to read the following information carefully. If you would like more information or if you would like to receive clarification on anything please contact any of the named researchers.

Thank you for your interest.

Purpose of the research:

The study aims to explore and understand (1) a variety of perspectives on difficult one-on-one conversations at the workplace and (2) what factors make conversations less difficult. Through the research, we hope to gain an understanding of how middle managers perceive the difficulty of a workplace conversation based on different aspects of it. Furthermore, we wish to find out what are the best ways to tackle difficult one-on-one conversations based on the middle managers' own experiences. We are especially interested in your insights on this matter.

Commitment:

It is dependent on you whether to take part in the research or not. Even if you decide to participate, you will be able to withdraw from taking part in the project at any time by contacting any of the listed researchers. If you choose to not participate or wish to withdraw, please ensure

that they have been informed. If you are willing to be interviewed, it should take up no more than 1 hour of your time and will be arranged at a time of mutual convenience.

What to expect:

You will have a conversation with the researchers virtually, using an online service, such as Skype, Zoom, or Teams. Ideally, the conversation will be recorded and transcribed later. The researchers will guide the interview and will ask questions about your experiences and views about difficult conversations, with a special focus on the content and interpersonal aspects of them.

Benefits and risks:

There are no foreseeable, immediate benefits and risks to the participants of the thesis project.

Confidentiality:

Interview recordings and transcripts will be held in confidence. They will not be utilised for purposes other than what are described in this Participant Information Sheet. The recordings will be deleted after the completion of the study and will not be accessible to third parties at any point of the research. The anonymised transcripts might be looked at by supervisors of Lund University. Your data will be held in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Any information that we collect will not be attributed to individuals without explicit consent. The thesis we write will contain anonymised information and we will aim to keep the identification of specific organisations to a minimum.

Data Protection Notice - The information you provide will be used for research purposes and your personal data will be processed in accordance with current data protection legislation. Any personal data will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be disclosed to any unauthorised third parties.

Use of information and results:

Any digital recordings made during this study will be transcribed for analysis. The anonymised transcriptions may be used in the thesis project and further publication. If you request a copy of

your transcript we can supply you with it. No other use will be made of these recordings and transcripts besides the above-mentioned ones without your explicit permission.

Contact information

If you would like to take part in the thesis project or if you have any questions about it, then please do not hesitate to contact one of the following:

Researchers:

Lili Varga - li5712va-s@student.lu.se

Rebecca Wirgin - re8024wi-s@student.lu.se

If you decide to participate in the research, please sign the associated consent form.

Thank you for your interest in this project, your contribution is vital for this study!

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: What Makes a Conversation Difficult? - The Importance of Topic and Relationship in Managerial Conversations

Name of Researchers: Lili Varga, Rebecca Wirgin

Participant Identification Number:

Please tick or cross each box:

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions and consider the information about the above project.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw or deny answering particular question(s) at any time without providing any reason and without there being any adverse consequences.
3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised and I will not be identified in the outputs that result from the study unless I give my consent.
4. I understand that relevant parts of the anonymised data collected during the research may be looked at by members of the research team and supervisors from Lund University. I grant permission for these individuals to have access to my records.
5. I understand that taking part involves anonymised interview transcripts to be used for the purposes of publication.
6. I agree to take part in the above thesis project.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Researcher

Date

Signature