The process of becoming a manager

A qualitative study of managers' experiences of the transition to their first manager position and the influence of organizational-established initiatives and resources

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Abstract

Title: The process of becoming a manager – a qualitative study of managers' experiences of the transition to their first manager position and the influence of organizational-established initiatives and resources

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Purpose: The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how managers experience the transition into their first manager position. Through this study, we will explore how organizational-established resources influence the transition, as well as evaluate these resources through the lens of organizational control and identity regulation.

Methodology: This thesis follows a qualitative research method and is based on interpretive research traditions. The study comprises a case study of a single organization and follows an abductive research approach. The empirical data is generated through semi-structured interviews of managers in their first middle manager position, as well as observations of an internal manager training program.

Theoretical Perspective: The study adopts a processual view, examining the idea of managerial identities as constantly emerging. Drawing from the identity literature and process theory, the study examines the process of becoming a manager and explores the connection between career transitions and engagement in identity work by focusing on the influence of organizational-established initiatives and resources.

Conclusion: Our findings reveal that career transitions toward a manager role can be regarded as a fluid process of "becoming" which at times is characterized by an ambiguous state of

in-between in which managers experience identity struggles. We identified two organizational-established resources to be influential in the process of becoming a manager; the company's internal manager training program as well as the concept of an integrated management development practice in which managers are gradually introduced to the managerial position. Furthermore, our findings indicate that employees do not necessarily have to be seen as victims of organizational control, as certain control mechanisms can be perceived as providing a stable and protective dimension to the ambiguous state of being in-between when transitioning to a manager role.

Key Words: Managerial Identity, Identity work, Career transitions, Identity regulation.

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Hope you will enjoy reading our work!

Hannah & Sara

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1. Introduction

Managers and managerial work have been of interest to researchers for decades (Tengblad, 2012; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016). An important managerial function in many organizations is the middle manager position (Mintzberg, 1999). Even if the middle manager role can range widely from line managers and supervisors to business unit managers and department heads, it is often lumped together as one homogeneous group (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). Hill (2003) argues that an overlooked manager position in research is managers who are at the beginning of their manager career, and points out that there is a lack of empirical studies of that group of managers and the transition towards their first manager role. The lack of empirical research is further reflected in the literature on how managers transition and develop into the manager role – even though there is a myriad of literature on how to develop managerial talents, few empirical studies have been done on manager development practices for new managers (Hill, 2003). This argues for the relevance to study how new managers develop managerial capabilities within organizations and through which management development processes they learn and improve managerial skills, knowledge, and attitudes.

The transition and development to a first manager role can be understood as a career transition in which the individual moves from one position as an individual contributor to the position of a manager (Hill, 2003; Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005; Yip et al., 2020). Such a career transition involves both direct work-related dimensions linked to the professional role and inevitably also more symbolic aspects related to the managerial identity (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). The research effort on the topic of identity can be described as tremendous, not least within the field of managerial identity. Interesting to note is the shift in the debate throughout the last decade. The stream of the literature shows a shift from viewing identity as something relatively stable and enduring (Dutton et al., 1994; Steele, 1988), to a more processual view indicating that identity is something fluid and dynamic (Gioia et al., 2000; Svenningsson and Larsson, 2006). The shift of perspective means that more attention is paid to how identities are being formed and established through identity processes (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

The processual view of identity can also be seen in research regarding career transitions and acknowledges the process to transition and develop into a manager role and identity as a long-term, ongoing process of becoming a manager (Andersson, 2005; Hill, 2003). This supports the idea of managerial identities as constantly emerging, viewing the transition as a process of becoming rather than a state of being (Andersson, 2005; Hill, 2003). In our preliminary investigations prior to the thesis, we discovered the idea of "becoming" a manager as being undeveloped in the literature, not in the least from the perspective of individual experiences. The contributions of this study could hence be viewed as broadening the perspective of the process of becoming a manager and giving insights to individuals in the process to transition to a manager role. Furthermore, the contributions could provide organizations with an understanding of how to support managers in career transitions as well as gain insight into how to enhance effective management development practices.

Hay (2014) points out that organizations often ignore the emergence of managerial identities and hence ignore the process of managerial becoming. Koleša (2021) confirms this view and points out that individuals are mostly left to their own resources in transitioning to their new role and identity. Nevertheless, there is still research that suggests that organizational-established initiatives and resources can come to be regarded as supporting the process of "becoming" a manager (Hill, 2003). This argues for the relevance to look into how organizational initiatives and resources can be seen to support the transition, and how these influence the transition towards a manager role and identity.

During the last decades, research has pointed towards an increased managerial attentiveness in regulating employees' "insides", referring to the self-image, feelings, and identifications of the organizational members (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 1992). This derives from the concept of culture management and normative control, which have been dominating topics in organizational research and critical management writings during the last decades (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Fleming and Spicer, 2009; Müller, 2017; Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993). Normative control is a form of organizational control in which the "inside" of an employee is regulated through the culture rather than guided by rules (Kunda, 1992). Organizational-established initiatives and resources, such as manager training programs and

other management development practices, can be regarded as attempts by organizations to form norms and values regarding the manager role (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 1992). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) put this in perspective of identity and argue that the regulation of identities can be seen as a control mechanism attempting to regulate the employee's identity. To take a more critical stance in this paper, and establish a more nuanced understanding, we will explore the topic of identity, career transition, and management development practice through the lens of organizational control and identity regulation.

1.1   Research purpose and questions

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how managers experience the transition into their first manager position. Through this study, we will explore how organizational-established resources influence the transition, as well as evaluate these resources through the lens of organizational control and identity regulation.

The thesis builds upon the literature on managerial identity, identity work, and career transitions, which will serve as a backdrop to our analysis. On a broader level, this study addresses issues such as organizational control and identity regulation. We, therefore, hope to contribute to the research of managerial identity by exploring how managers experience the process of becoming a manager, as well as how organizational-established initiatives and resources influence the transition. This leads us to the following research questions:

- How do managers experience the transition to their first manager position?
- How do organizational-established initiatives and resources influence this transition?

1.2   Main findings

Our findings reveal that career transitions toward a manager role should be regarded as a fluid process of "becoming" which at times is characterized by an ambiguous state of in-between in which managers experience identity struggles. Throughout the study, we identified two organizational-established resources to be influential in the process of becoming a manager; the

company's internal manager training program as well as the concept of team-in-team, an integrated management development practice in which managers are gradually introduced to the managerial position. Although organizational-established initiatives and resources can be considered as supporting the process of transition for managers, they can also initiate friction within the individuals, which can lead to individuals engaging in identity work. With regard to identity work, our findings suggest that managers apply a reversed decoupling process in which they "couple" with their operational work tasks and hence describe difficulties in having to let go of these tasks. Further, our findings indicate that manager training programs predominantly function on a symbolic level to ease the transition into a manager role. Hence, the feeling of safety and security that organizational-confirmed frameworks provide through approved templates seems to be more important than the actual content. Consequently, managers can refer to the training program and try out new frameworks in a protected and legitimized space. Furthermore, we demonstrate how training programs provide a social context as well as opportunities for managers to create and expand their network with other managers, which serves as a support function to create a sense of belonging as well as a sense of confirmation. Lastly, our findings indicate that employees do not necessarily have to be seen as victims of organizational control, as our interviewees perceive certain control mechanisms as a stable and protective dimension in the ambiguous state of being in-between when transitioning to a new role.

1.3 Research outline

The outline of our thesis starts with the Literature review, which presents the theoretical background and gives an overview of the literature, ultimately providing the reader with a deeper understanding of the relevant research field. In the Methodology chapter, the study's underpinning assumptions are presented, alongside the data collection and analysis methods. The following chapter, Empirical Analysis, presents the main findings and analysis of the empirical material. The chapter Discussion puts the empirical findings in the context of our research questions in order to prove a deeper understanding of our empirical material. The last chapter, Conclusion, elaborates on the theoretical contributions and practical implications of our study as well as provides suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

This chapter will provide a foundation and horizon of significance into which the empirical findings will be embedded or contrasted from. First, we will explore the topic of identity in the light of our study. Next, we will look into identity work, focusing in particular on the connection between career transitions and the engagement in identity struggle. This is followed by exploring the topic of management development and other organizational resources that ease the transition from one position to another. Lastly, we shed light on the critical side of organizational support initiatives and the concept of normative control and identity regulation.

2.1 Identity

Identity is an issue that has been discussed in various contexts over time, ranging from academic disciplines like social science, philosophy, and humanities (Brown, 2014). Brown (2014) makes a distinction between social identities (e.g. nationality), personal identities (e.g. age, height), and role identities (e.g. manager, mother). However, many scholars deny such clear categorization of identities, as identities act cross categories (Lawler, 2014). This emphasizes the notion that individuals do not identify themselves with just one category but rather create multiple identities, which further demonstrates the complexity of the topic (Lawler, 2014; Mead, 1934). This means that it is not possible to provide a single, overarching definition of the term identity, as it is a construct that cannot be measured and is difficult to put into categories (Lawler, 2014). Lawler (2014) explains that one problem concerning the term identity is that it refers to various different phenomena concerning not only the sense of one's self and the social categories that the self is attached to but also how others' perceptions influence the self-view. This exemplifies that individuals often attempt to identify themselves in relation to others, but also want to define themselves in terms of their own identity (Ricoeur, 2005). Nevertheless, there seems to be a consensus that in general the term identity is used to refer to the meanings individuals attach to themselves (Brown, 2014). Those meanings are developed through social interactions with others as they seek to answer questions like "who am I", "how shall I relate to others?" or "what shall I strive to become?" (Baumeister, 1986). This view is supported by Svenningsson and Alvesson (2016) who underline that identities are always created in relation to others. The assumption underpinning our study is therefore based on the perspective that individuals

understand themselves as "social selves", thus identity is not constructed in isolation but rather in social interaction (Goffman, 1959; Lawler, 2014; Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2016). From this perspective, identity needs to be understood as produced between, and not as existing within individuals (Lawler, 2014). In this study, we attempt to take a closer look at identities in a professional context, more specifically the manager role and the managerial identity.

2.1.1 The process of becoming

In the previous section, we touched upon how individuals assign meanings to themselves in relation to their social environment. However, the nature of identity is portrayed differently by various scholars. Some streams of literature hold the view that identities are stable and enduring (Dutton et al. 1994; Steele 1988), while more recent research views identity as something fluent and dynamic (Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2016). The trend in literature can be seen to support the latter, which means that it moves away from viewing identities as fixed entities to paying more attention to identity processes in which identities are being formed and established (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). The essence of our study is to explore how individuals experience the process of transition to a manager role and identity over time, which means that our study can be seen to be influenced by the assumption that identities are fluent and dynamic, and vary over time as individuals always strive to shape their identity (Gioia et al., 2000; Svenningsson and Larsson, 2006). Undertaking a process perspective allows us to explain how identities are shaped by looking at how they develop over time. We, therefore, base our assumption on the process view, suggesting that identities are always in movement and can therefore be seen as processual as well as temporary (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). This emphasizes the notion of identities as always becoming rather than being (Ashforth, 1998). The process theory assumes that reality is constantly moving and transforming and is not fixed by specific events (Weick, 1995). We can use the metaphor of a flowing river to illustrate that even if identities can appear as stable or fixed, a closer processual perspective can reveal that it, just like a river, is constantly transforming its shape and never standing still. This perspective views identities not just as "being" static entities but rather as always in the process of "becoming".

2.1.3 Managerial identity

As previously stated, this study examines identities in a professional context, more specifically managerial identity. Many scholars describe managerial identities and the manager role as characterized by fragmentation (Andersson, 2010; Watson, 2001; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016). Svenningsson and Alvesson (2003) point out that managers face daily struggles through handling various contexts, difficult situations, and shifting relationships at work. Therefore, the question of who you are as a manager varies with time and context (Watson, 2009). Hay (2014) points out that managerial identities are often hard to teach through training, but are rather continuously developed through the process of "becoming" a manager. Managerial identity is not generic, but nevertheless, some representative features have been identified (Koleša, 2021). In the literature, the heritage of Taylorism and scientific management is evident in the dominant managerial discourse that constructs manager work as expertise-based, viewing the manager as conducting rational analysis, being involved in decision-making, and having control over organizational activities (Tengblad, 2012; Watson, 2001). Although more recent research has contributed to a broader understanding of managerial identities, it can still be argued that the manager as an "all-knowing" individual remains the most dominant perspective in organizations and societies (Tengblad, 2012). This view is often reflected by individuals themselves assuming their identity as a manager typically presents themselves as confident, independent and knowledgeable (Hill, 2003). This illustrates how the ideal of a manager as all-knowing potentially could influence managerial identity, as managers internalize the ideal and start to identify upon these terms (Hill, 2003). In this way, the assumption of the all-knowing manager can also be regarded as forming the base for managers' authority and legitimacy (Goffman, 1967). However, this image of the "all-knowing" manager has implications for the manager's identity as it creates ideals for the manager to live up to (Tengblad, 2012; Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2016). This indicates that managers are presented with the idealizations of how they should be and should act to fulfill the expectations of the manager position. However, this can become a struggle if there exists a discrepancy between reality and the ideal (Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2016).

2.1.4 Becoming a manager

On the assumption of the process theory, we claim that managerial identities transform and "become" something new rather than just staying the same (Weick, 1995; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Hence, individuals in organizational contexts constantly strive to shape and develop their identities and at the same time are being formed by discursive forces (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Therefore, the process theory guides most of our arguments in this study, as we will be investigating the transition of individuals from one professional role to the other. Based on this, we will in this study refer to the processes of becoming a manager as a process that entails the transition towards a manager role and the development of a managerial identity.

The idea of constantly becoming a manager is not new. Andersson and Wickelgren (2009) view managerial becoming as a fluid process and the state of being a manager can therefore never be fully achieved. Hay (2014) points out that organizations often ignore the emergence of managerial identities and hence, ignore the process of managerial becoming. A study conducted by Koleša (2021) shows that individuals are often left to their own resources in transitioning to their new role and identity. In other words, managers are to a large extent left to manage themselves through the process. This points out the relevance to conduct further research on the process of becoming a manager.

2.2 Identity work

The previous section highlighted the assumption that identities are in a constant state of transformation and that individuals create their identities in relation to others. Managers can therefore be seen as being in a continuous process of forming and developing their identities, that is engaging in identity work. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) describe identity work as *"people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness"* (p. 1165). In a multifaceted and unstable world, identities become destabilized and individuals have to actively deal with constantly adapting their identities (Goffman, 1959; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Hence, identity work can be seen as a form of struggle to maintain a coherent and positive self-view during a crisis or transition (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016). As mentioned above, identities,

as well as identity work, are not discrete phenomena that exist in a vacuum but are always created in relation to others in the form of collective groups or organizations (Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2016; Snow and Anderson, 1987). Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) have identified five different forms of identity work for managers: first, identity adjustment, which is concerned with individual self-image, dealing with the interpretation of the work context in relation to others – managers might have to deal with tasks they do not particularly like, but do that without causing difficult identity problems; second, identity expression, represents a form of identity work in which the individual struggles with accepting fixed identity placements. Here the individual adapts his or her identity to suit established managerial ideals. The third form, identity juggling, deals with the inner conflict of individuals to bridge the gap between the actual managerial tasks and how the individual wants to be perceived as a manager. This form of identity work can potentially lead to identity wrestling or even identity crashing. Those last two forms of identity work represent rather problematic and negative forms of identity work and deal with the problem that the individual's self-view is only vaguely confirmed by others. This emphasizes the importance for individuals to engage in intensive identity work in order to reinforce or maintain their identity (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016). In the following, we will use the concept of identity work as a way to explore the internal examination of one's own identity and investigate what kind of friction and identity struggles identity work processes may give rise to. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) investigated different ways of dealing with this friction caused by identity work which will be further explained in the next section.

2.2.1 Decoupling

A study conducted by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) illustrates the struggle many managers face with having to move from a rather bureaucratic role to being strategic leaders. They emphasize that managers establish fantasies of being visionary and strategic, which means that they try to hide the existing operative part in their managerial role. In their study, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) present different ways of dealing with this friction caused by identity work. One of the ways to deal with the friction is through decoupling, which is described as a way for managers to create separate managerial identities in an attempt to maintain their desired identity. This means that individuals "decouple" from their identity by pretending to do something attractive like leadership, but in fact, they still do operational tasks. In that way, decoupling is

used to ease the struggle of managers who saw themselves as trapped in having to do rather operative tasks than acting out the desired strategic activities (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016).

In this way, decoupling can be seen as a way to deal with the friction and illustrate how identity work can act as a buffering effect against the external environment (Dunne, 1996; McAdams, 1993). According to Ibarra (1999), identity work can serve as support when people move into new professional positions. In order to successfully adapt to a new position, individuals must not only gain new skills but also accept a new context which implies other social norms and rules that determine how individuals approach the new situation (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Individuals have to gradually internalize the new corresponding identity in order to enact the new role (Goffman, 1959). This emphasizes the importance for individuals to socially locate themselves in the new position (Ibarra, 1999). This reflects the consensus of socialization literature, which concludes that identity changes accompany changes in the professional work role (Ibarra, 1999). Hill (2003) therefore underlines the obligation for organizations to provide a supportive environment and resources to ease the demand for work role changes and career transitions. Hill (2003) points out that career transitions, such as a transition to a manager role, require support from the company and further argues that managing the transition to become a manager is a joint responsibility of the individual and the organization.

2.3   Management development

As a starting point in this section, we need to outline our theoretical assumption. In the last decades, scholars have been debating the term *management development*. The discussion has been centered around the distinction between management and leadership (Hill and Stewart, 2007). Here, the literature presents polarized positions: those who make a clear distinction between the two and regard them as completely separated from each other, and those who regard them as the same (Hill and Stewart, 2007). Although we consider the distinction to be relevant, we will not make any further analytical distinctions between leadership and management, but rather consider both of them part of management development.

In today's contemporary businesses, there has been an increased interest in developing managerial capabilities within organizations (Rigg, 2007). In essence, management development

is described as the process in which managers learn and improve managerial skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Hill, 2003). Burgoyne (1988) points out that there is always a degree of natural management development processes taking place in organizations and refers to development that happens without deliberate or planned purpose. This non-systematic approach is only efficient to a certain point but is often working well in smaller, entrepreneurial settings. As the organization matures, the need for deliberate approaches to management development increases (Burgoyne, 1988). Several researchers argue about the importance of developing managerial capabilities through on-the-job experience (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; Hill, 2003).

2.3.1 On-the-job experience and management internships

Davies and Easterby-Smith (1984) argue that learning and development can be regarded as emerging through interaction between a person and their environment. From this perspective, managers can be seen to develop most effectively via on-the-job experience and when given the opportunity to gain experiences in interactions with others (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; Hill, 2003). Managerial work is often fragmented and it can be difficult to understand what the work entails as well as what is expected of the role (Tengblad, 2012). Hill (2003) argues that management development includes paradoxical dimensions; managers cannot be told what they have to know, but rather need to experience it themselves to fully understand the comprehensiveness of managerial responsibility. This argues for the importance for managers to have the possibility to exercise managerial tasks and gain on-the-job experience in order to internalize the complex content and expectations of the job (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; Hill, 2003). Hence, providing managers with the opportunity to preview the managerial role is described as crucial for management development (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; Hill, 2003). Hill (2003, p.242) conceptualizes this preview with the term *management internship*, which is defined as a management development practice in which potential managers undertake managerial responsibilities, such as taking on a junior reportee, before being promoted to the first manager position. The benefit of this approach is that both parties have the opportunity to observe the other – the individual experiences executing managerial work tasks and the organization is provided with reliable evidence of the individual's proclivity for the manager role and hence has the opportunity to assess if the individual has what it takes (Hill, 2003).

The possibility to preview the manager role has implications on manager identity work too. Through providing management internships, potential managers may begin to form managerial perspectives and managerial knowledge and skills as well as assess if managerial work is intrinsically rewarding to them (Hill, 2003). According to Ibarra (1999), individuals adapt to new professional roles by experimenting with trying out images that serve as possible, but not yet fully established identities. These trials can be seen as "*provisional selves*" which try to connect the gap between self-conceptions and expectations of the role (Ibarra, 1999, p. 787).

However, it is argued that management internships require close attention to establishing supportive and nurturing relationships to foster the development of the individual (Hill, 2003; Winterton and Winterton, 1999). It may seem obvious, but many management development practices fail to meet this requirement (Hill, 2003). Management development practices such as management internships should not be considered a sink-or-swim or survival-of-the-fittest proposition, but rather enhance a supporting environment aiming to improve managerial effectiveness through a deliberate and thoughtful process (Winterton and Winterton, 1999; Hill, 2003).

2.4 Organizational resources to ease the transition

In the last chapter, we pointed toward earlier studies that indicate that on-the-job experience plays the most significant role in the transition to becoming a manager. However, it is important to acknowledge that learning and development can come from a variety of sources (Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; Hill, 2003; Burgoyne and Stewart, 1976). Although the opportunity to experience and execute managerial work is seen as the most significant resource when transitioning to a first manager role, Hill (2003) identified some other organizational resources indicating to facilitate and ease the development into a manager role – peer network relations and formal training.

2.4.1 Peer network relations

Hill (2003) identified that observing and interacting with other coworkers – particularly past and current peers – was an important resource for a new manager. From these experiences important competencies could be acquired, which influence what values and attitudes are important, and

create a sense of instrumental and psychosocial support, especially during periods of transition and stress (Hill, 2003). Kram and Lynn (1985) confirm this perspective by stating that peer relations provides support for the individuals' sense of competence, and can function to provide confidence in the professional role. In this way, peers confirm each other through sharing "*perceptions, values, and beliefs*" related to their work (Kram and Lynn, 1985, p.118) which is suggested as crucial in helping individuals establish and maintain a continuous sense of competence, responsibility, and identity throughout their careers (Hill, 2003; Kram and Lynn, 1985).

Peer relations can be seen to have implications for identity as well, as it creates a sense of belonging and compatibility between the individual and the social environment in which peers confirm each other's professional identity (Milton and Westphal, 2005; Weaver et al., 2011). Professional identity can be seen to be related both to social and role identities, and become a matter of the individual's self-conceptualization associated with the role adopted (Adams et al., 2006; Hall, 1987; McGowen and Hart, 1990; Weaver et al., 2011; Barker Caza and Creary, 2016). From this perspective, peers within the same social group who share certain skills or knowledge can be regarded to constitute a group of individuals within the same professional sphere (Barker Caza and Creary, 2016). From a social identity perspective, professional identity involves interactions between individuals in the workplace, and relates to how a group of individuals differentiate and compare themselves from other professional groups (Adams et al. 2006; Weaver et al., 2011). Professional identity can hence be described as the "*attitudes, values, knowledge, beliefs and skills that are shared with others within a professional group*", which emphasize the relations to the professional role undertaken by the individual (Adams et al., 2006, p. 56). A study by Weaver et al. (2011) indicates that professional identity is reinforced by professional inclusivity and social exclusivity. In their study, professional inclusivity describes how professional identity is empowered and reinforced when individuals are treated as professionals by their environment (Weaver et al., 2011). Social exclusivity, on the other hand, occurs when groups of individuals are isolated from other (social) groups, which ultimately leads to a sense of peer unity and a shared sense of identity within the groups. Based on this, Weaver et al. (2011) therefore suggest a coherent relationship between the sense of belonging to a group

and being accepted by the environment and the feeling of being exclusive when compared to other social groups.

Previous studies show that peers who are in the same position are important resources for new managers to rely on (Hill, 2003). Hill's (2003) study of how new managers transition into their first manager role indicates that managers that had an extensive and varied network, and who were willing to ask for help, found it easier to cope with challenges during the first year. Hill (2003) identified that several managers rely on networks they already had when entering the manager role, which points toward the importance for organizations to create opportunities for new managers to extend their network.

2.4.2 Formal training

Although the effectiveness of formal training in management development processes is highly disputed in research, some studies point out that it still plays an important, although limited part, in the development of new managers (Burgoyne and Stewart, 1976; Davies and Easterby-Smith, 1984; Hill, 2003). According to Hill (2003), formal training fulfills five critical functions: acquainting new managers with corporate policies, procedures, and resources; providing valuable insights into corporate culture; creating a forum in which managers could receive feedback; facilitating relationships with peers; and serving the function as a rite of passage.

Formal training provides managers with the opportunity to gain specific knowledge about how to do their job, as well as conveys corporate assumptions, norms, and values to the manager (Hill, 2003). Formal training can hence be seen to provide managers with a framework for thinking about how to handle common dilemmas, understand best practices, and evaluate behavior and performance within the organization (Hill, 2003). Formal training programs also provide a platform for managers to increase their networks of relationships, which means that formal training functions to facilitate the establishment of developmental relations such as peer relations (Hill, 2003).

Furthermore, formal training can be seen as serving as a rite of passage, symbolizing the organization's faith in the new manager and the willingness to invest in them (Hill, 2003). In this

regard, formal training can be seen to hold a great amount of ritualistic quality (Hill, 2003). Ulrich (1984) explains rituals as repeated actions that take on meaning and establish important "regularities" in organizations. Rituals also indicate what values are promoted. Hence, rituals regarding organizational activities such as training and development procedures, therefore, withholds a symbolic value (Ulrich, 1984). In other words, formal training emphasizes the ritualistic and symbolic value of transition from one position to another. In the following chapter, we will therefore consider how symbolic rituals play an important part in career transition, such as moving to a manager position.

2.5   Career transitions

Any transition, moving from one position to another, can be conceptualized as a phase of change (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). Here, rites of passage play an important part, as it is a "*rite that marks a person's transition from one set of socially identified circumstances to anothe*r" (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005, p. 53). The concept of rite of passage originated with the French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (1909/1960). Van Gennep argued that human life is characterized by two basic phenomena: individuals simultaneously belong to various social categories; and belonging to these social categories is not static (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). Although the concept of rites of passage is originally associated with transitions in the life cycle and the transitions of an individual through socially constructed categories of age or development, Mayrhofer and Iellatchi (2005) argue that in today's changing landscape, the concept can be transferred into the career of individuals. Throughout their career, individuals constantly move and change social categories.

Career transition can take place both within or between a social domain (Andersson, 2005). It is emphasized that changes between social domains, changing from one context to another, can generally be seen as easier, while changes within a social domain need a more articulated definition of the new role (Andersson, 2005). Consequently, rites and ceremonies become an essential part when transitioning to a new role within the same organization and the same social domain (Andersson, 2005). Career transitions within an organization and the change of social categories inevitably involve moving across intra-organizational boundaries (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). Moving across boundaries is associated with a number of uncertainties for the

individual. When social categories change, individuals are put in situations where new demands occur, which means that established patterns of behavior and interpretation are no longer adequate to meet these demands (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). Yip et al. (2020) point out that transitioning to a first manager role is particularly uncertain and challenging since the individual does not have the referential frameworks allowing them to tackle the new situations of being a manager.

Career transitions have meanings beyond the pure work-related aspects, which means that it is not just addressing work-related aspects, but also have a symbolic value (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). In this way, rites "do" as well as "say" something – how, when, by whom, with whose acceptance, and so on, convey important messages. (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). Rites can be defined as a relatively elaborate, extraordinary set of activities that bring together various forms of cultural expressions into one event (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005; Andersson, 2005). Trice and Morand (1989) argue that rites of passage are helpful in understanding career transitions as the concept describes how role transitions within a social system is managed though ceremonial events.

2.5.1 The framework of rite of passage

The framework of rite of passage describes how career transition can be distinguished into three different phases accompanying role transitions: separation, transition, and incorporation (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). The first phase, separation, represents the transition and the process of letting go and separating from the former position (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). This illustrates how individuals have to let go and separate from their current state of mind or role (Andersson, 2005). Consequently, it is acknowledged that the process of transition starts long before the actual exit of the physical role (Ashforth, 2001). This separation phase is described to require a lot of energy from the individual and is often connected to a feeling of instability (Andersson, 2005).

The second phase, transition rites, is linked to an intermediate, "neither-nor" state in which the individual is neither in the previous position nor in the next. This represents the period of transition and is described as an in-between state in which individuals make minor changes to

test the new role (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). Ashforth (1998) emphasizes that this step-by-step identification with the new role can be seen as testing the role through minor low-risk changes. Weick (1984) defines this as essential small wins which are important to transfer into the aspired role.

The last phase, incorporation rites, can be seen to support the integration into the new position (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). This implies that the individual establishes a feeling of confidence and acceptance of the new role (Andersson, 2005). However, Ashforth (1998) points out that next to a personal validation of the role, social validation and acceptance of the environment has to take place to fully accept the new role.

To summarize, the different phases of rites of passage can be seen to reduce uncertainty as it allows a social system to conceptualize individual development. Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005) point out that rites create expectancy which means that it has the potential to ease the transition for both individuals and the wider the social context by (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). This means that through different types of rites, uncertainty can to a certain degree be converted into expectable steps (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005).

2.6   Identity regulation

In the previous chapters, we have examined our main assumptions of identity which will be relevant for our further research. Furthermore, we have explored what organizational resources potentially could ease the development into a manager role, and emphasized the importance of ritual events when transitioning to a manager role. We will now evaluate the critical side of organizational resources by considering the concept of identity in relation to organizational control and resistance.

During the last decades, there has been an increased managerial attentiveness to regulating employees' "insides", referring to the self-image and feelings of organizational members (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 1992). This derives from concepts of culture management and normative control, which have been dominating topics in organizational research and critical management writings (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 1992; Müller, 2017; Willmott,

1993). This form of organizational control regulates and controls the "inside" of employees through the culture rather than through bureaucratic rules (Kunda, 1992). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue that identity is an important dimension of organizational control. In their influential article "Identity Regulation as Organizational Control" (2002), they refer to this as identity regulation and point out that organizational control can be accomplished through targeting identity construction processes in which employees position themselves within discourses about work and organization.

Organizational discourse is described as the language used in organizational practices to differentiate and structure (social) reality, ultimately "*framing the way people understand and act*" (Watson, 2001, p. 113). As a result, discourse creates a world-view that justifies certain actions as reasonable and legitimate (Grant, Keenoy, and Oswick, 2001; Alvesson, 2004). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) point out that management plays an important role in introducing, reproducing, and legitimizing the presence of particular discourses. In addition, they assert that management-orchestrated identities, in which self-identity is constructed and maintained through managerial discourses, can lower employee anxiety and help them cope with ambiguity. Nevertheless, from a less positive perspective, the dominance of management-arranged identities restricts the possibility of critical reflection and may lead to employees becoming devoted to a particular set of meanings (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) emphasize that discourses play a significant role in identity formation processes. A large part of the discourse existence and accessibility in organizations is shaped as well as institutionalized in organizational practices, often expressed via concepts such as "corporate culture" (Alvesson, 2004). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe how this enables the possibility to embrace the notion of "we" in organizations. From this perspective, organizations can be regarded as a significant source of identification for individuals, which in turn informs the individuals' identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Organizational processes such as training can therefore have implications to shape the "right" identity in preference to the company (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). This emphasizes that organizational control operates through the "*management of identity*", primarily through discourses, to influence, regulate and change identities within work organizations (Alvesson and Willmott,

2002, p. 632.) The organization's prevailing discourses have consequences on self-identity as employees position their identity in relation to these discourses (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Previous studies indicate that management automatically produces a certain kind of work orientation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). This neglects practical implications in which such types of control interplay with events and cultural meanings that are activated in processes of identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) point out that there is often a plurality of discourses and practices within organizations, and that identities should therefore be regarded as only partly regulated by management-driven regulation. Hence, "counter-discourses" and other processes can therefore discredit or inhibit identity regulation. This emphasizes the struggle to establish and sustain a sense of self-identity, since it is framed by various images, ideals, and ways of being (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

2.6.1 Resistance

In the previous section, we have outlined the critical side of organizational resources by considering the concept of identity in relation to organizational control. Resistance is understood to represent a particular relationship between power and control (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Fleming and Spicer, 2007). As control in the workplace involves specific sets of rules that influence and determine work behavior and subjectivity, resistance can be seen as working to disrupt this process in favor of those who are controlled (Fleming and Spicer, 2007). Thompson and Ackroyd (1995) emphasize that individuals are never fully adopted by certain prevailing discourses in organizations, but that there is always resistance taking place in some form.

In workplaces, resistance can take various forms. Fleming and Spicer (2007) make a distinction between different dimensions of resistance at work: resistance as refusal, voice, escape, and creation. Refusal is simply the blocking of power by refusing to do something; voice attempts to gain legitimate representation within the power relation, escape involves distancing oneself from realities of power via cynicism, irony, and humor; and creation counteracts subjugation by creating an alternative identity (Fleming and Spicer, 2007). Resistance in management development programs is generally positioned as a critical response by participants to the content or process of the program, but could also take the form of refusal by individuals to conform to an

organizational-regulated identity (Caroll and Nicholoson, 2014). This refusal type of resistance has the potential to happen in dramatic forms, but Contu (2008) points out that it often happens under more "softer" forms in which individuals can participate without too much risk or cost, but still remain subjective. This risk-free form of resistance rarely has the fuel to destroy the machine of power but infuses the individual to retain their sense of subjectivity throughout the process (Contu, 2008).

3. Methodology

The purpose of this section is to present the underpinning assumptions of the study, as well as outline the process for collecting and analyzing the empirical data. We have conducted 10 semi-structured interviews, as well as observed four different training sessions of an internal manager training program. First, we will start with the philosophical grounding and research tradition to consider what ontological assumptions informed our study. Subsequently, we will continue with our research design and process on how we collected and analyzed our empirical material. Finally, we will complete with some concluding thoughts by addressing credibility and reflexivity.

3.1   Philosophical grounding

The base for our study revolves around individual experiences and perceptions of the process to transition towards a manager role and identity. The result of this study can therefore never be regarded to illustrate an objective truth, but rather encapsulate the individual's subjective perspectives and world-views. The study hence follows a subjectivist research philosophy, which emphasizes the view of reality as socially constructed. From this view, humans shape their understanding of the world through talking with each other, agreeing on interpretations of reality, and acting based on these interpretations (Prasad, 2018). These arguments and framing are based on a constructionist ontology which indicates that contexts are socially constructed and underline the importance of undertaking a process perspective that takes into account how processes unfold over time (Bryman and Bell, 2007). On that basis, the study is grounded on the view that human beings, and consequently managers, are always in the process of "becoming". This view excludes a cause-effect study and will therefore not provide us with definite answers, as it is not possible to separate the causes of the organizational-established initiatives and resources from other causes. This study can therefore rather be seen to adopt a constructionist ontology and processual view as we aim to gain an understanding of how identities develop over time, rather than search for definite answers.

3.2 Interpretive research tradition

The thesis is mainly based on a qualitative research design drawing on interpretive tradition and the methodological approach such as symbolic interactionism and hermeneutics. The data collection has been done through semi-structured interviews and observation in order to explore how managers experience and interpret their transition to the first manager position.

Individual interpretation is crucial within symbolic interactionism and thus, to understand the symbolic aspect of manager training, we will examine how managers interpret and make sense of the phenomenon and the variety of emotions and responses it may evoke (Prasad, 2018). The interpretive tradition acknowledges an interactionist perspective and views reality as created in interactions with others (Prasad, 2018), which is important for our study as we explore an organizational context and its social practices. Central concepts in the symbolic interactionist research are role-taking and identity (Prasad, 2018), which are relevant for our study, as we are looking into the transition to a manager position. The symbolic interactionist perspective is interested in exploring how the roles we take on in life provide us with identities and how that becomes the source of the constructions of reality (Prasad, 2018). As we are taking a processual perspective in this study and exploring the "becoming" of a manager, we have directed our attention mainly to the process, which is viewed as an important aspect within the symbolic interactionist research tradition (Prasad, 2018).

To interpret the observations we will be drawing on methods associated with hermeneutics. The hermeneutic approach is usually interconnected with the matter of text, but can also be applied to understand the usage of language in relation to its wider context (Prasad, 2018). The interpretation of language mainly guided us in our observation of the different sessions of the management training programs. Hence, we take into account the hermeneutic circle, which suggests that the meaning of language can not only be drawn from the words, such as the language used in the training sessions but has to be examined in a wider context (Prasad, 2018).

3.3　Research design and process

To gain a better understanding of managers' interpretations and experiences, we chose to conduct our research using a single case organization. Yin (2014) argues that a case-based research study enables researchers to gain a better insight into real-life context of a particular phenomenon. We collected the empirical data through various methods, referred to as triangulation (Flick, 2004), which according to Yin (2014) is useful for case study-based research as it provides a broad base for how to interpret the material in order to answer the research questions. Combining data sources may help balance out the subjective influences of individuals and make the empirical findings more convincing (Flick, 2004; Yin, 2014). This balancing act refers both to the individuals we interview, as well as us as researchers in our interpretations of the empirical data.

3.3.1　Case context

The organization at the center of our case study is a Scandinavian company operating within the marketing-technology industry in which they mainly help clients with digital marketing efforts. The company is fairly young, both in terms of operating years and in terms of the people working there, as the average age of employees is 30 years. The organization has eight offices across five countries, consists of approximately 500 people, and has a flat hierarchy. A large part of the company's overall hiring strategy revolves around hiring graduates and letting them grow and develop within the company. There are several examples of people in senior management positions that started as graduates and then advanced to senior leading positions throughout the years. Consequently, the company is a place where a lot of people begin their careers, and therefore, where many people take on their first manager role. As the purpose of this study is to examine the experience of managers in their first manager position, this company was ideal for conducting a study.

3.3.2　Data collection

For collecting the empirical data, we have conducted ten semi-structured interviews, as well as observed four different training sessions of the company's internal manager training.

3.3.2.1 Interviews

Interviews as a method enable researchers to understand the interviewee's experiences from their subjective point of view (Kvale, 1996). Since managers' experiences are central to this study, we focused on conducting interviews with managers who recently started their first middle manager role. For this reason, most of the interviewed managers were in their first manager job and had approximately one year to only a couple of months of experience in the manager positions. The age of the managers ranged from 25-35 years. The time aspect was important when selecting interviewees since we wanted managers to remember their experiences and feelings as they made the transition to a manager position. Therefore, we choose to interview managers that quite recently made this transition. The majority of the managers selected for the interviews have technical backgrounds and have up until their manager role operated as technical experts in their disciplines. Among most managers, this is their first manager job, and they have only one year or a few months of experience. Some managers have been with the company for several years, while some started only recently. In the following analysis and discussion, the managers will be referred to as "managers" or be provided with figurative names.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) point out that a good interview should *"contribute thematically to knowledge production and dynamically to promoting good interview interactions"* (p.131). This approach was adopted to structure the course of the interviews, as we alternated between asking thematic questions relevant to the research topic, but also made sure to keep the flow of the interview and stimulate interviewees to talk about their experiences and feelings. We designed our interview guide upon the same premises and formulated questions in relation to our research purpose and research questions. The interview guide was used as a support to make sure to keep the interviews on track. However, we allowed ourselves the flexibility to ask other more spontaneous questions to react to unpredictable and interesting statements. A helpful element in the process of creating the interview guide was that we were able to observe the workshops in advance. Through the observations, we were, therefore, able to get an insight into different topics relevant to our study. For example, the topic of "identity crisis" was raised by one of the workshop leaders, which we then explored further in our interviews. We also observed the general mood and frequency of interactions and picked up on this in the interviews to reflect how the training was received by the participants.

The interview was conducted in two rounds. The first round consisted of four interviews with the aim to provide us with an initial understanding of relevant or surprising topics. The study can be viewed to follow an abductive research approach as we have aimed to shift between empirical and theoretical perspectives throughout the process (Alvehus, 2020; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). Having two rounds of interviews allows us to interpret patterns in relation to pre-understanding in the form of previous research in the first round, and let that guide us further in the second interview round.

3.3.1.2 Observations

To provide a broader understanding of the organizational context, including the norms and values underpinning it, observation was included in the data collection. The observation was conducted by participating in four sessions of the company's internal manager training.

The internal manager training program observed in this study consisted of five sessions which were presented as online group-wide training with cross-office participants of newly appointed managers. The first session covered the topic "Manager role and expectations" and was held online with eighteen participants from various locations. The purpose of this session was to set the role and expectations for managers, equip them with the same mindset, increase confidence in the role as well as let everyone find their own style of being a manager. The second session covered the topic "performance management". The purpose of this session was to give an introduction to the performance review process, as well as equip managers with resources to develop and motivate their subordinates. The third session was around the topic "Building a strong team", but due to internal circumstances, this session was canceled and held at a company-wide forum, which meant that we could not observe this particular session. The fourth session was on the topic "Feedback" with the purpose to discuss how to give and receive feedback as well as how to create and enhance a feedback culture. Lastly, the fifth session was centered on the topic "situational-based leadership" which equipped managers with leadership frameworks to develop their own leadership style and be able to adapt their style depending on their subordinates. The different training sessions were led by top management and Human

Resource representatives. In the following analysis and discussion, they will be referred to as "workshop leaders".

During the training sessions, we took field notes, both regarding the content but also about how the content was framed, and observed the reactions from participants. Furthermore, we paid close attention to what questions were raised by the participating managers in order to grasp what they stressed as important. The observation provided us with information about what internal resources were provided for the participating managers to support their training and transition to the manager role. In the manager training program, the manager learns what values and norms are meaningful for the manager role, from the perspective of the organization. Thus, the observation gave us an understanding of how the organization constructs the manager role, which we used to explore how it influences the managers' experience of transitioning to a manager role.

3.3.3 Data analysis

The data analysis and interpretation of the empirical material started with collecting the data (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). This indicates that some raw interpretations inevitably were already made during the observation and interviews. However, in order to code as open as possible and ensure that the study did not miss possible new perspectives, we started looking at the empirical material using the concept of initial open coding (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). The starting point was therefore to familiarize ourselves with the empirical data to find themes, patterns, and repetitions. Furthermore, we transcribed the interviews to make the sorting, reducing, and categorization process more convenient. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) view transcription as an interpretive process in which oral speech and social interaction become translated into a more abstract written form. While the process to transcribe the material into a written form made us more focused on what was being said, one risk was that we would lose the aspect of how things are said, such as tone of voice or use of humor. However, as we recorded the interviews, we were able to alternate between the transcription and the audio material when doing the data analysis. In terms of sorting, reducing, and categorizing the data from the observations, we went through field notes and looked at company documents (power presentations) to find patterns as well as repetitions and compare identified themes to what we

found in the interviews. We particularly paid attention to the language used by the workshop leaders for the different training sessions and how they related the content to their own experiences. Additionally, we looked at the questions the participating managers brought up and compared them to the themes to look for contradictions or surprising notions. After each interview, we recorded our spontaneous notes and key takeaways. This enabled us to grasp initial themes and helped us in structuring our thoughts and first impressions.

We used categorization to sort and reduce our empirical material. Emphasis was put on categorization reduction in which we prioritized certain themes and categories to make sense of the data (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). As a starting point, we aimed to find some core categories in the data from the interview, which are referred to by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) as central concepts or themes that frequently appear in the data. While looking at the data, we aimed to combine the questions "what" and "how" recommended by Gubrium and Holstein (1997). Considering the constructionist approach, we asked ourselves: "what is a manager at the company?"; "how is that manager role portrayed?", and "how do managers experience the transition to becoming a manager?". Asking these questions made us discover a distinction between the experiences of being in a manager role and the experiences of the actual transition into the manager role. This formed the foundation for our analytical distinction between the state of "being" versus the process of "becoming", which ultimately became our main assumptions of the study.

For the categorization and sorting process, we first worked individually to identify relevant themes. In a second step, we discussed each interview and compared the identified themes. The themes we identified early on were related to the respondents' experience of the transition to a manager role. They aimed to explore what organizational initiatives and resources were viewed as supporting the transition for the managers. Our initial idea was to investigate the company's internal manager training program. However, throughout the categorization and sorting process, we identified another organizational resource to be influential in the transition process: the so-called team-in-team setting, an integrated management development practice, was stressed as supporting the transition to a manager position even more than the manager training program. Due to these findings, we were able to broaden the scope of our study and include this concept in

our further analysis. Furthermore, since we started the categorization and sorting process closely to our data collection, we could include the team-in-team concept in our interview guide and explore the topic further in the second interview round.

To help the sorting process, we used a color-coded excel sheet to create some overarching themes and categories in which we added selected quotes from the interviews. This created a comprehensive base for the reduction process. The reduction process was closely interlinked with re-sorting and re-analyzing the findings, an aspect Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) argue is crucial in order to not get caught up in certain interpretations.

The reducing process was directed to create a better order and gain an overview of the empirical data. Here we used the above-mentioned excel sheet and went through all the different categories and selected quotes to make it coherent and to find similarities and connections between the identity theme. One important aspect of the reduction process related to the matter of representation, which refers to the significance of representing examples of the data in a clarifying and accurate manner (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). This means that we carefully discussed each category thoroughly to make sure that we made a genuine representation of the manager's answers and descriptions of their reality.

As a first step to analyzing our identified themes, we constructed excerpt commentary units where we briefly indicated our analytical point, introduced the empirical excerpt as well as used analytical comments to include a theoretical message (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). At first, the excerpt units were rather descriptive, but along the way, we added more depth and analytical points. Styhre (2013, p.37) points out that empirical data "*doesn't speak for itself*", which means that we as researchers needed to take an active role in inscribing meaning to our empirical findings. Our aim in the analysis process was to describe the significance of empirical findings in regard to the purpose of the study and the research questions, while still allowing room for alternative interpretations and discussions.

3.4   Credibility and Reflexivity

The extent to which the results of a study can be seen as valid for other contexts than solely the specific situation studied is referred to as generalization (Ryen, 2004). The fundamental assumption underpinning our study is based on an interpretative research tradition and a constructionist ontology, which means we are not claiming to find objective truths but rather aiming to explore subjective experiences and interpretations. Thus, the conclusions from the study need to be considered in the context of the case, and therefore limit the generalizability and refrain us from making any general statements or widespread conclusions. The results of this study can rather help to create an understanding of how managers experience the transition to their first manager position than make generalizations that are valid for all situations. Moreover, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2010) point out that qualitative studies based on subjective meanings and interpretations are heavily influenced by both the subjectivity of respondents as well as researchers' own interpretations. Hence, we refrain from making any broader generalization of this study, but view it as considered within its context. Ryen (2004) argues that research results within qualitative research should be regarded as providing a perspective rather than a generalizable truth. Nevertheless, even if we can not claim the result of the study to be generalizable for all situations or contexts, the requirement of quality and credibility of the study need to be addressed.

To begin with, our empirical material is mainly based on interviews, whose implications for the quality of the study and its results need to be addressed in a reflexive way. Schaefer and Alvesson (2020, p. 33) argue that there is an overall lack of "*source critique*" in interview research today and claim that few studies take a "*careful and reflective stance toward their sources*". This draws attention to the importance of researchers to evaluate and probe interview accounts and other empirical material in a careful and deliberate way.

Although we assume that our respondents intended to provide us with honest and truthful statements, we need to critically assess their interview accounts. What needs to be taken into account is that in interview situations, individuals may, more or less consciously, not express authentic experiences. Alvesson and Kärreman (2007, p. 1269) point out that instead of expressing authentic experiences, people may rather express favored realities that may be

politically motivated or correspond to a certain "*institutionalized standard talk*". Besides that, it is also important to be aware that the individuals may formulate their answers with the intention to satisfy the author's interests (Alvesson, 2011). This was an important aspect for us to take into consideration, particularly regarding the topic of identity. Here, fantasies about one's identity as well as how the manager wants to be perceived become an important factor in their identity construction. When interpreting the empirical material we critically acknowledged that the manager, potentially unconsciously, may have given us answers corresponding with the "managerial rhetorics", inevitably influenced by the ideals and fantasies surrounding the manager role. To deal with the issue of our respondents' authenticity, we carefully compared their answers several times and found overlapping themes. Moreover, we analyzed each interview individually and had a joint discussion in which we tried to challenge and reflect on our presumptions. Lastly, our roles as observers of the management training program helped us to ensure the credibility of the interview responses as we carefully compared the findings.

Alvesson and Sköldberg (2010) argue about the importance of reflexivity among researchers. This refers to the importance for researchers to critically question the context – both the object that is studied, as well as the researchers themselves. Therefore the reflexive approach influences us as researchers and affects which premises we interpret and analyze in the empirical material at all. Here we acknowledge that we are inevitably influenced by the same managerial discourse as our managers. First, both of us have previous work experience in which we have encountered different managerial efforts, which has shaped our understanding of organizational contexts. Second, throughout our studies, we have read about aspects related to leading people and organizations, which consequently has provided us with a certain framework for interpreting and understanding organizational phenomena. Lastly, we can imagine ourselves facing a similar position as managers in the future, which inevitably could affect how we interpret our findings. By bringing attention to this, we could become aware of and question our assumptions, and in this way approach the empirical material more carefully and thoughtfully.

3.5 Ethical reflection

To ensure compliance with ethical issues, the process of data collection and analysis are anchored in the research ethics from Lund University (2022). To protect the anonymity of the company the name of the company is not revealed. Each interview was initiated with a thorough explanation of the process and purpose of this study to ensure that every interviewee received the same information. Furthermore, we mentioned that we will record the interviews, and stressed that the content will be treated confidentially and will only be used for the purpose of this study. The participants were also given the right and opportunity to withdraw any content. To further comply with the principles of ethics we anonymized the names of the participants in the empirical data by replacing them with figured names.

4. Empirical Findings

In this chapter, we will present the main findings and analysis of the empirical material. Firstly, we will examine how the managers experience the transition to the manager position and particularly focus on what they perceive as challenging in the process. Subsequently, we direct our focus to the organizational culture and explore how it may impact the transition to the manager role. Thirdly, we will explore what company-established initiatives and resources supported and helped the managers in their transition to becoming managers. Lastly, we will examine how and when the managers perceive themselves as managers.

4.1 Experiences of transitioning to a manager role

As a starting point, we will explore how the managers experience the transition to a manager role. Regarding this, we identified the main theme in the empirical findings, which considers the struggle the managers had when leaving their former roles as experts within their respective disciplines.

4.1.1 Leaving the expert role

As Elinor described her view of what her responsibilities and everyday activities would be if she transferred to a manager role, she explained that she imagined the manager role to be much more strategic and involve holistic tasks. Like the majority of the managers in the study, Elinor comes from a technical background and has up until her manager role operated as a technical expert in her discipline. Therefore, the most significant change, and a major struggle several managers mention, is the shift going from a specialist role to a manager role. Some managers described this struggle as going from a very detailed and focused-oriented way of working, to working much more holistically with digital marketing efforts. They underlined the change of having to work more strategically in their new role as managers. This represents a shift of perspectives in which managers are more involved in long-term planning, rather than in executing tasks such as working hands-on with digital marketing campaigns. However, as in Elinor's case, it does not seem too realistic that this shift of perspectives can be implemented in practice at all times. Elinor explains that she still finds herself being too involved in operative tasks. Although she described that she still likes to get involved in operative tasks, she emphasized that doing both at

the same time is difficult to handle. Another manager, Josephine, stressed that gaining distance from operative activities is one of the most difficult parts for her when transitioning to a manager role:

> *"I think that one of the biggest challenges for me is to move away from just doing things myself and now just talking to everyone in the team constantly, trying to figure out, like, what are they working on? How can I help? What blockers do they have? How to ensure that they keep progressing with their projects basically. So that's been, and still is probably, the main challenge that at least I face as a manager."*

This challenge was further exemplified on several occasions during the internal manager training program. Particularly in the second training session concerning the topic of performance review, several managers showed difficulties letting go of the operational role. Throughout the session, the workshop leader tried to introduce topics regarding leadership and centered the discussion around how the performance review setting could be used as a tool for the manager to guide and develop their team. Surprisingly, questions that came up from the managers revolved around detailed, technical, and operative procedures. Rather than asking how to motivate people or how to transfer the vision, they were concerned with topics such as what steps to follow during a performance review. We observed how several managers were rather concerned about specific step-by-step processes, ignoring the workshop leader's attempts to reflect upon visionary topics. This illustrates the struggles of several managers to shift their perspective from an operative mindset to a more holistic and strategic way of thinking.

Coming from an expert role, several managers described having detailed expert knowledge in the area they were about to manage. Nevertheless, having expert knowledge can be seen as a double-edged sword. Several managers referred to their previous experience as something helpful in regard to their new manager role. They pointed out the importance for managers of having a good overview of what the team is working on and underlined that the knowledge gave them the ability to support their employees more efficiently, as they can relate to their daily work and struggles. However, several managers reflected upon their previous experience and knowledge as a limitation to the manager role. Some managers stressed that deep expert

knowledge can make them too involved in the work and can therefore create difficulties to let go of details. In some cases, there may be a risk that the manager becomes a gatekeeper to client responsibilities and as a result, they can become a barrier to professional growth if their team members do not have the opportunity to take on more client responsibilities.

4.1.2 Handling double roles

In our last section, we emphasized the struggle several managers experience in gaining distance from operative responsibilities when transitioning into a manager role. When we asked Elinor how she experienced the process of becoming a manager, she reflected that the change of work tasks was a rather slow and gradual process: "*I think like at the very beginning, I had sort of a maybe naive expectation that the change would happen overnight in me being less operational and more strategic*". She continued to reflect that there was no clear cut between the expert role and the manager role, leaving her with overwhelming feelings for a period of time.

As discussed in the previous section, the interviews illustrated that the majority of the managers partly felt stuck in the expert and operative role, while at the same time having to transition to a more strategic role. Whilst being in the transition, several managers had to take on managerial responsibilities along with their operative tasks, which meant they had to undertake double roles during a certain period of time. One manager, Maria, described this as a struggle of having to handle double roles:

> "The struggles that came with that was that the level of seniority that you were at when you became a new manager, didn't really allow you to kind of drop your operational duties altogether. So you ended up in this kind of limbo situation where you were half a manager and half a senior digital specialist, and you still had a lot of client contact, and you were still optimizing ads and accounts. And still, you were trying to be a manager at the same time."

This quote represents the general view, that handling double roles was perceived as rather stressful, hectic, and overwhelming. It was also repeatedly expressed that handling double roles caused difficulties for several managers to allocate their time efficiently. Constantly having to

switch between operational and strategic roles, seems to reduce the capacity to go as in-depth as they were used to in their former roles as experts. This implies that managers find it hard to focus on their previous work as experts, while at the same time feeling not yet fully arrived in their role as managers. One manager, Henry, described this challenge with a metaphor of spreading himself thin, which illustrates the tension for him to give up the former operative work when transitioning to a manager role:

> *"Yeah, I noticed from myself recently, that it, you know, limits my capacity to do that kind of deep work in some areas. So, when I'm spreading myself out, I'm also spreading myself a bit thin in some areas. So, I'm not really going too in-depth where maybe I could or should have in some areas, both in terms of the technical aspects of digital marketing, but also in terms of being like a better manager, like going more in-depth with some of the frameworks there."*

In this statement, words like *"spreading yourself thin"* indicate a negative connotation. This highlights that Henry views the change of work tasks towards more strategic work as a rather negative aspect, which ultimately led to him feeling as if he was not able to fully step into the manager role to the extent that he wanted.

4.1.3 Shift of perspective: How to make an impact behind the scenes

In the previous section, we highlighted the struggle several managers experience in handling double roles. Another struggle several managers seemed to experience was the shift in responsibility when moving from an expert role as an individual contributor to a manager role. This change, which can be seen as a potential challenge when entering the manager role, was discussed in the first training session. The purpose of that training session was to outline what it means to be a manager at the company. Here the workshop leader pointed out that being a manager means a shift in priorities – as a manager you are not only responsible for your individual results, but also the results of your team. This was referred to as a potential "identity crisis" as transitioning to the manager role can have a negative impact on the manager's own result. This shift of perspective was also repeatedly mentioned in the interviews as several managers mentioned how this changed the circumstance for receiving recognition and

confirmation. In their roles as technical experts, several managers expressed that they were used to being recognized through their own results and individual contributions, which provided them with the feeling of confirmation that they made an impact on the organization. In their new position as managers, several interviewees seem to struggle with finding new ways to make an impact. Although some managers perceived their new role as a way to potentially leverage their expertise by helping others develop, several managers expressed this new setting to be challenging. Henry, for example, pointed out how he has actively worked to make sure he continues making an impact in the organization: *"I'm used to overseeing a lot of details and being very like, proactive and being [involved in] project management and so on. So kind of taking a step back from that and relying on other people to do that, yeah that's a challenge. But I feel like I hopefully can do some work on a scale, so I can help a lot of people become great at these things and not just kind of do things myself"*. Another manager, Josephine, further underlined that making an impact is important to her. However, unlike other managers we talked to, she claims that she found a way of creating this impact in her new role:

> *"I've always liked developing things myself, so that's been like one key driver, always. But I'd say that the main reason for that is because I've always liked to have a great impact across the company in general. And basically, by doing this [being a manager] I achieved the same end result, like having a big impact. It's just not me doing it. It's more like you're behind the scenes."*

These quotes illustrate the importance for managers to find their own way to leverage their expertise *"behind the scenes"* and thus find a new way to make an impact in the organization. This was highlighted as a shift of perspective for several managers. Elinor, for example, described a situation in a recent client meeting where she actively shifted her perspective from focusing on clients to focusing more on the people in her team to be able to give them efficient feedback. She expressed that this is important to her, as she wants to help the team handle difficult situations and see them grow and develop in their role. She described how this ultimately led to her feeling like she still has a significant impact on the organization.

One striking notion is that there appears to be no prestige in stepping away from the operational work. It is quite the opposite: several managers experience mixed feelings about leaving their operational tasks behind, as this has been rewarding for them in terms of showing their contribution and impact on the organization. Although the managers had to leave their former roles as experts, many still enjoy being involved in the operational work and try to find ways to integrate it into their new roles. Some managers even described the necessity to still partly be involved in the operational work as the strategic client work entails the manager to have knowledge of the operational work tasks to understand interrelations of the work.

Another interesting notion was that several managers were rather hesitant in their decision to become managers. Most managers described that there was a practical reason why they became managers, as several managers explained that they were requested to become managers due to a rising need for technically knowledgeable managers in the growing organization. They perceived this reasoning as logical, but not necessarily as a planned or desired step in their career.

Throughout this section, we talked about the struggle to leave the expert role and fully take on the role of a manager, which leads to the challenge of having to handle double roles. We illustrated that several managers feel torn between both roles. On the one hand, they still enjoy being involved in operational tasks and see the importance of doing so to remain an overview of the situation. On the other hand, they struggle with allocating their time to both roles, which reduces the capacity to go in-depth. Therefore, managers perceive the constant switch between the roles as a barrier to letting go of the expert role and fully transitioning to the manager role. Hence, they see the risk of still being too involved in operational tasks, which might lead to difficulties in letting go of responsibility and the risk to act as a blocker for the professional development of their employees.

4.2 The impact of the organizational culture

In the last section, we talked about the struggle to leave the expert role and fully take on the role of a manager. In this section, we will now direct our focus to the organizational culture and explore how it may impact the transition to the manager role.

Throughout the interviews and the observations, the organizational culture was described as dynamic rather than strict and hierarchical. Several managers pointed out that the organizational culture is centered around the belief that each individual is best suited to figure out solutions for themselves and encourages people within the organization to find their way around problems, which is something that is particularly reinforced in the manager role. In general, managers expressed that they had not received that much guidance or clear instructions from top management regarding the manager role. Rather, they are encouraged to rely on their own sound judgment by trying things out and finding individual ways of dealing with problems. One manager, Maria, pointed out that she experienced this as helpful when entering her new role since it leads to her having more freedom to make decisions.

The company operates in a relatively young industry that is constantly changing, which affects the company culture. It is perceived that the company is change-driven, which means there are still parts of the organization that are not yet fully established. It was therefore a common theme in interviews for managers to discuss the challenges they faced in trying to navigate the changing environment to gain some stability. However, several managers seem to enjoy this dynamic and partially established environment and overall seem to have a positive view of the company culture and way of organizing work. In general, a majority of the managers seemed to feel that the free and non-hierarchical culture empowered them in their role. Despite that generally positive notion, the dynamic company culture was still partly experienced as an unstable environment, which has the potential to create insecurities and a lack of clarity for managers – particularly at the beginning of their manager journey. This is illustrated in a statement of Henry, who pointed out that the company culture itself can sometimes make it difficult for him to assess the boundaries of his management responsibilities. He illustrated the struggle by giving a recent example from the yearly salary review process in which he was unsure how far his management responsibility reached when setting new salaries. Due to the lack of written rules, there were certain uncertainties regarding the extent of his management authority. The strong focus for

managers to act independently and always rely on their judgment can hence be seen to sometimes become an internal conflict for managers. Some managers expressed that this made them hesitant to ask questions and that the uncertainty and unclarity can make them doubt their ability to always act in an independent manner.

4.3 Organizational resources and initiatives

In the last sections, we have examined the struggles managers perceive when transitioning to a manager role and explored in what cultural context the transition is taking place within. We will now look at what company-established initiatives and resources supported and helped the managers in their transition to becoming managers. First, we will take a closer look at how the manager journey started for a majority of the managers by focusing on the concept of "team-in-team". We will then continue to explore how the internal manager training program influences the transition to the manager role.

4.3.1 Team-in-team: possibility to try out the manager role

The majority of the managers referred to the start of their manager journey taking place in a "team-in-team" setting. The concept of "team-in-team" is described as a step-by-step approach to the manager role and consists of creating a smaller team in an already existing team. In that way, a senior manager leads the whole team, whilst a senior coworker receives responsibility for some employees in that team. Hence, the senior coworker is not yet an official manager but already gaining experience in managing certain managerial tasks. One manager, Lucas, described how the team-in-team setting enabled him to be seen as a manager before he officially became a manager:

> *"So, it was a long process for me, but I didn't like trying to do it quickly or anything. And when the promotion came out, people were like: 'What? Haven't you been managing the whole time?'. So that's also kind of the process at the company, that you are promoted once you have done the parts already."*

In that way, several managers describe their transition as easier because they already felt like managers before their official promotion. Another manager, Tracy, reflects on her transition to the manager role:

> *"For me it wasn't that hard actually. To be totally honest I felt like a manager [for the last two years]. And the reason for that is that I've been working on the largest project that we have here. And despite that I've had a team lead in the past, I have been a team lead within the team, so I felt it wasn't a big difference at all. It was just a difference in the title actually."*

According to this statement, the team-in-team process starts when a project lead is assigned to a large client project. In this way, the person starts positioning themselves as a senior figure, which makes the transition to the manager role easier as they already placed themselves as a leading and senior figure within the team. Maria described this as a natural transition: *"It was quite natural for me to kind of have that project and I guess that was like the key thing in both for me, like realizing that this is quite fun. And perhaps also for the company to see that I could actually kind of do that kind of stuff."* This quote highlights that the team-in-team concept is not only important for Maria's own realization about what she finds motivating, but it is also a way to be accepted by the company in her new role. Positioning herself as project lead gave her a preview of certain managerial responsibilities which ultimately can be seen as a way to prove to the company that she could handle the new responsibility.

Due to the team-in-team setting, several managers describe their transition as easier because they already felt like being accepted as managers before their official promotion. Lucas reflected on how the team-in-team setting enabled him to try out the manager role:

> *"It's kind of comforting to like, okay, you can try it out and if you don't like it, it's okay. And I guess if I want to start a new place with a team lead role or managing role I wouldn't feel as safe as I do now after testing out managing and doing it for a half a year before entering the role. So I really really like that part about it."*

This quote emphasizes how the team-in-team setting creates a safe space for the manager to try out the manager role before being officially promoted. Furthermore, several managers mentioned that starting to manage people within the team made the transition into the new role easier since this meant that they already knew the team beforehand. This was expressed as a kind of security for several managers since they were aware of the team dynamics and felt more secure in how to motivate the team.

Other managers underline the importance that they do not feel the pressure from the company to be perfect from the beginning. Accepting that you will not be perfect from the start, that you are allowed to make mistakes, and feel that this is mutually accepted by the organization was therefore pointed out as an important aspect when considering the manager role. In this regard, the team-in-team concept could also support managers in their transition, as the process of slowly taking on responsibility might lower the expectation to be perfect from the start. This creates a safe environment for the managers and a way to avoid any larger disturbance or surprises when entering the new role.

4.3.2 The manager training program

As seen in the previous section, one initiative established by the company that helped managers in their transition to becoming managers was the team-in-team concept, as it enabled the managers to slowly progress into their new roles. A second initiative and resource provided by the company can be seen to be the manager training program. We will therefore go on to examine how the program provides the managers with a security framework to protect their newly established identity. Subsequently, we will explore the workshop leaders' role in the program; and finally, take a closer look at the meaning of establishing networks through the management training program.

4.3.2.1 The importance of step-by-step processes

In general, the training program was viewed as a broadly applicable and good initiative. Several interviewees emphasized the fact that it covered relevant issues of being a manager and that each session gave them something to use in their work as managers. A reoccurring reflection throughout the interviews was that the program provided managers with frameworks, templates,

and step-by-step processes that supported them in their transition. The majority of the managers pointed out that they do not quite remember the content of the training, but that it gave them a feeling of safety and security to have the possibility to look at the material afterward.

Additionally, our observations during the second training concerning performance reviews enabled us to identify that the managers valued those step-by-step answers to assess how to react in certain situations as managers. As mentioned earlier, several managers kept asking rather operative questions during this training session. While the workshop leader tried to introduce topics regarding leadership and steer the discussion towards more strategic topics, questions that came up from the managers mainly revolved around detailed, technical, and operative procedures. This illustrates the importance of step-by-step processes for managers. By being told what to do and how to think, the managers can legitimize their actions and use frameworks and benchmarks of role models to rely on already existing and accepted templates. Throughout the training, program managers were encouraged to try out newly learned processes in their team. This was for example seen in the last session covering situational-based leadership, where the workshop leader presented a comprehensive model for how to assess the need for leadership effort in their team and encouraged the managers to try it out. The workshop leader mentioned, however, that it is a good idea to share with the team that you have been attending the manager training program and that you are implementing some of those concepts. By trying out and referring to organizational-confirmed frameworks and models, the managers can use the training program as a safety net to rely on if things do not work out as expected. In this way, their newly established identities as managers can be protected because they can justify their actions through already established entities, such as organizational-confirmed frameworks, and thus prove they are acting with objective and fair intent. Maria stated that the step-by-step processes and frameworks were really helpful for her as she could move away from solely *"relying only on her gut feeling"*, to now being able to use and *"rely on science-based templates"*.

4.3.2.2 The workshop leaders

As pointed out in the last section, several managers emphasized the importance of step-by-step processes that were provided by the manager training program. When asked about what they

particularly liked about the manager training program, several managers further mentioned the workshop leaders themselves and how they saw them as inspiration:

> *"The main thing that I took out of it is not necessarily the content that he presented, but the way he presented it. And I think that's really interesting to me to see how other managers talk and do things in a way. He's very aware of, like, his own framing and aware of his own biases, all these things making it clear that, you know, this is my perspective, and that kind of opens up more dialogue." (Jane)*

As this quote from Jane illustrates, the main takeaway was less about the content itself, but how the workshop leader presented and framed the topic. This became especially clear in the first two workshops, as these workshop leaders were also part of top management. By taking the time to do the training themselves, top management demonstrated that they care about the transition of the managers which can be seen as providing symbolic value for the managers to feel appreciated. Furthermore, the workshop leaders seemed to create a space for the managers to relate to the topics themselves, rather than just telling them explicitly how to think and act. During the first two workshops, the facilitators repeatedly stated that managers should adapt the given information to their own management style to find their own way of managing. However, they were also sharing their own experiences by giving examples of how they handled different situations. Based on that, several managers perceived the workshop leaders not just as inspiration, but as role models to orient themselves on how they should act and behave. Even though the workshop leaders emphasized openness, they also established norms and procedures by describing their own beliefs and methods, which resulted in accepted standards and rules. Nevertheless, this allows managers to benchmark themselves and try out their own approaches.

Throughout the observations, we noticed how the workshop leaders prepared the managers by explaining and outlining the challenges they might encounter in their new roles. For example, in the training session covering feedback, the workshop leader talked about how to handle emotional responses evoked by feedback, both the employee's responses as well as the manager's own experiences. Here she pointed out that she expected the managers to feel certain emotions or feelings and mentioned that the managers therefore should be prepared for that by underlining: "*I*

don't expect you to feel all of this at all times, but I expect you to end up there at times". This illustrates that the manager training program aims to prepare managers for the manager role by pointing out what struggle they may face in their new role. In some way, it is even expected from the managers that they will be confronted with this struggle. This indicates that managers are expected to go through a certain transition and develop into the role of managers by struggling with certain aspects. This phenomenon was additionally illustrated in the first training session. As mentioned before, during this workshop the workshop leader emphasized that the manager role entails a shift in perspective and that managers need to be prepared for this as it may lead to struggling feelings which can for some go so far that they perceive it as an "identity crisis". These examples illustrate that the training program, and the efforts of the workshop leaders, can be seen to mitigate and protect the manager by preparing them for difficult situations and uneasy emotions.

4.3.2.3 Management training program as establishing a (security) network

Another aspect of the manager training program that was expressed to be particularly appreciated was how it provided opportunities to get to know other managers in the same situation. Several managers expressed that they found this valuable because it provided them with opportunities to exchange and share experiences. Hearing other managers' experiences helped them to realize that they are part of a social context with other managers. One manager, Elinor, reflected upon how just being part of a social context helped her in the transition:

> *"Of course it's impossible to like remember everything from that sort of a training and like successfully apply it to your role every day, but it helps a lot to just like be a part of those type of contexts with other team leads and sort of get to listen in on what struggles there are or they are currently going through."*

This statement indicates that Elinor perceives it as helpful to be part of a larger social context with other managers since this confirms her to be part of that social group. This potentially helps her to accept her new position within the company, since she can compare herself to other managers. Furthermore, the statement emphasizes that she perceived it as helpful to recognize others' challenges. Another manager, John, confirmed the importance of being part of a larger

context. He liked the idea of not being alone, but rather enjoyed sharing the experience and challenges with others who are in the same situation as him:

> *"I would say it's really nice to see that many people face the same challenges even though we are at different offices, different teams, different like areas, which I think is really nice that, well of course not nice that we all have the same challenges, but it's kind of nice to see that you're not alone with these challenges, and that many people feel the same things."*

This once again underlines the importance of being part of a social context and of being recognized by it. Another manager, Henry, pointed out that he feels reassured that he is doing the right thing when he has an opportunity to discuss concerns with other managers. This illustrates that managers believe that the social context can confirm whether they are on the right track by enabling them to compare their concerns with those of others. Throughout the program, the same managers attended the same training sessions together. In that way, the managers got to know each other quite well and were able to build networks between different teams, departments, and offices. Several managers expressed that knowing that they had a network of other managers they could reach out to felt helpful in their transition. In that way, the training program can be seen as building a security net to rely on after the training. One of the managers, Jane, points out:

> *"You know, if you have a more tailored discussion with other people, you simply get to know them better and it's easier to sort of reach out to them. For example, later on like, 'oh, I saw your name in the meeting, what's up?' So a bit of networking."*

However, even if this possibility to extend their network was expressed as an appreciated feature by several managers, few managers seemed to have reached out to other managers after completing the training. This indicated that the mere knowledge of a supporting network seems to be helpful for the managers in their transition to the manager role.

4.4 Feeling like a manager

The last theme identified in the empirical material considers how and when the managers perceive themselves as managers. A returning reflection by several managers was that official managerial work tasks, such as conducting a performance review, were important for the process of perceiving themselves as managers. Like several other managers, Henry pointed out that he felt like a manager for the first time when managing the first performance review:

> *"... there was a little bit of an authority setting, that you have someone there, listening to your advice and participating and so on, we have this kind of a great dialogue and it felt kind of professional. And I think that gave me a feeling, okay, now this is meaningful, this is something that they are getting something out of and this is how I'm contributing. So in that sense, that's when I feel like, okay, now I'm actually managing."*

This quote indicates that seeing yourself as a manager involves perceiving yourself as professional, in which you are exercising some degree of authority and having the opportunity to influence subordinates and contribute to their development. Other managers referred to more symbolic organizational events, such as offering someone a job or coming up with a team name as important in perceiving themselves as managers. Tracy cited the fact that taking on a senior client lead role where she gained greater responsibility for delivering results enabled her to perceive herself as a manager for the first time. This indicates that the team-in-team setting helped her to view herself as a manager as it enabled her to position herself as a senior and leading figure within the team.

5. Discussion

To gain a deeper understanding of our empirical material, we will now discuss our findings in the context of our research questions. First, we will take a closer look at the managers' experience, mainly directing the focus at the struggles managers perceive when transitioning to the manager role. Subsequently, we will examine the influence and impact of the organizational-established initiatives and resources on the transition to the manager role. Lastly, we will critically examine the organizational-established initiatives and resources through the lens of organizational control and resistance.

5.1 Managers experience when transitioning to the manager role

In our empirical material, we explored how the managers experienced the transition to a manager role and identified the struggle of having to leave their former roles as experts within their respective disciplines. Through the team-in-team concept, managers were given the opportunity to slowly progress into the manager role. Here several managers experienced an inner struggle because they neither identified themselves with the old role of operational experts nor fully with the new role of being a manager.

5.1.1 Juggling two roles

In the light of the above, managers find themselves in a continuous process of developing their identity. This can be seen in the concept of identity work which refers to the engagement of individuals in forming their identities and wanting to maintain a coherent and positive self-view (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). As seen in the empirical material, several managers experience a form of friction because they felt trapped in a situation where they still felt responsible for their former operative activities while at the same time being expected to take on managerial tasks. Consequently, many managers felt confronted with having to undertake double roles for a certain period of time.

In the literature review, we referred to a study by Sveninngsson and Alvesson (2016) who illustrated the struggle managers face when moving from a rather bureaucratic role to being strategic leaders. Their study emphasizes that the examined managers still have to take on

operative activities while fantasizing about rather strategic leadership tasks. Sveninngsson and Alvesson (2016) suggest that managers, therefore, engage in identity work in the form of identity juggling, in which they aim to close the gap between what one does on the job (work content) and how they perceive themselves as managers (their identity). However, our case study exemplifies that managers were less concerned about the gap between work content and identity as they did not have any clear fantasies about the managerial role. This implies that, in contrast to the study of Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016), managers were less concerned about being perceived as strategic leaders. The main struggle for the managers seemed to be the juggle of wanting to handle a double-role function by being an operative expert, while at the same time taking on managerial tasks. Surprisingly, few managers expressed their wish to distance themselves from the operational work, but rather highlighted the importance and joy of working with operative activities. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016) on the other hand, underline that the managers in their study perceive strategic work as a form of prestige and therefore strive to separate or decouple themselves from operational work. Decoupling refers to managers creating separate managerial identities in order to maintain the desired identity and keep conflicting forces apart (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016). Contrastly, the managers in our study rather express their strive to connect and couple with their operational work tasks and therefore describe difficulties in having to let go of these tasks. Hence, they are engaged in a form of identity juggling by wanting to handle a double-role function. However, this double-role function can be seen as a potential double-edged sword. On the one hand, managers can benefit from their expert knowledge established in their old role, but on the other hand, managers risk getting too involved and therefore limit or decrease the development of their subordinates by not giving them enough responsibility to grow.

5.1.2 Reversed decoupling

Our findings that the managers strive to connect and couple with their operational work tasks can possibly be attributed to the company culture. The organization appears to value having managers with great knowledge of the operational work, which shows that operational work tasks, like working hands-on with digital marketing, are highly valued in the organization. Therefore, managers still want to be connected and "couple" with operational tasks. This can hence be seen as a "reversed decoupling" process, in which managers are longing to couple with

their operational work, which leads to difficulties in letting go of certain expert activities. Using the metaphor of juggling, managers are trying to not let one ball drop to the floor, which requires an immense balancing act between having to keep both balls in the air using the same speed and intensity of motion. Therefore, we diverge from Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2016) definition of decoupling in a way that the managers in our study do not establish managerial ideals which deviate from the actual managerial work, but rather find themselves in a reversed decoupling process in which they want to juggle and couple the two roles at the same time.

One of the main reasons why managers still want to be connected with operational tasks refers to the perception that they discern this as a way to have a direct impact on the organizational work. Some managers underline that they see themselves "spreading thin", which has a negative connotation and describes that they perceive themselves as losing the richness in their work through transitioning to a manager role as this involves working on a more surface level. Therefore, it can be assumed that managers see themselves confronted with a different form of identity juggling than originally described by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016). The managers in our study are occupied with managing the shift in how they perceive themselves as making an impact, and hence want to be connected with operational work. In this way, identity juggling deviates from Sveningsson and Alvesson's study (2016) who claim that managers want to be perceived as strategic leaders but are rather forced to commit to doing operational tasks instead.

5.1.3 The company culture influencing identity work

As stated in the last section, we diverge from Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2016) definition of identity juggling in a way that the managers in our study do not want to distance themselves from operative work. However, our findings reveal another form of identity struggle for the managers, which acknowledges the idea that identity work can function on several levels simultaneously. Our observations showed that the company formulated certain expectations of what a manager should be like. This was highlighted in the interviews as several managers spoke about the perceived expectations to constantly act independently as managers by using their own judgment. However, some managers underlined that at times it can be hard to always be independent, which highlighted their struggles to live up to those expectations. In regards to this, we can identify a gap between how managers want to be perceived and how they see themselves.

Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003 point out that in a multifaceted and unstable world, identities become destabilized and individuals have to actively deal with constantly adapting their identities. Here we can see how the dynamic, change-driven, and at times unstable, company culture influenced the managers' identity work as the expectation from the company created a struggle for them to maintain a coherent and positive self-view. The managers in our study want to be perceived as someone who is independent and can solve problems by themselves, but in fact, they see themselves struggling with being fully independent or relying solely on their own judgment. In this way, managers struggle to uphold a coherent and positive self-view as they at times doubt their ability to act in accordance with the expectations from the company.

In the previous section, we referred to the study of Sveninngsson and Alvesson (2016) who illustrated managers fantasizing about being strategic and visionary leaders. In our case, this identity struggle can be attributed to the company culture and the expectations from the organization, rather than derive from the manager's inherent desires or fantasies of being strategic leaders. In this regard, we can to some extent confirm the definition of identity work provided by Svenningsson and Alvesson (2016) in the way that managers struggle to maintain a coherent and positive self-image, but still diverge from their understanding of what causes this inner struggle.

To summarize, our findings indicate that the managers experience an inner struggle when transitioning to a manager role which can be seen as a continuous process of adapting and developing their identities through a form of identity work. The inner struggle mainly centers around the necessity to still be involved in the operative work as well as they wish to maintain the responsibility for those tasks. This is mainly rooted in the belief that it creates the most visible impact through which many managers gain their needed confirmation. In that way, the managers engage in identity work and try to juggle both roles, the operative expert role as well as the manager role. Furthermore, our findings show that another form of identity struggle is also taking place in which managers struggle to live up to the organization's expectation to rely on their own judgment and always act in an independent manner.

5.2 Institutional forces when transition to a manager role

In the last part, we touched upon the main struggles managers perceive when transitioning to the manager role. We will now go on to take a closer look at the organizational-established initiatives and resources addressed previously in the empirical findings, and examine their impact on the transition towards the manager role. In the context of identity work, those initiatives can be regarded as institutional forces which ultimately influence and stimulate identity work. We initially only focused on the manager training program as an organizational initiative to help the managers in their transition to becoming managers. Nevertheless, our interviews revealed another, even more important, organizational concept that eased the managers' transition. We found that on-job-experience in the form of the so-called team-in-team concept was stressed by the managers to be a helpful institution to transition into a manager role. In the following, we therefore refer to the main institutional forces as the team-in-team concept as well as the manager training program.

5.2.1 Team-in-team as an institutional force

In our study, we have been able to determine that the team-in-team concept of slowly progressing into the manager role influenced the transition, as it impacted the managers' identity work in different ways. On the one hand, the team-in-team concept could be understood to reinforce identity work as the development through on-the-job-experience allows managers to slowly develop their identities as managers. On the other hand, the team-in-team process creates identity struggles as it establishes contradictions for managers to construct and maintain a coherent and positive self-view (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

The team-in-team setting worked as a practical example of the concept of management internships and thus demonstrated how such management development practices enable managers to gradually progress into the manager role. The concept of management internships was originally conceptualized by Hill (2003) as an opportunity for potential managers to preview the managerial role and gain on-the-job experiences by undertaking managerial responsibilities before being promoted to the first manager position. Hill's research, however, approached the concept in a rather prescriptive way that only provided ideas on how management internships

should be approached in organizations and could therefore be seen to lack some more critical aspects. In the following, we will therefore explore the meaning of the team-in-team setting within research as well as examine some more critical aspects in relation to its influence on identity work.

5.2.1.1 Team-in-team concept reinforces identity work

The empirical findings show that the team-in-team setting allows managers to experience being managers in a comfortable environment, which could be construed as building confidence in the role before they are even officially called managers. A majority of the managers started their manager responsibilities in a familiar environment by commencing to take on a client lead role or starting to manage junior members of their existing team, which ultimately created a comfortable and safe feeling. Furthermore, several managers described that they are allowed to be forthright about their shortcomings and therefore to make mistakes, which created a safe environment for them. Previous research points out that it is crucial to place potential managers in a supportive environment to enhance managerial effectiveness (Winterton and Winterton, 1999; Hill, 2003). This means that management development should not be considered a sink-or-swim or survival-of-the-fittest proposition (Winterton and Winterton, 1999; Hill, 2003). The team-in-team setting could be seen to consider these suggestions and provide the manager with a supportive environment. This safe and comfortable environment allows the manager to avoid any larger disturbances or surprises when entering the new role. Moreover, both parties have the opportunity to observe the other, which is considered a beneficial aspect of management internships (Hill, 2003). This became particularly clear in the first stage of the team-in-team process in which managers positioned themselves as a client lead, and hence placed themselves as a senior and leading figure in the team. Thereby, managers received the possibility to assess if they find the role intrinsically motivating. At the same time, the organization had the chance to evaluate the managers' skills and qualities.

In the light of the above-mentioned aspects, the possibility for managers to gain on-the-job experiences through the team-in-team setting could be presumed as having positive implications for their transition towards a managerial identity. The team-in-team setting was described to ease the transition to the manager role and identity because they already felt like being accepted as

managers before their official promotion. This illustrates the importance of getting acceptance from the wider social environment within the organization in order to conform to the new role (Ashforth, 1998). The acceptance of the new role by the social environment has implications for the managers' identity as it emphasizes the notion of how identity is created in relation to others and hence needs to be understood as produced between, and not as existing within, individuals (Lawler, 2014). In regards to the manager's identity work, Svenningsson and Alvesson (2016) suggest that identity work during a period of transition is often focused on maintaining a coherent and positive self-view. Here, the findings show that the manager could preview and prepare for the managerial identity by starting to begin to form a managerial perspective and developing managerial capability. From an identity perspective, the team-in-team concept could therefore be regarded as positive as it enables managers to do managerial tasks and gain confidence in the new identity before officially being promoted as managers, allowing them to maintain a coherent and positive self-view throughout the process.

Moreover, the team-in-team setting can be seen as a possibility for the manager to try out the manager role, and hence, "try-out" different manager identities. Therefore, they are given the possibility to try out and experiment with different "selves" throughout the process (Ibarra, 1999). The possibility to have a trial period could be seen as an important factor for some of the managers in their decision to become a manager. In this way, the team-in-team setting could be seen as a factor that supports and enables the start of the transition to the manager role, but also as initiating coping mechanisms for the managers to handle the transition into the new role.

5.2.1.2 Team-in-team concept contradicts identity work

The findings presented in the previous section illustrate a positive view of the team-in-team concept. This confirms the findings of Hill (2003), who mainly emphasizes the beneficial aspects of management internships in her research. However, our study reveals some more critical aspects in regards to the concept as we identified that the slow progress through the team-in-team setting creates a limbo situation for managers in which they need to undertake and handle double roles. Andersson (2005) highlights the importance of articulating a definition of the new role when changing social categories within a social domain, that is, making a career transition within an organization. The risk is that it puts the individual in an in-between and ambiguous state in

which the individual is no longer in the previous position but has not yet reached the next position. This can be confirmed by our study as the team-in-team setting caused an unclear distinction between the expert and the manager role, which consequently created struggles for managers feeling stuck in the betwixt-and-between situation (Andersson, 2005). Our findings revealed that the urge to find a balance between the old operational role and the new managerial responsibilities was inevitably perceived as stressful, hectic, and overwhelming for the manager.

In regards to identity work, this causes struggles for several managers as it makes it hard to establish a coherent identity while undertaking and handling double roles. Ultimately, this has implications for their transition towards a managerial identity, as it makes identity work a contradicted and fragmented process. Moreover, our findings highlight that the team-in-team setting requires the manager to still be involved in operational work for an extended period of time, which also has implications for identity work. Here, the drawn-out processes make it difficult to know when to let go of their identity as an expert and when to enter the role as managers.

To summarize, although many beneficial aspects of a team-in-team setting could be confirmed as reinforcing identity work, the empirical findings in this study could also reveal some critical aspects. Our findings indicate that management development practices such as the team-in-team concept do not only reinforce identity work but can also be seen in a more critical way as it might lead to situations in which the individual has to handle several identities. This potentially risks the coherent and positive self-view of the individual. Thus our study could be seen as contributing to broadening the perspective of management development practices by examining the influence on the transition towards a manager role and identity.

5.2.2 The manager training program as an institutional force

Although the majority of the managers mainly referred to the team-in-team process as an important factor for their development into the manager role, several managers also mentioned the manager training program as an influential aspect to make the transition easier. The manager training program can inevitably be seen as formal training provided by the company. Formal training and education are suggested to play an important, although limited part, in the

development of new managers (Burgoyne and Stewart, 1976; Hill, 2003). Hill (2003) points out that manager training programs provide access to organizational resources that could be seen as important in the development of a manager role. However, our study demonstrates that specific content appeared to be less important. For several managers being part of a program seemed to be more important, highlighting the symbolic value of the program. Therefore, we will now take a closer look at how the manager training program works as an institutional force to facilitate and ease the development into a manager role and identity. In general, our findings indicate that the manager training program has a significant symbolic value for the managers in their transition.

5.2.2.1 Security frameworks

Several findings in our study illustrate that the manager training program provided the managers with step-by-step processes and guidelines. The study indicates it is important for managers to have access to these frameworks as it provides them with best practices and guidelines on how to deal with difficult situations. These frameworks, typically suggested as step-by-step processes, worked as a way to provide safety and security to the manager and can be seen as a way to establish and increase their confidence. Hence, these frameworks can be regarded as "security frameworks", protecting the managers in their transition to become managers. In our study, we could see how security frameworks enabled managers to move away from relying on their gut feeling. Through those frameworks, managers were able to use science-based templates, which provided them with a sense of safety and security. This notion acknowledges the suggestion from Van Mannen and Schein (1979) and recognizes that it is not only important to gain new skills when entering the manager role, but also important to accept social norms and rules of the new context, and learn how to navigate and approach new situations. Our study indicated that the content of the manager training program becomes secondary, but the feeling of safety and security that it brings to the manager role becomes more important. This confirms the view that organizational activities such as training and development procedures withhold a symbolic value (Ulrich, 1984). From an identity perspective, this can be seen as a buffering effect, protecting the managers from potential negative outcomes (Dunne, 1996; McAdams, 1993). By using organizational-confirmed frameworks and models, the manager's actions become legitimized and justified. In that way, managers can refer to the training program and try out new frameworks in a protected space. Consequently, managers can work towards a managerial identity without

putting themselves at too much stake while learning to navigate new social norms and rules when approaching new situations.

5.2.2.2 "We are in it together"

In the previous section, we outline how manager training programs infuse a feeling of safety and security in the managers by providing security frameworks. We will now direct our discussion towards how the program enhances peer relations and how this enables a sense of belonging among managers. Our empirical findings illustrate that the manager training program provided a social context and served as a function to nurture social ties by providing opportunities to establish relationships with other managers in the same situation, and possibilities to exchange and share experiences. Peer relations are described as important resources for new managers and can be seen as crucial in the transition towards a managerial identity as they provide important support functions and assist in coping with many challenges during the first year (Hill, 2003; Milton and Westphal, 2005; Weaver et al., 2011). In our study, the feeling of "we are in it together" was emphasized as important, which shows that there is a sense of belonging between the manager. Hence, this feeling could be argued to help managers identify with the new role as it provides them with a sense of confirmation as well as a sense of belonging about their identity as managers (Weaver et al., 2011). This confirms peer relations as important to provide support for the individual's sense of competence and confidence in a professional role, ultimately confirming their professional identity (Kram and Lynn, 1985; Weaver et al., 2011; Milton and Westphal, 2005). This further confirms the argument of Alvesson and Willmott (2002), who claim that manager training programs can work to embrace the notion of "we", which ultimately influences the identity-forming process.

Some managers in our study perceived it as helpful to compare their concerns with the perspectives of other managers as this reassured their actions and confirmed their professional identity. As stated by Weaver et al. (2011), professional identity is reinforced by professional inclusivity and social exclusivity which emphasizes that the feeling of belonging to a group reinforces a feeling of professional identity. This can be confirmed by our study, as managers underline the "we" feeling and the importance of peer relationships in order to identify with their new role as managers. Furthermore, peer unity in a sense of feeling socially isolated from other

non-management groups can be argued to be reinforced by the manager training program. The program illustrates the social exclusivity of the managers as a social group that deviates from other employees. Therefore, the training program can also be seen as a way to reinforce social exclusivity on a symbolic level.

5.2.2.3 Extending manager's network

In the previous section, we explored the relevance of peer relations. Additionally, our study can confirm Hill's (2003) research that manager training programs provide opportunities for managers to create and expand their network with other managers. Network relations have the possibility to provide psychological and emotional support, particularly during times of transition (Kram and Lynn, 1985; Hill, 2003). Interestingly to note is that even though the findings show that this was expressed as a highly appreciated feature of the manager training program, few managers seemed to have reached out to other managers after completing the training. This highlights that the mere knowledge of a supporting network seems to be helpful for the managers in their transition to the manager role. In regards to this, the actual support can be argued to be less important than the fact that managers perceived that they could potentially receive support if needed. The potential support created by the established network can therefore be seen as creating symbolic value and thus providing a sense of security for the managers.

5.3 Career transitions and process of becoming

As stated at the beginning of the thesis, we start from the fundamental assumption that the study is based on a processual perspective in which the transition to a manager role inevitably is seen as a process of "becoming". We will therefore take a closer look at the process of career transition, in which individuals constantly move and change social categories, as well as consider how the framework of rites of passage can help us understand the importance of symbolic rites accompanying career transitions towards a manager role.

When transitioning to a manager position, managers move from one socially constructed category, the category of digital experts, to another socially constructed category, the category of managers. Rites and ceremonies are an essential part when moving from one position to another as the "rites" mark a person's transition from one set of socially identified circumstances to

another (Andersson, 2005; Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). Rites can be defined as a relatively elaborate, extraordinary set of activities that bring together various forms of cultural expressions into one event (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005; Andersson, 2005). In our study, this event can be seen in the form of the manager training program and the concept of team-in-team, both ultimately aiming to ease the transition for the managers. The manager training could additionally be seen to work as a rite, marking a certain point in time when managers are officially transferring into the new role.

Career transitions, such as a transition to a manager position, are not just addressing work-related aspects, but can also possess symbolic value (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). In our study, the manager transitions to a new role within the same organization, and consequently, rites and ceremonies become an essential part as the manager changes social categories within the same social domain (Andersson, 2005). To understand career transitions, we can use the metaphor of a suspension bridge. Just like a suspension bridge is connected to two stable platforms, we can understand how an individual moves between two stable positions through their career transition. This means that when transitioning from one platform to another, or from one professional role to the other, individuals symbolically find themselves on an unstable bridge that might feel insecure at times.

To understand the career transition process and what potentially could support a manager throughout the transition, we can use the framework of rite of passage, which describes how the transition is distinguished into three different phases: separation, transition, and incorporation (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). In our findings, we can see that the manager is going through all different phases of transition.

In regards to the first phase, separation, our study indicates that the managers experience a transition that involves the process of separation and letting go. This is particularly evident as many managers describe their difficulties in letting go of operational work tasks which are mainly inherent in their former role. This can be traced back to the company culture, which highly values the close connection and overview of the operational and expert work. This confirms Ashforth's (2001) argument as it illustrates that the transition towards a manager role

starts long before the official exit of the expert role. It can therefore be argued that the positioning as senior lead through the team-in-team concept can be seen as having an inherent symbolic value as it supports the transition to the manager role.

The second phase, transition, can be seen to be linked to the intermediate and "in-between" state that several managers find themselves in. If we return to the metaphor of a suspension bridge, we can see that this phase, characterized by no longer being in the previous position but not yet reaching the next position, reflects the most unstable and ambiguous phase of the transition. To cope with this ambiguity, it is important for the individual to gain "small wins" and make minor changes to test the new role (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005; Ashforth; 1998; Weick, 1984). Our study shows that in order to gain these small wins, managers get involved in "official" managerial work tasks such as conducting the performance review or being part of the recruitment process of new hires. By involving themselves in such activities, the manager could improve work-related aspects and managerial knowledge and skill. Symbolically, it signals to the individual as well as the social environment that managers are involved in managerial tasks. Therefore it can have an impact on how the managers perceive themselves as well as are perceived by their environment. This might also influence how they feel accepted by their environment. Metaphorically speaking, it adds some wire to the suspension bridge and makes the passage more stable.

The last phase, incorporation, can be seen to support the integration into the new position and implies that the individual establishes a feeling of confidence and acceptance of the new role (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005; Andersson, 2005). The whole team-in-team process can be seen as an incorporation phase as managers get the opportunity to preview managerial tasks which increases their confidence as they slowly develop their managerial skills.

What is interesting to note in our study, is how the managers move quite fluidly between the different phases – in some regards, they are already in the incorporation phase, while in other aspects still in the separation phase. Consequently, it can metaphorically be seen as if they continuously move back and forth through the transition on the suspension bridge. Career transition can therefore not be regarded as a sequential model in which steps can be reduced to a

linear planned, engineered, and managed process but rather as a fluid process of "becoming". Consequently, we have to look at our metaphor of a suspension bridge with new eyes: individuals will always be in transitions, never really "being" but always "becoming". Hence, managers always find themselves at some stage on the suspension bridge; sometimes at a more stable part, other times struggling to find stability. Nevertheless, we can see in our study how managers express high appreciation for step-by-step processes. Since career transitions cannot be seen as linear step-by-step processes, symbolic organizational events become even more important. Mayrhofer and Iellatchi (2005) point out that these symbolic organizational events help to reduce uncertainty and transform it into expectable steps. This means that through events such as the manager training program and its related security frameworks, this uncertainty related to career transitions can be transformed into expectable steps and hence create a sense of stability.

5.4 Identity and organizational control

As stated in the research purpose, this study aims to address issues related to organizational control and identity regulation. To put a broader perspective on our study and take a more critical stance on our findings, we have to consider potential critical sides of institutional forces in the form of the team-in-team concept and the manager training program. Therefore, the following section will examine these institutional forces in the context of organizational control and identity regulation. In the study, we can see several examples of organizational control taking place, which we will examine in the following.

5.4.1 Identity buffering

As discussed previously, our observations of the manager training program revealed a company culture that emphasizes the image of managers as being independent, relying on their own judgment, as well as finding solutions by themselves. These findings can hence be argued to reflect the underlying values and norms for the manager's role. As these are not written down, but rather implicitly expressed through the company culture, it can be regarded as normative control, regulating the "inside" of employees through the culture rather than through bureaucratic rules and procedures (Kunda, 1992).

In our findings, the manager training program can be seen as an organizational effort to target identity formation processes, which indicates the presence of identity regulation. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) state that organizations influence employees through management-constructed discourses, which ultimately lead to managers position themselves upon these terms. In our study, we identified an influential discourse inherent in the company culture. As mentioned above, throughout the observation we could see how the company culture emphasized how people should be independent and figure out things on their own, which is further reinforced in the manager role as managers are expected to be able to navigate the ever-changing environment. In our study, we could see that managers wanted to position themselves upon these terms. For example, it was stated in several interviews that the managers did not receive that much guidance or direction from above but rather were encouraged to find their way and figure out solutions to problems along their way. Despite the numerous security frameworks, the managers describe themselves as free agents shaping their journey towards the manager role. This indicates that the managers want to position themselves as independent individuals. It was also repeatedly stated by several managers that they encounter new situations with a "trial and error" approach, which underlines that they want to position themselves and be perceived as someone that can figure out things on their own. The self-positioning could also be seen in the way some managers talked about their struggles to live up to the expectation to act independently and rely on their own judgment. Here several managers expressed that they were at times hesitant to ask questions and address issues since this risked exposing them as not independent.

The discourse of managers as independent can be seen to be influenced by common managerial discourse that constructs managers as "all-knowing" (Hay 2014; Hill 1992; Tengblad 2012; Watson 2001; Koleša, 2021). Our findings can hence be seen to confirm previous research that such discourse can create idealizations of how managers should act and behave, but that it can become a struggle if there exists friction between reality and the ideal (Tengblad, 2012; Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2016). As elaborated on earlier in the discussion, this friction led to inner struggles for several managers, which induced managers to engage in identity work.

In the observations, we can see how the discourse of managers as independent is constructed and reproduced in the way the workshop leaders presented and framed their topic. This was

particularly apparent in the first two sessions where the workshop leaders, who are both part of top management, shared their own experiences. Although the workshop leaders highlighted an open approach, they thereby also set norms and procedures. Emphasizing their own approach gave rise to established standards and informal rules that are accepted at the company. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) point out that management often plays an important role in introducing, reproducing, and legitimizing the presence of particular discourses. The language used by the workshop leaders and how they talked about their own experiences consequently constructed a world-view that renders certain actions reasonable and legitimate, ultimately framing the way managers understand and act in accordance with the manager role (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Grant, Keenoy and Oswick, 2001; Watson, 2001). Inevitably, this reproduces and legitimizes the presence of managerial-driven discourses. Nevertheless, our findings point out that this was not particularly intended to exercise control on the managers, but rather to protect and support them in their transition towards a manager role. This is confirmed by Alvesson and Willmott, 2002 who point out that managerial orchestrated identities, in which self-identity is being constructed and maintained through managerial discourses, have the potential to reduce anxiety for employees and assist them in coping with ambiguity. Building upon this notion, we want to introduce our framing of the concept of *identity buffering* as an additional perspective to identity regulation.

The concept of identity buffering emphasizes a protective and safeguarding element to identity regulation, and is conceptualized as organizational efforts to lessen or moderate uncomfortable feelings and create a buffering impact to prepare managers for, or even make them avoid, clashes when transitioning towards a new identity. This was particularly identified in the first training session in which the workshop leader demonstrated organizational efforts to reduce the potential "identity crisis" for the managers. The workshop leader did this by pointing out how the managers will eventually receive recognition and confirmation through the results of others, which represents a shift in perspective and a potential identity crisis when entering the manager role. This ultimately shows that the effort aims to lessen or moderate uneasy feelings and emotions for managers when leaving the expert role, and thus tries to avoid an identity crisis when transitioning towards the manager role. The identity buffering could also be seen in the training session covering feedback where the workshop leaders made efforts to mitigate and

protect the manager by preparing them for what uneasy emotions may be evoked when giving or receiving feedback. These organizational efforts hence act as a buffering effect and attempt to prepare managers for a possible identity crisis or clashes. The concept of identity buffering can be regarded to provide security and safety for the manager, which is referred to as crucial in enhancing managerial effectiveness (Winterton and Winterton, 1999; Hill, 2003). Although the training program can still be regarded as identity regulation as it inevitably sets standards and norms for the managers in which they self-position themselves, we hereby want to add some nuance to the debate and contribute with a broader perspective to this type of organizational control and what implications identity buffering efforts can have on the transition towards a manager role and identity.

5.4.2 Security frameworks: Stabilizing the transition

Throughout the study, we have identified how managers appreciated and requested security frameworks, such as step-by-step processes and guidelines when transitioning to the manager role. This indicates that some degree of control or regulation is actually appreciated by managers as it provides them with a sense of security and safety. This contradicts previous research which often portrays organizational control as if employees are always victims of those control mechanisms (Kunda, 1992; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

The case company demonstrates that a flexible and dynamic organizational culture can be seen as a rather unstable environment for the managers, particularly during transitions. Career transition, when individuals move from one stable identity to another, can create ambiguity (Mayrhofer and Iellatchi, 2005). Our empirical findings reveal that in an ever-changing environment, it becomes even more important to have a stable and static dimension to hold on to when moving towards the manager role and identity. Returning to our metaphor of career transitions as a suspension bridge, it can be pointed out that the weather conditions might influence the crossing of the bridge. If the conditions in the surrounding environment are harsh, the passage may feel more turbulent and difficult to cross. Hence, it is important to add some wires to the bridge, to ease the passage and gain control. Likewise, step-by-step processes can be seen as a stable dimension that may provide a feeling of security and safety when transitioning to a manager role. These stable security frameworks inform the manager how to act in certain

situations, and can inevitably be regarded as directing and controlling the individuals, and at the same time bring stability to the process of becoming a manager.

This puts organizational control in a new perspective and underlines the importance of finding a balance between dynamic and flexibility on the one hand, and stability and security on the other, during transitions. Our case study indicates a rather dynamic and flexible company culture, which created the need to bring in a stabilization dimension, such as step-by-step processes, to provide a feeling of security and safety for the individuals. This could be argued to be particularly important when transitioning to the first manager role, as individuals often do not have referential frameworks that allow them to tackle new situations of being managers (Yip et al., 2020).

5.4.3 Resistance and the discourse of career development

A surprising discovery in our empirical findings is that few managers appeared to resist or refuse the transition to a manager role. We continuously scrutinized the empirical material for traces of resistance, such as if the manager distanced themselves by the use of humor or cynicism, or by creating alternative identities as a way to counteract and refuse the attempts to regulate and target their values and beliefs (Fleming and Spicer, 2007). However, in our findings we could not identify any form of resistance or deliberate intentions of the manager to disturb the process to become a manager, nor did any managers express any substantial critical responses to the content of the program. Rather, we found the opposite, that managers appreciate and want more guidance and regulation.

The decision to transition into the new role was hardly expressed as a desire by any of the managers in the first place. The study showed how many managers were requested to be managers by the organization, and showed that several managers, at least in the initial phase, felt rather hesitant to take on the new role. However, this was portrayed as an expression of protecting themselves from stress and overwhelming feelings, rather than resisting or refusing the proposition to enter a manager's role and identity. Nevertheless, on several occasions, the managers underline the importance for them to develop professionally. This leads to the assumption that even if most managers saw the new role as challenging in many regards, they

nevertheless wished for this development and accordingly received the proposition to transition towards the new role as something positive.

Ultimately, the managers have chosen a career as professionals in a fast-changing industry which inevitably means that they are drawn to a career fraught with continuous growth and development. Consequently, the proposition to become managers can therefore be seen as a way to support their ongoing identity narrative (McAdams, 2001). This supports the suggestion of Alvesson and Willmott (2002), who claim that identity regulation is conditional upon the receptiveness of employees. It can therefore be argued that managers perceived the proposition to become managers as a chance to develop their ongoing identity narrative, which led to showing little to no resistance in the transition to the new role.

These findings can therefore add nuance to the debate of managerial discourses as something that automatically produces a certain kind of work orientation in organizations. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) point out that there often exists a plurality of discourses in organizations that could either reinforce or contradict identity regulation. Richardson (2012) points out that the discourse regarding people's career development is influenced by beliefs that a career is a significant marker of social status in society and the labor market. The career development discourse emphasizes individuals "naturally" want to grow and develop by consciously seeking out challenges (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009, p.1129). In our study, we can interpret that the career development discourse is reinforcing the identity regulation as it acts in accordance with their identity narrative. This explains why managers want to tap into the managerial discourse as it enables them to grow and develop and ultimately develop in their careers. This can hence be seen to explain why there was so little resistance to becoming a manager.

6. Conclusions

In our study, we aimed to develop a deeper understanding of how managers experience the transition into their first manager position. Moreover, we intended to examine the influence of organizational-established initiatives and resources on how newly appointed managers experience this transition. Throughout the discussion, we have addressed and answered our research questions using our empirical findings. In regards to our first research question, how managers experience the transition to their first manager position, our findings reveal that career transitions toward a manager role can be regarded as a fluid process of "becoming" which at times is characterized by an ambiguous state of in-between in which managers experience identity struggles. In regards to the second question, we identified two organizational-established resources to be influential in the process of becoming a manager; the company's internal manager training program as well as the concept of team-in-team, an integrated management development practice in which managers are gradually introduced to the managerial position. Although these organizational-established initiatives and resources can be regarded as supporting the process of transition for managers, the concept of team-in-team also initiates friction for the individual, ultimately leading to individuals continuously engaging in identity work.

In the following, we will demonstrate how our findings can contribute to existing research. Subsequently, we will take a closer look at practical implications and conclude by outlining possible limitations as well as opportunities for further research.

6.1 Theoretical contributions

As outlined in our introduction, there is a lack of empirical studies of middle managers who are transitioning towards their first manager role and managerial identity (Hill, 2003). With our qualitative study, we adopted a processual view, examining the idea of managerial identities as constantly emerging. We, therefore, broadened the perspective of the process of becoming a manager, exploring the connection between career transitions and the engagement in identity work by focusing on the influence of organizational-established initiatives and resources.

With her study, Hill (2003) suggests that organizational-established initiatives and resources can be regarded as supporting the process of "becoming" a manager. However, her study examining management internships is mainly based on theoretical assumptions and does not provide enough empirical data. Our findings indicate that the team-in-team concept, which can be regarded as a management internship program, was perceived as most important in supporting the managers during their transition. Therefore, we provide empirical data to support Hill's study and strengthen the argument that organizational-established initiatives and resources in the form of management internships can be regarded as supporting the process of transition for managers. Nevertheless, Hill's prescriptive research mainly focuses on examining the positive effects of management internship programs on how managers perceive their transition to a manager role. Hence, our findings can be regarded as diverging from Hill's study, as we identified some more critical effects of management internship programs. Therefore, we can contribute to the academic field by taking on a critical perspective and establishing a deeper understanding of management development practices. Our findings indicate that the concept of management internships can initiate friction within the individuals, which can lead to individuals being engaged in identity work. Hence, individuals often feel trapped in a situation where they still feel responsible for their former operative activities while at the same time being expected to take on managerial tasks.

In this context, we have made a particular contribution to the examination of managers' way of engaging in identity work. We diverge from the study of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) who claim that managers aim to close the gap between what one does on the job (work content) and how they perceive themselves as managers (their identity). Our study indicates that managers were rather engaged in handling a double-role function by being an operative expert, while at the same time taking on managerial tasks. Therefore, we claim that, in contrast to the study of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016), managers were less concerned about being perceived as strategic leaders. Therefore they do not decouple or separate their managerial identity in order to maintain the desired identity. Conversely, managers in our study apply a reversed decoupling process in which they "couple" with their operational work tasks and hence describe difficulties in having to let go of these tasks. We thereby deviate from the concept of decoupling described by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003). However, we want to raise the awareness that these

findings are context-specific and can be traced back to the unique company culture, which attaches significant value to expert knowledge and operational work and operates in a dynamic and change-driven environment.

In addition, our study contributes to the understanding of how manager training programs can influence and ease the transition for the managers in their process of becoming managers. Our findings confirm the view of previous research which suggests that formal training such as manager training programs play an important but limited part in the development of new managers (Burgoyne and Stewart, 1976; Hill, 2003). Furthermore, we confirm the view that rituals regarding organizational activities such as training and development procedures withhold a symbolic value (Ulrich, 1984). We even stress this perspective by stating that the manager training program predominantly functions on a symbolic level to ease the transition into a manager role. To begin with, this was made clear by the fact that the content of the program was perceived as not primarily important. Our findings indicate that the feeling of safety and security that organizational-confirmed frameworks provided through approved templates seemed to be more important. By using organizational-confirmed frameworks and models, the manager's actions become legitimized. Consequently, managers can refer to the training program and try out new frameworks in a protected space. Second, our findings confirm that the manager training program provides a social context as well as opportunities for managers to create and expand their network with other managers. This supports the general view of many scholars who claim that networks and peer relations serve as a support function to create a sense of belonging as well as a sense of confirmation in a way that they get reinsurance by comparing their actions with others (Kram and Lynn, 1985; Weaver et al., 2011; Milton and Westphal, 2005). However, our study indicates that the network is rather significant on a symbolic level since few managers seem to have reached out to their peers after completing the training. The mere knowledge of having a network to rely on seemed to be helpful for the managers as they could potentially receive support if needed. Lastly, our study highlights that the team-in-team process evoked no clear cut between the old and the new role. Therefore, the manager training program was perceived as a symbolic event to constitute the official shift to the new role in the environment as well as to the managers themselves. In this regard the study indicates that manager training

programs have an implication for managers' identity too, as the social exclusivity of the program created a sense of belonging among the manager, ultimately reinforcing the managerial identity.

Furthermore, previous research indicates that there has been an increased attentiveness to regulating employees' "insides" through control mechanisms (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 1992). In our study, this can be seen in the way the company culture emphasizes people to be independent and figure out things on their own, which is further reinforced by top management formulating expectations about the manager role. Our study confirms that these mechanisms potentially control the employees' insides and act as a form of normative control as managers try to align with this view and want to be perceived as independent.

Nevertheless, our observations revealed several situations in which top management made efforts to protect the managers through a certain form of control aiming to prepare the manager for uneasy or struggling emotions. This can be seen as an attempt to buffer or moderate potential identity crises or clashes. By introducing the concept of identity buffering, we, therefore, contribute with the perspective on how organizational efforts can work as a buffering effect to lessen, mitigate or moderate uncomfortable feelings. In that way the concept of identity buffering can be seen as a contribution to previous research, balancing the discussion of organizational control mechanisms. Therefore, our findings indicate that employees do not necessarily have to be seen as victims of organizational control, as our interviewees perceive these control mechanisms as adding a protective and safeguarding element. In that way, some degree of control or regulation is actually appreciated by the managers, as this represents a stable dimension to the ambiguous state of being in-between when transitioning to a new role. This led to a surprising discovery in our empirical findings, that few managers appeared to resist or refuse the transition to a manager role. One reason for that can be seen in the notion that the proposition to move towards a manager role seems to be aligned with the discourse of career development, supporting managers' identity narrative of having a career in which they grow and develop.

Our study is based on a processual perspective in which the transition to a manager role is regarded as a process of becoming. We, therefore, contribute with empirical findings on how the process of becoming may look like in practice by giving researchers and practitioners insights

into individual's experiences in the process to transition to a manager role. Moreover, our findings help understand how organizational efforts can support managers in their career transition. Based on our findings we conclude that career transitions should not be regarded as following a sequential n-step model in which steps can be reduced to a linear and thought-out process but rather as a fluid process of "becoming" which is always in motion. This indicates that it becomes a rather fluid and unclear process where individuals continuously move back and forth in their development. Furthermore, we can conclude that the company culture is influencing the transition to the manager role. The case company's flexible and dynamic organizational culture creates a rather unstable environment for the managers at times, which creates tension for the manager as they need to find ways to bring stability to the process. These findings may contribute to understanding how the company culture could influence the transition to a manager role, and highlight that it is important to be aware of both the positive as well as the negative aspects to support and enhance career transitions.

6.2   Practical implications

Our study acknowledges that becoming a manager is a long ongoing process that is rather fluid and nonlinear. We, therefore, highlight that managers always find themselves in transition; sometimes feeling more secure, other times struggling to find stability. Hence, our findings create an awareness that career transitions are always in the process of becoming. Consequently, this may have practical implications for both the individual in transition as well as for the organization in which the transition takes place. On the one hand, the findings of this study may prepare the individual for the process of becoming a manager by creating awareness that the process might entail insecurities and instabilities at times. On the other hand, our findings may help organizations to prepare individuals for this unstable environment. It can therefore help organizations in understanding how integrated transition processes, like the team-in-team concept, can help employees to transition to a new role. Nevertheless, we also raise awareness about potential identity struggles which may appear within those processes. Organizations should therefore carefully evaluate how to integrate management development practices and adapt their approaches to the existing company culture. Our study indicates a significant instability in the process, which can be traced back to the change-driven culture and unstable environment. Our study may therefore imply an increased awareness of how the company culture influences the

transition to becoming a manager. In a dynamic and change-driven environment, it will be helpful for organizations to consider how to increase the stability of the process to be able to provide a supportive environment in order to enhance a successful development of managers. Leaving the newly appointed managers alone in such a situation bears the risk that they will end up with identity struggles.

6.3   Research limitations

Like other studies, we are aware that our study is not without limitations. Given the specific case of our study, our results cannot be considered fully representative of other companies. The results of this study can therefore be regarded to help create an understanding of how managers experience the transition to their first manager position and what organization-established initiatives and resources may influence the transition, rather than making generalizations that are valid for all organizations. This refers to the fact that our research primarily explores the process of becoming into a dynamic and non-hierarchical company culture. We acknowledge that this has a significant impact on our study, as the result would probably be different in a more bureaucratic organization.

Another limitation refers to the institutional forces influencing the transition to becoming a manager. We are aware that the relationship between the organization-established initiatives and resources and the experiences of the individuals are not to be considered a cause-effect study. As reflexive researchers, we acknowledge that it is never fully possible to separate between the causes of the identified institutional forces and other causes influencing the process of becoming a manager. Hence, we recognize that other initiatives and resources might also influence the process. This is why our identified institutional forces, the team-in-team concept and the internal manager training program, must be viewed as only one possible source of influence.

Lastly, we are aware that the statements of the interviewees have to be considered carefully as they might be influenced by both the subjectivity of respondents as well as researchers' own interpretations. However, our roles as observers of the management training program helped us to ensure the credibility of the interview responses as we carefully compared the findings.

6.4 Opportunities for Further Research

To proceed from the limitations mentioned above to implications for further research, we suggest that it would be particularly interesting to explore how other institutional forces may impact the process to become a manager. Our study has mainly focused on the initiatives and resources established by the organization, but we see opportunities for future research to explore how other factors may have implications for the transition. In our study, we touched upon peer network relations as an important influence during the transition towards a manager role. We, therefore, consider it interesting to do additional research on how other relationships, for example, the relationship between the manager and his or her own manager, might impact the transition. Furthermore, future research may also consider the organizational culture more carefully. We particularly see an opportunity to conduct empirical research to compare our findings with findings of other contexts to evaluate the influence of the company culture.

Lastly, the findings in our studies shed light on the more critical perspective of management development practices such as the concept of management internship. Our research shows that more empirical studies are needed in this area to explore the more critical and "dark" side of such practices to gain a comprehensive view of the impact on the process of becoming a manager.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

Intro from us
- Information about study.
- Inform about confidentiality and anonymity, and ask for permission to record the interview.

Introduction questions
- Could you tell us about your role at the company?
- What do you do as a manager?
- Why did you want to become a manager?

Experiences of the transition to the manager role
- How has your journey to become a manager looked like?
- What were your expectations for the manager role before you became a manager?
- What was the biggest surprise when becoming a manager?
- How did you feel about the process to become a manager?
- What kind of support have you had to grow into the role?
    - What resources were most helpful to you?
- When did you feel like a manager for the first time?
- How did you feel about going from being a digital specialist role to a manager?
- How did you feel about going from being a colleague and then becoming a manager?

The manager role
- How do you feel about being new in a manager role?
- How would you describe your leadership?
- What is most important for you when being a manager?
- From your perspective - what makes a manager a good manager? Why is that?
- How do you perceive the demands on the manager role?

- What do you think the company expects from a manager?

Experiences about the training program

- What do you think about the manager training program?
    - What have you learned from the training?
    - How has the manager training program helped you in your role as manager?
- Do you think the training has been important for you?
    - In what way?

Dynamic questions & follow-up questions:

- How did that make you feel?
- How did you experience that?
- Could you give an example or situation of when that happened?
- How did you feel in that situation?
- Why is it challenging/difficult?
- How was that for you?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you xxx? Could you give an example of that?
- What did you do about it? How did you handle the situation?
- How did the company support you in that situation?