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Leading others to lead themselves

A qualitative case study of how middle managers perceive and encourage self-leadership in a high-growth firm

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Finally, we hope that you, the reader, will find this thesis interesting and that you will learn something from our findings.

Sincerely,

Nils Engström & Malcolm Wahl

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Abstract

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Authors	Nils Engström & Malcolm Wahl
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Keywords	Self-leadership, high-growth firm (HGF), middle manager, self-management, super-leadership, servant-leadership
Purpose	The purpose of this study is to elaborate on the role of self-leadership from a middle manager's perspective in HGFs in order to contribute valuable insights to existing literature and HGFs that practice self-leadership
Theoretical perspective	The theories used in the study are presented in the literature review and comprise current literature and research regarding HGFs and self-leadership.
Methodology	A qualitative study with an abductive approach has been conducted. The empirical material has been gathered through eight semi-structured interviews with middle managers from the organization. The study has been based on a social constructionist perspective.
Empirical foundation	The empirical material is based on how the interviewed middle managers perceive and encourage self-leadership in the Company.
Conclusion	Self-leadership is perceived similarly by the middle managers, in a way that aligns with the literature. The study also shows that middle managers use different strategies to encourage self-leadership. This could depend on various factors, one being that different departments within the Company have different needs for self-leadership. Some additional conclusions have also been found.

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1. Introduction

This study will focus on how middle managers in high-growth firms (HGFs) perceive and encourage self-leadership. In this chapter, a 1.1 Background to the subject will be introduced, and discussed why it is interesting to study self-leadership in an HGF from a middle manager's perspective. The 1.2 Problematization will provide an overview of previous research followed by the study's intended contribution to existing literature. Lastly, the research question and the purpose of the study will be presented.

1.1 Background

In today's society, organizations are facing new challenges as a result of the technological, information-based environment, with markets and products constantly changing (Houghton & Neck, 2006). Regardless of the challenging and competitive world of business, the number of companies that have established themselves as high performers and scaled up their organizations rapidly has increased (Strengers, Mutsaers, Rossum & Graamans, 2022). Growing seems like a necessity if businesses want to thrive (Guggenberger & Simon, 2019), and it is possible to question whether expressions such as “trust the process”, “Rome was not built in a day”, and “slow and steady wins the race” are beginning to go extinct.

The interest in and the number of high-growth firms (HGFs) have increased in recent years (Monteiro, 2019). There are several driving forces behind this, with two being more prominent. First, the focus on job creation has increased considerably in the last decades, especially after the economic crisis in 2008 (Monteiro, 2019). Even though high-growth firms represent a small part of the world's businesses, they are primarily accountable for creating new jobs (Monteiro, 2019). According to Ferrando, Pal, and Durante (2019), 8% of all businesses in Europe are HGFs, and they are accountable for creating 43% of all new jobs and for 30% of the total turnover. Therefore, HGFs play a significant role in today's society (Strenger et al. 2022). Second, HGFs are vital for innovating and developing new products, and they often emerge as strong competitors, driving markets to new limits (Strengers et al. 2022). Cassia and Minola (2015) and Erken, Donselaar, and Thurik (2018) even argue that the entrepreneurial spirit and inventiveness of HGFs have a substantial and long-lasting impact on overall economic growth.

However, there isn't much agreement in academic literature regarding how to define high-growth firms (Coad, Daunfeldt, Hölzl, Johansson, and Nightingale, 2014). One commonly used definition, expressed by Eurostat and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), is that a high-growth firm is an organization with a minimum of ten employees that experience an annual growth rate of 20% of turnover or employees during at least three years (OECD, 2007).

HGFs encounter several challenges growing at such a rapid pace (Lee, 2012). According to Lee (2012), they identified six obstacles that HGFs often face and consider significant. One obstacle that 41% of the studied HGFs mentioned was the lack of managerial skills. In comparison, the number of regular-growth firms that reported managerial skills as an issue was only 27%. Alternative approaches to management might be necessary to address the lack of managerial skills that often occurs as a result of high growth (Lee, 2012).

Furthermore, managing the growth of an HGF can be a complex and challenging task (Ferrando, Pal, & Durante, 2019). The complexity can not be handled by a single actor and therefore middle management plays a vital role (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). They work as mediators between top management and lower-level employees, responsible for implementing strategic decisions and overseeing the work of lower-level employees (Daft, Murphy, & Willmot, 2020).

A complementary approach addressing the complexity of HGFs is to empower individuals to influence and lead themselves. One way to implement this could be by encouraging self-leadership. The main point of self-leadership is to trust people with a high grade of autonomy and expect them to lead themselves through their work by using a set of behavioral and cognitive strategies (Houghton & Neck, 2006). Businesses and top management have embraced the concept of self-leadership, striving to increase self-leadership skills and behaviors through training activities and educational programs, as well as cementing self-leadership as a core value in the organization (Houghton & Neck, 2006). In a study conducted by Dondi, Klier, Panier, and Schubert (2022), skills that will be needed in future work are defined and referred to as distinct elements of talent. 18 000 people participated in the study, and the researchers

managed to identify four categories, with self-leadership being one of those. The study stresses the importance of self-leadership, pointing out that people associate self-leadership with employment and job satisfaction (Dondi et al. 2022). According to Forbes (2022), people who have developed strong self-leadership skills are more likely to thrive and succeed, both personally and professionally.

1.2 Problematization

Self-leadership has not only gained interest in the business world. It has also become more commonly researched by academics in the management literature (Goldsby, Goldsby, Neck, Neck & Mathews, 2021). Nonetheless, there seems to be a lack of studies that examine the concept of self-leadership in an HGF. Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie (2017) stress the complexity of managing an HGF and highlight the importance of encouraging behaviors such as self-empowerment (Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie, 2017). Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie (2017) touch on the concept of self-empowerment or self-leadership, however, they do not examine it from a middle manager's perspective. In context, the purpose of this study is to elaborate on the role of self-leadership from a middle manager's perspective in HGFs to contribute valuable insights to existing literature and HGFs that practice self-leadership. By examining how middle managers perceive and encourage self-leadership within their teams, this study aims to deepen the understanding of how they view, work and promote self-leadership and compare it to the existing literature. The following research question has therefore been formulated and will lay the foundation for the study:

How is self-leadership perceived and encouraged by middle managers in a high-growth firm?

2. Method

This chapter will elaborate on how the research was conducted. To introduce the case study, the chapter will begin to discuss the process with 2.1 The Company and the 2.2 Respondents.

Thereafter, the chapter will describe our 2.3 Qualitative research strategy, our 2.4 Abductive approach, and our 2.5 Analytical methodology. This chapter will also elaborate on the 2.5 Quality of the research by discussing the limitations of the study and how we worked on mitigating them. Lastly, a 2.6 Summary will be presented.

2.1 The Company

The selected company (mentioned as “the Company” in the study) operates within the transport industry by providing innovative products and services. Despite being a relatively young company, they have managed to expand the workforce and have spread out over several regions and countries. Over the past three years, the Company has had an intense growth journey with an approximately average growth rate in revenue of 570% and 140 % in employees. We have had a great interest in the Company for a time, which made it possible to get in contact early in the process. The Company has extensive collaborations with master's students, devoting time and resources to help them write their master's thesis. This is usually not applicable to bachelor thesis students, but we discussed and agreed upon a topic and got the unique opportunity of being enrolled in their thesis program. We then became interns at the Company and were assigned a supervisor. The internship made it possible to get access to relevant company resources such as mail, calendars, and databases, which helped with identifying and contacting participants for the study.

We are aware of the potential for bias in this study because we are both interns at the Company, which could affect our ability to interpret the empirical data objectively, and there might be a risk that we interpret the data favorably for the Company. We have approached this limitation with caution in the data collection process, but we are aware that it could still have affected our presented empirical material, as well as our interpretations of it.

2.2 Respondents

The study focuses solely on the perceptions of middle managers in the Company. This was deemed as an appropriate approach regarding the scope of our study. The supervisor provided us with a list of all middle managers in the Company, containing the middle manager's name, title, department, hire date, country, and office. We used these categories as filters that made it possible for us to get an overview of the candidates and enable us to make a through-out selection with the aim of getting a wide range of middle managers.

2.2.1 Reasons for chosen participants

There are several reasons why we chose middle managers as participants. According to Woolridge et al. (2008), middle managers have an essential role in connecting different organizational actors. They are between top managers and employees, giving them a wide network and an influential position in the Company (Woolridge et al. 2008). This is also emphasized by Rouleau and Balugan (2011), who stress the importance of middle managers being the link between internal departments. Rouleau and Balugan (2011) argue in their study that the behaviors and activities of middle managers contribute to strategic sensemaking. They identified that middle managers were receiving attention from both senior managers and subordinates during change implementations, highlighting their influential position.

Even though theory argues for the importance of the role of middle managers in an organizational context, there are potential risks with exclusively interviewing middle managers. It could lead to generalizations and inaccurate conclusions about how the Company operates as a whole. However, interviewing middle managers could provide insights and opinions regarding other actors in the Company. This was a decisive factor in why middle managers were chosen as the participants for the study. Due to their position in organizations and their knowledge about different actors on various levels, the empirical material from the interviews would presumably provide necessary data to form an understanding of how self-leadership is perceived and encouraged by middle managers in the Company.

2.4 Qualitative research strategy

Since the study aims to examine how middle managers perceive and exercise self-leadership, the study has been based on a qualitative research strategy with a social constructionist orientation. We chose a qualitative research method to view the world from the respondents' eyes and their world, which is in line with what Bryman and Bell (2017) and Bell et al. (2019) define as a qualitative research strategy. Because of our internship at the Company, we have worked closely with the respondents. This is preferable to improve the nuance of the empirical material, according to Bell et al. (2019).

Furthermore, qualitative interviews were conducted in order to examine how middle managers encourage self-leadership in the organization and how they perceive it. This can be described as an idiographic approach, where the focus is to explain the unique nature of a case and the factors behind it (Bell et al. 2019). According to Bell et al. (2019) definition of a case study, this study meets that description because the empirical data was obtained through qualitative interviews with a specific company. The decision to do a case study arose from our aim to analyze self-leadership in a comprehensive way. By studying a specific organizational environment, this objective appeared to be more achievable in comparison to conducting studies on several organizations. Bell et al. (2019) highlight observations made by Stake (1995), saying that case study research is concerned with the complexity of a specific case and its nature.

Due to the complex nature of the case, we conducted semi-structured interviews with middle managers working in different departments to understand the environment and various aspects of the case comprehensively. Some pre-selected themes shaped the ground of the interviews, but the interviewees had freedom in how they answered the questions and expressed themselves, which is in line with Bryman and Bell (2017) definition of semi-structured interviews.

There are numerous advantages to semi-structured interviews. They can investigate issues that are resistant to observation and enable the reconstruction of events. These interviews are also less prone to reactive effects compared to other types of methods for data collection, such as participant observations (Bell et al. 2019). Nevertheless, one could argue that reactive effects

could also appear in semi-structured interviews since interviews could be seen as an unnatural conversation where the interviewees could present a false image of themselves (Bell et al. 2019; Bryman & Bell, 2017). To make the interviews more natural, we started each interview with a few minutes of warm-up questions to make the interviewees feel more comfortable. Another disadvantage with qualitative interviews is that the interviewer can not observe social interactions and behaviors between individuals, which is possible when conducting participant observations (Bell et al. 2019; Bryman & Bell, 2017). A combination of both semi-structured interviews and observation may therefore be preferable. However, due to the current circumstances of the study, such as the timeframe and the scope of the research, we decided to exclusively conduct semi-structured interviews, and that it would be sufficient when gathering the necessary empirical data.

The initial thought was to conduct ten interviews. However, after eight interviews, we felt that the empirical data had reached saturation, which is why we decided to stop there. Furthermore, we made sure that all respondents allowed us to ask follow-up questions, which enabled us to ask further questions that were not included in the predetermined interview guide during the time of the interviews. By doing so, we made sure that we could get clarity on certain aspects we perceived as unclear or would prefer them to elaborate on further.

Table 1. Interview information

Alias	Departments	Length
Respondent 1	Central Office	44 min
Respondent 2	Product	38 min
Respondent 3	Product	62 min
Respondent 4	Central Office	42 min
Respondent 5	Central Operations	30 min
Respondent 6	Central Office	46 min
Respondent 7	Central Operation	36 min
Respondent 8	Product	44 min

2.4 Abductive approach

The study has been conducted with an abductive approach. The study started by researching self-leadership theory in order to understand and explain the phenomena before collecting data and observations in order to explain and identify the reality at the Company. However, the theory itself could not answer the research questions beforehand, and the data material did not provide us with sufficient explanations and theoretical understandings of certain aspects. Therefore, we chose to work iteratively between an inductive and deductive approach to identify different factors to help define and explain the problem in a way that made it more obvious and clear. By doing so, we avoided the limitations of deductive reasoning, including its reliance on a rigid logic for theory resulting in false hypotheses, which causes a dilemma because it is unclear how to choose the theory to be tested (Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). Furthermore, by choosing this method, we avoided the limitations of inductive reasoning, which center on the claim that no amount of empirical data can definitely lead to the formulation of a theory (Bryman & Bell, 2017; Bell et al. 2019). Rather than using the data to support a single theory, we chose an abductive approach, which according to Alvesson & Kärreman (2007), can help us be open-minded to the possibility of unexpected results in the empirical data.

2.5 Analytical methodology

To enhance the analysis of the empirical data, we chose to use Rennstam and Westerfors (2011) method. Sorting, reducing, and argumenting are what Rennstam and Westerfors (2011) believe to be the three main processes when analyzing qualitative data. After becoming familiar with it, we sorted the empirical material, made comments, and took notes to categorize certain citations into specific themes to get an overview. In line with Rennstam and Westerfors (2011), after sorting the empirical material, we began mapping relevant parts and citations to reduce unnecessary material and increase our comprehension of it. The sections we considered important and interesting to the research were highlighted using color coding. Furthermore, Rennstam and Westerfors (2011) also argue that argumentation is required to differentiate from earlier research on the subject and contribute to further understanding in the field. We did this by first discussing it openly and then arguing for it in the discussion chapter, where we connected the results to past theories on self-leadership.

2.6 Research quality

When conducting research, it is critical to consider the study's quality in light of several aspects pertinent to the particular situation. Reliability and validity are concepts often used when evaluating the research quality of a study. However, academics have questioned the use of these concepts in all settings. Reliability and validity are particularly relevant when evaluating quantitative research since they often use measurements and look at large groups in order to draw conclusions based on statistical tests. (Bryman & Bell, 2017). When evaluating qualitative research, it could instead be valuable to dive deeper into the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. These concepts will collectively make up the total trustworthiness of the research and determine the research quality. (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

When assessing the study's credibility, it is essential to evaluate how the interviews were conducted (Bryman & Bell, 2017). We provided the study to the respondents so they could read it and provide feedback to ensure they felt that their responses had been fairly interpreted and examined. It is crucial to remember that although the study is based on our perception as writers, the feedback was considered. One limitation that could have affected the credibility is that the interviews were remote and not in person. To minimize this limitation, we recorded the interview with video. Another limitation is that most respondents have Swedish as their native language. Although they all work at an international company and are used to speaking English, this could have affected the study's credibility. We made an effort to ensure that the language in the citations was intelligible to reduce this restriction. Even though we tried to minimize this limitation, we are aware that it could have affected our interpretations.

Transferability contributes to trustworthiness, as mentioned in (Bryman & Bell, 2017), which describes how the study should be able to be used in another context or at a different time. We have made an effort to make the transferability as high as possible, even though it was designed as a case study. We describe the Company and the participants thoroughly as well as propose other scenarios for future research on the concept of self-leadership in a high-growth firm in order to consolidate the transferability of the study. However, the research was conducted

at a specific company that finds itself in a unique stage which needs to be considered when using the results from this research.

We took several measures to increase the dependability of the study. We have documented our data collection process thoroughly using Google Meets transcription tools, recording the interviews, and taking notes during the interviews to ensure that we got the right information. It also enabled us to go back to the respondents' statements to ensure that we interpreted them correctly. We also took steps to mitigate potential bias by recognizing the potential conflict of interest and taking a cautionary approach in data collection.

To increase the confirmability of our study, we have aimed to have an objective data collection process. Although we tried to avoid subjective interpretations by both of us being present at all interviews, Bryman and Bell (2017) highlight that it is not possible to be fully objective throughout a qualitative study. Therefore, to further increase the confirmability of the study, we also provided a detailed description of the research process, including the methods used, and the data collected, which can help other researchers to independently verify the results of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

2.6 Summary

This chapter discussed the methods used to conduct the research, including the selection of the Company and respondents, the qualitative research strategy, the abductive approach, and the analytical methodology. The Company is a transport company that has experienced rapid growth. The study focused on middle managers in the Company and was conducted using a qualitative research strategy with an abductive approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight middle managers to examine how they perceive and exercise self-leadership in the organization. The analytical methodology included how we sorted, reduced, and argued for the empirical material. The research quality was also evaluated in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Measures were taken to ensure that the research was conducted with the highest possible quality.

3. Literature Review

This chapter will elaborate on the existing academic literature relevant to the study. The chapter begins to introduce 3.1 High-growth firms since the complexity of high-growth firms may have a large impact on how self-leadership is perceived and encouraged in a company. The overlap between the literature will be explained in 3.2 Overlap Self-leadership/HGF. Thereafter, the concept of 3.3 Self-leadership will be elaborated on, as well as alternative leadership approaches that support self-leadership in the workplace.

3.1 High-growth firms

To introduce high-growth firms, we start by describing organizational growth, followed by going through the organizational life cycle to highlight some common characteristics and explain different stages of growth. Thereafter the concept of HGFs will be presented, giving an overview of the subject. Lastly, a summary will be presented.

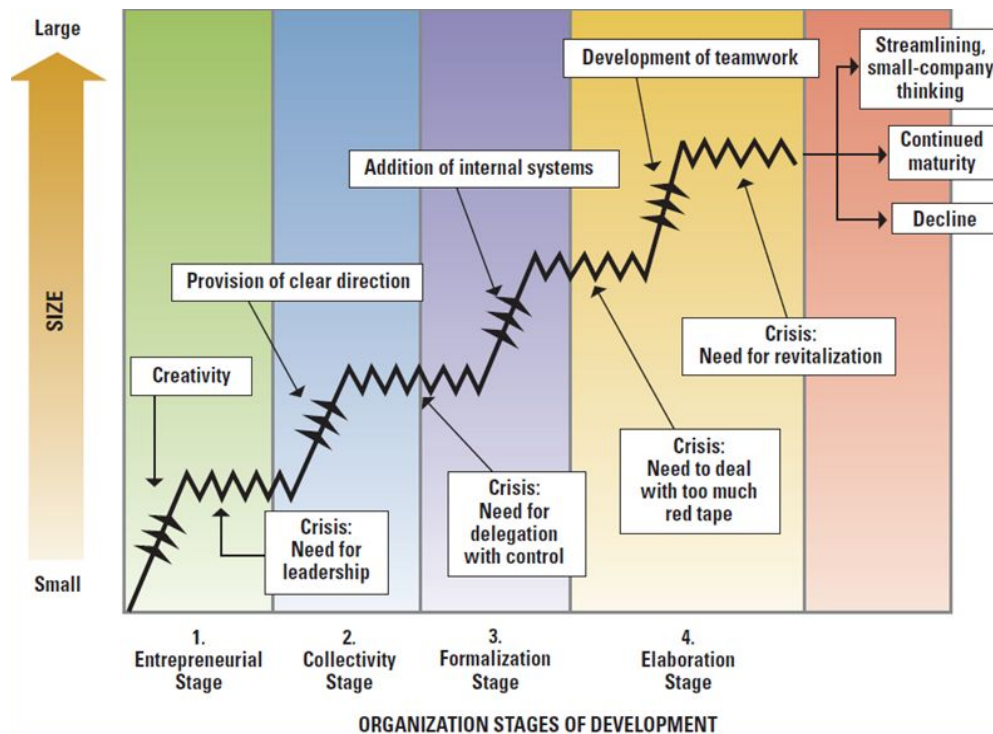
3.1.1 Organizational growth

The definition and the use of the term organizational growth trace back to 1965 when Starbuck (1965) defined growth as “*change in an organization’s size when size is measured by the organization’s membership or employment, and it defines development as a change in an organization’s age*”. Over the past few decades, there has been a lot of interest in the concept of organizational growth (Weinzimmer, Nystrom & Freeman, 1998). However, Weinzimmer, Nystrom and Freeman (1998) stress the disparity between several definitions of organizational growth. The study concluded that several measurement-related challenges must be considered when defining organizational growth (Weinzimmer, Nystrom & Freeman, 1998). It should consider factors such as organization type and industry when evaluating growth (Weinzimmer, Nystrom & Freeman, 1998). However, sales growth seems to be the most frequently used measurement for organizational growth (Weinzimmer, Nystrom & Freeman, 1998).

3.1.2 Organizational life cycle

In addition to organizational growth, Whetten (1987) published an article - *Organizational Growth and Decline Processes*, mentioning the increasing interest in organizations' dynamics and evolutionary processes, thus organizational life cycles. There are several different theories of organizational life cycles, e.g., the *Greiner Organizational Growth model*, but this study will use the one defined by Daft, Murphy, and Willmot (2020). The organizational life cycle advocates that organizations follow a natural flow of different life cycle stages. The concept implies that organizations are first created and then grow older and older until they decline. Declining means that an organization either fails, e.g., bankrupt, or is acquired by another organization (Daft, Murphy, & Willmot, 2020). The stages are divided into four, and each stage has its own circumstances and challenges. The time spent in the different stages varies in organizations (Daft, Murphy, & Willmot, 2020). The stages in the organizational life cycle are the entrepreneurial stage, collectivity stage, formalization stage, and the elaboration stage.

Figure 1. Organizational life cycle (Daft, Murphy, & Willmot, 2020)



Around the world, founders and executives struggle to manage the transitions between the organizational life cycle stages and the difficulties that come with them. One example of how complex these scenarios could be is that only one out of five businesses that survive the first year of the entrepreneurial stage will survive the following five years (Daft, Murphy, & Willmot, 2020). High-growth firms are complex organizations that move fast (Monteiro, 2019). Therefore, they can be expected to go through these stages more quickly, operating under different circumstances.

3.1.3 High-growth firms

Researchers within strategic management literature have examined organizations with rapid growth since 1985 (Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie, 2017). However, the concept has gone under many names, such as “stumblers”, “stars”, “mice”, and “gazelles”, which all explain high organizational growth from different perspectives (Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie, 2017). Monteiro (2019) reveals in a literature review that the interest in high-growth firms has increased rapidly in the past decades, from around 400 citations in 2004 to over 11 000 citations in 2019.

As mentioned in the introduction, the interest in HGFs can be explained by the fact that they create a great number of new jobs (Monteiro, 2019), but also by their contribution to innovation and the development of new products. At the same time, as they work as strong competitors, they are also forcing markets to new limits (Strengers et al. 2022). In addition, the increased interest in HGFs is not limited to academic literature. The European Commission stated their political objective to support high-growth firms in the strategy report, *Europe 2020 strategy* (European Commission, 2010), and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have presented a report that intended to provide valuable insights to guide governments in supporting HGFs (OECD, 2010).

However, there is a lack of an established definition of identifying and measuring high-growth firms (Coad et al. 2014). This is because growth is measured from different perspectives, leading to various definitions of HGFs (Coad et al. 2014). According to the literature, the most established way of measuring growth is by sales or the number of employees. Even though these indicators reveal various organizational characteristics, most research agrees that outcome does

not appear to depend on which of these two characteristics is selected (Coad et al. 2014). The growth is often either measured in relative growth, thus, annual growth rates in relation to other organizations within different geographics or industries, or absolute growth, thus, growth within a specific timeframe (Demir, Wennberg, and McKelvie, 2017).

3.1.4 Summary

Organizational growth refers to an increase in the size or membership of an organization (Starbuck, 1965). The concept has garnered significant interest in recent decades, and although there is disagreement about how to define and measure it, sales growth seems to be the most established measurement (Weinzimmer, Nystrom & Freeman, 1998). The organizational life cycle is a concept that suggests that organizations go through different stages of development, including birth, growth, decline, and death. The organizational life cycle stages are the entrepreneurial stage, collectivity stage, formalization stage, and elaboration stage. Each stage has its characteristics and challenges (Daft, Murphy, & Willmot, 2020). High-growth firms experience rapid growth and are of significant interest due to their ability to create new jobs, contribute to innovation and development, and act as strong competitors. However, similar to organizational growth, there needs to be more consensus on defining and measuring high-growth firms, with the most commonly used metrics being sales or the number of employees (Weinzimmer, Nystrom & Freeman, 1998).

3.2 Overlap Self-leadership in an HGF

Managing the growth of an HGF as they strive to maintain its rapid pace of growth can be a complex and challenging task (Ferrando, Pal, & Durante, 2019). In the section above, we also concluded that HGFs might be moving fastly through the different stages of the organizational life cycle, resulting in different challenges. According to Lee (2012), one challenge highlighted as a result of high growth is the lack of managerial skills. Altogether, this suggests that HGFs may need to consider alternative approaches to traditional management. One potential solution is to empower individuals to take on more responsibility and influence within the organization. Self-leadership has been proven to be a successful approach in the workplace, especially when the traditional hierarchical structures are unsuitable or when the tasks are complex (Houghton & Neck, 2006). The combination of theories can provide insights into how self-leadership can be

used to empower individuals to lead themselves, address the complexity of HGFs and help to fill the managerial skills gap.

3.3 Self-leadership

This chapter will highlight theory relevant to the concept of self-leadership. First, the concept itself will be introduced. Furthermore, the chapter will elaborate on different strategies individuals can use to encourage self-leadership. Thereafter, a paradox of self-leadership will be introduced and explained. Super-leadership and servant-leadership will also be presented as leadership approaches that facilitate self-leadership in the long run. Lastly, the chapter will include a summary.

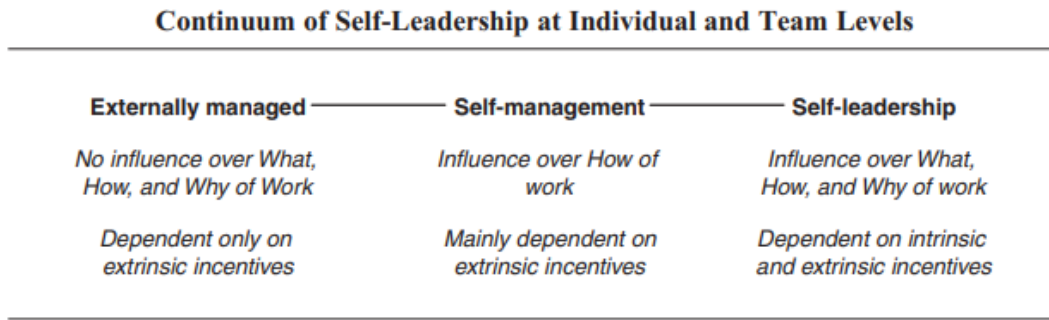
3.3.1 Self-leadership

Individuals' actions and behaviors are often said to be supported by external forces such as formal leaders (Stewart, Courtright & Manz, 2011). However, self-leadership theory argues that the main driver for one's behavior comes from within, highlighting internal forces as the most influential e's actions (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stewart, Courtright & Manz, 2011).

Manz (1986) described self-leadership as a process through which individuals control their behavior, influencing and leading themselves using specific behavioral and cognitive strategies. The concept of self-leadership was introduced in the 1980s to look beyond the behavioral self-management process and enable the distinction of different levels of self-influence in organizations (Steward et al. 2011). Since then, self-leadership has become an established concept and a more common subject to study by academics (Houghton & Neck, 2006).

Influencing your work processes is a critical aspect of self-leadership. According to Stewart, Courtright and Manz (2011), the degree of self-influence in processes could be illustrated in a continuum, with behavior that is predominantly influenced by external factors at one end of the spectrum and complete influence by freedom at the other end.

Figure 2. Continuum of self-leadership (Steward et al. 2011)



The continuum illustrates three categories with different levels of self-influence. Firstly, externally managed could be described as having no influence and solely dependent on extrinsic incentives. Secondly, self-management involves some degree of personal control but also includes external incentives, such as guidance, and the influence over one's work processes is somewhat limited. Lastly, self-leadership represents a higher degree of self-control where individuals not only use self-management techniques but also evaluate the suitability of current standards and establish their standards. Therefore, analyzing the degree of control that comes from individuals themselves is essential when studying self-influence in work processes. (Stewart, Courtright & Manz, 2011)

3.3.2 Self-leadership strategies

Manz (1986) outlines a number of self-leadership strategies that could be applied to alter patterns of behaviors and cognition to increase individuals' inner motivation. These strategies could be divided into three main categories: behavior focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought pattern strategies (Houghton & Neck, 2006).

Behavior focused self-leadership strategies are based on self-awareness theories and the idea that individuals develop self-awareness through taking charge of their performance and behavior (Houghton & Neck, 2006). Self-observations, self-formulated goals, self-rewards, self-punishments, and self-reminders are examples of behavior focused strategies. Self-observation may help individuals gain insight into how they behave, where, why, and under what conditions they use various behaviors, which is the basis for effectively formulating individual goals (Houghton & Neck, 2006). This kind of self-awareness is required in order to be

able to recognize when unproductive or ineffective behaviors need to be modified or eliminated (Manz, 1986). Developing knowledge about individual strengths and limitations through self-observation is a powerful tool that enables self-leadership (Manz, 1986; Houghton & Neck, 2006).

Manz (1986) asserts that rewards might impact one's self-awareness. Through physical and psychological rewards, individuals can influence their behaviors and actions. The first step in influencing your behavior is pinpointing what you find rewarding. Consequently, if you have knowledge about what you perceive as rewarding, it will increase your inner motivation (Manz, 1986). However, it is equally important to identify which behaviors and actions generate guilt to attain a desirable behavior, which Manz (1986) labeled as self-punishment. Another self-behavior strategy is using self-reminders, meaning that individuals are encouraged to remind themselves and accentuate the meaning of specific tasks in their work.

Individual motivation can also arise from natural reward strategies. Natural rewards are usually categorized into extrinsic and intrinsic rewards (Manz, 1986). Extrinsic rewards are external rewards that an organization could provide, e.g., an increased salary or performance-based bonuses, and the source of motivation is the reward itself. Intrinsic rewards are rather about finding motivation in one's specific work, regardless of the extrinsic rewards. The meaning and purpose of individuals' work are what motivate and drive behaviors and actions (Manz, 1986).

The third strategy to achieve self-leadership is the use of thought patterns as a way to change the line of thoughts and behaviors. By controlling thought patterns and exchanging negative thoughts with positive ones or seeing opportunities instead of problems, individuals will act accordingly with a more positive attitude and achieve more significant results (Houghton & Neck, 2006). One of the decisive factors when it comes to changing thought patterns is individuals' fantasies and perceptions. Through the use of mental pictures, one can visualize success, increasing motivation, making it easier to overcome problems and challenges in work tasks (Houghton & Neck, 2006).

3.3.3 Paradox of Self-leadership

In the article “*Self-Leadership: A Paradoxical Core of Organizational Behavior*”, Stewart, Courtright, and Manz (2019) examine the paradoxes of self-leadership and discuss how it is both empowering and limiting for individuals. The authors note that self-leadership allows for greater autonomy, but it can also lead to a lack of accountability and limit individuals' creativity and innovation. Stewart, Courtright, and Manz (2019) also note that self-leadership can be beneficial for organizations, as it can create a sense of ownership and responsibility, but it can also be detrimental, as it can lead to a lack of collective responsibility. Stewart, Courtright, and Manz (2019) suggest that self-leadership can be beneficial for organizations, however when it is balanced with collective responsibility. They also suggest that organizations should strive to create a culture that encourages and supports self-leadership, while also ensuring that individuals are held accountable for their actions.

One paradox that Stewart, Courtright, and Manz (2019) mention is “*The Paradox of Self-Leadership Depletion and Strengthening*”, meaning that self-regulation is needed to succeed with self-leadership. Self-regulation refers to the ability to control one's behavior, emotions, and thought patterns to achieve goals. The basic idea is that self-regulation involves constant effort and energy, which runs out when used. The constant effort required to succeed with self-regulation and self-leadership could be problematic in the long term due to one's limited ability to maintain self-regulation. Stewart, Courtright, and Manz (2019) mention impulse purchases and one's ability to stick to diets as examples of similar tendencies. However, it is suggested that external support, such as encouragement from colleagues and managers, will lead to better conditions for successfully maintaining self-regulation and self-leadership in the long run (Stewart, Courtright, & Manz 2019).

Furthermore, Stewart, Courtright, and Manz (2019) suggest that leadership that provides external support should be encouraged and prioritized to ensure the viability of self-leadership long term. Examples of leadership that encourage self-leadership include super-leadership and servant-leadership.

3.3.4 Leadership styles to support Self-leadership

Super-leadership is a concept that has become increasingly popular in the field of leadership studies, particularly in the last decade (Schnake, Dumler & Cochran, 1993). The concept of super-leadership highlights the importance of encouraging employees to engage in self-leadership (Schnake, Dumler & Cochran, 1993). It encourages employees to take on greater responsibility, be more self-directed, and collaborate. According to Schnake, Dumler and Cochran (1993), the main task of a leader is to lead and encourage employees to be self-leaders in their work. The concept attempts to bridge the gap between traditional hierarchical leadership and more innovative and democratic leadership.

Furthermore, Houghton, Neck, and Manz (2003) argue that super-leadership empowers employees and redefines the role of leaders. They argued that super-leadership could lead to more effective and efficient decision-making and improved organizational performance by giving employees a greater sense of ownership and responsibility. Houghton, Neck, and Manz (2003) also suggested that super-leadership could create a more diverse and inclusive work environment.

Another leadership style that supports self-leadership is servant leadership (Van Dierendonk, 2011). Servant leadership focuses on creating a positive work environment where people are empowered to take the initiative and responsibility. He argues that servant leadership effectively creates an environment of trust, respect, and collaboration. He further argues that servant leadership is beneficial because it encourages employees to take ownership of their work and to be creative and innovative. In addition, Van Dierendonk (2011) notes that servant leadership can build strong relationships between leaders and employees, leading to greater job satisfaction and improved performance. Organizations that embrace servant leadership also experience higher levels of employee engagement and job satisfaction, as well as improved customer service, higher productivity, and greater profitability (Van Dierendonk, 2011)

3.3.6 Summary

Self-leadership is an established concept in organizational behavior that is based on the idea that individuals can control their own behavior and lead themselves using a specific set of behavioral

and cognitive strategies. These strategies can be divided into three categories: behavior focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought pattern strategies. One paradox with self-leadership suggests that self-regulation is necessary for success but that it also requires a lot of energy that can be difficult to sustain in the long run. To mitigate this, external support, such as encouragement from colleagues and managers, is recommended. Super-leadership and servant-leadership are two leadership styles that provide external support and encourage employees to take on greater responsibility, be more self-directed and collaborate. These leadership styles can facilitate self-leadership, and lead to improved organizational performance, higher levels of employee engagement and job satisfaction, as well as improved customer service, higher productivity, and greater profitability.

4. Analysis

This chapter will analyze the empirical material from the qualitative interviews. First, 4.1 The high-growth journey will be analyzed to introduce the case. The chapter will then elaborate on the study's central concept of self-leadership by analyzing the respondents' 4.2 Perception of Self-leadership and 4.3 Encouragement of Self-leadership. Following, the mentioned 4.4 Challenges with Self-leadership in the Company 4.5 Summary of the chapter.

4.1 The High-Growth Journey

Before analyzing the study's central concept of self-leadership, we aim to introduce the context of the case by analyzing the Company's high-growth journey. The view of organizational growth is shared among almost all respondents. The growth is described in similar ways with words such as “*exponential*”, “*rapid*”, “*hyper-growth*” and “*scale-up*”.

Exponential. I mean, I've never experienced corporate change rate at this pace before. I've seen growth at this pace before, like physical growth and you know, expanding, but not the change rate. Because best practice from three to six months ago is obsolete today.
(Respondent 7)

In this quote, Respondent 7 expresses that this level of growth has not been experienced before. The quote also speaks to the importance of staying on top of the ever-changing business landscape and highlights the need for organizations to stay up-to-date with the latest best practices to remain competitive in their respective industries. One could interpret that Respondent 7 emphasizes the need for organizations to be flexible and adaptive to changing trends while also considering the rapid pace of change. For them to succeed in the current business environment, the Company needs to be prepared to embrace change and evolve quickly.

I think that one of the main challenges working in this type of environment is that things have grown so rapidly all the time. So people are running quite fast. (Respondent 1)

In this quote, one of the main challenges with growth is highlighted, with people “*running quite fast*”. One could sense that there is some skepticism about growing at such a rapid pace, that people need to slow down, and that it might benefit the company going forward.

However, Respondent 8's view differs from the others, saying that the growth is steady and not going too fast or too slow.

It's growing at a reasonable rate, like nothing too fast. (Respondent 8)

The quote illustrates a different view of the growth within the organization. Respondent 8 believes that the growth is “*reasonable*” and not “*too fast*”. One can see that the definition of high growth may differ between individuals, suggesting that the concept is subjective and based on personal experiences. All respondents are working at the same company, however, they work in different departments and regions, having different perspectives and personal experiences and therefore defining growth in various ways.

4.2 Perception of Self-leadership

This subchapter will elaborate on how the respondents perceive self-leadership. First, the respondents' perceptions of self-leadership will be analyzed. Thereafter, we will analyze the respondents' approaches to self-leadership in order to identify similarities and differences. Finally, a summary will be presented.

4.2.1 Concept of Self-leadership

When asked about self-leadership, all respondents had similar definitions of the concept. They defined it in various ways and focused on different elements, but the essence was the same.

I think self-leadership is really about just waking up, knowing what you need to work on, and what needs to get done without being told what to do. But also, at the same time, being motivated and excited to be working on what you're working on. (Respondent 8)

The quote illustrates the meaning of self-leadership, focusing on independence and the ability to lead oneself without directives from a superior. The quote also highlights self-motivation, thus, the ability to motivate oneself to achieve one's goal by being “*excited to be working on what you're working on*”.

In addition, Respondent 2 also mentions the importance of leading oneself but also the ability to be responsive and quick.

Well, one piece is that you figure out solutions, and you can pressure test them with people around you, and you don't necessarily go to your own manager to figure something out. You figure out who the person is that I should talk to about this thing and try to just figure it out. Because, I mean, especially in an area like this where you have a lot of uncertainties around technology in these things, you need to be super kind of quick in, well, your manager probably won't know the answers anyway. (Respondent 2)

One crucial aspect of self-leadership, according to Respondent 2, is the ability to come up with solutions yourself instead of asking your manager for help and guidance. Respondent 2 emphasizes that you try to figure out things and argue that it is essential in technology and during uncertain times. The quote also highlights that individuals need to solve problems themselves because managers “*probably won't know the answers anyway*”. This is in line with Respondent 3's answer

Basically, having a lot of self-leadership is, even if I don't have clear instructions, I try to figure out what makes the most sense to me, and then I go and do it. (Respondent 3)

According to Respondents 2, 3, and 8, self-leadership is all about figuring things out, solving problems on your own, and doing what makes the most sense to you, even though you lack instructions and support from your environment.

Furthermore, when asking about how the respondents perceive the need for self-leadership within the organization, they had different answers and the need for self-leadership varied depending on your role and what you are expected to do in your work.

I believe that to some extent, some roles actually require more self-leadership because the scope of the role is really undefined. (Respondent 1)

Maybe for someone that works in a very analytical way with clearly defined problems, then self-leadership would be less important, but if you work in a very central role when it's about managing people, the level of self-leadership needed is very high. (Respondent 6)

The answers from Respondents 1 and 6 suggest that different departments have different needs for self-leadership. Respondent 1 suggests that roles with an undefined scope require more self-leadership. Meanwhile, Respondent 6 implies that analytical roles need less self-leadership, while departments with roles that require more creativity or interpersonal skills may benefit from higher levels of self-leadership.

While the respondents have similar perceptions of self-leadership, they seem to have different approaches to how they work with it. The approaches focus on different elements, for example giving autonomy, setting a structure, or having some control as the most crucial aspect.

Empower the team you know. I'm really hands-off in a sense like, you know, if you have really good people that are dedicated to kind of what we're doing, they're going to, you know, work on the things that we need to work on to get to our goal. So less micromanaging and more just giving them autonomy. (Respondent 8)

In this quote, respondent 8 emphasizes a hands-off approach, describing it as giving employees autonomy instead of micromanaging them. Furthermore, the employees are described as competent and dedicated to the Company's mission and therefore have a strong drive to work on appropriate things that take the Company forward in the right direction.

This is further emphasized by Respondent 2, who stresses the importance of autonomy, highlighting individual responsibility and freedom as vital for the organization.

It's always making sure people don't feel like cogs in a machinery [...] It's their company as much as it's mine. (Respondent 2)

Respondent 2 illustrates the aim for autonomy when saying that the employees should not “*feel like cogs in a machinery*” and also highlights that every employee has an important role in the company.

In contrast, Respondent 3 highlights structure as a key element when it comes to ensuring self-leadership. Having a clear structure enables employees to work autonomously since they know what they are expected to do.

It's about setting structure and then, like, understanding what you're supposed to do and like. Basically not be waiting for instructions. (Respondent 3)

The quote implies that the employees should have autonomy, however, in order to achieve this, they need to have a clear structure that can help to provide guidance. Therefore, one can argue that this approach is a sort of hybrid where the manager provides a structure to flourish the employee's autonomy, which could be interpreted as servant-leadership.

Furthermore, another approach to self-leadership is about providing some level of control. The assumption is that control is necessary in an organization that operates in a world with uncertainties and changes.

In my experience, it's a lot about trying to maintain some level of control in a quite chaotic organization and being quite hands-on and we talk about management principles that, at this phase, you would need a more showing-the-way approach. Have a more hands-on type of leadership in a hypergrowth than in later stages.[...]being very involved and being guiding very directly, and to make sure that we have that alignment.
(Respondent 7)

Respondent 7's answer differs from Respondent 8 and 2's answers, having a more “*hands-on*” focus and a “*showing-the-way approach*”. Although the quote has similarities with Respondent 3, thus, structure and control could be viewed as equals, Respondent 7 suggests more control and direct supervision, “*guiding very directly*”.

4.2.3 Summary

This subchapter explores the perceptions of self-leadership in the Company. All respondents had similar definitions of self-leadership, focusing on independence and self-motivation and the ability to lead without a superior's directives. Additionally, the need for self-leadership varies depending on the scope of a role, with some requiring more and others less. Different middle managers work with self-leadership in different ways, with some emphasizing autonomy, while others believe providing structure or some level of control is important.

4.3 Encouragement of Self-leadership

This subchapter will elaborate on how the respondents work with self-leadership in their respective teams. Using self-leadership strategies could be a way of encouraging self-leadership in an organization. However, this subchapter will look deeper into three main elements, analyzing how they work with motivation, goal-setting, and risk-taking to better understand how they work with encouraging self-leadership.

4.3.1 Motivation

When asked how the respondents motivate themselves and their employees, the middle managers gave different responses, highlighting different strategies and elaborating on various incentives that provide motivation within the company. Some managers perceived intrinsic motivation as the primary motivation, while others highlighted external motivation as an essential part of their motivation.

Regarding motivating employees, Respondent 4 expressed that they did not have any specific strategies for that, that their employees motivate themselves, and that the employees usually do not need external motivation from their managers.

I think that they, to a great extent, motivate themselves. And, As I said, they're very easy to manage. (Respondent 4)

They are very self-going in that sense. I haven't spent that much time motivating people. They're very motivated by themselves. (Respondent 5)

Employees motivating themselves is also highlighted by Respondent 5, saying that they have not spent much time motivating people since employees, to a large degree, motivate themselves. This quote implies that many people have a strong intrinsic motivation to shape their work rather than relying on external incentives for motivation. However, in contrast to previous statements, Respondents 3 and 8 argue that the source of motivation needs to come externally sometimes and can not fully come from within.

It depends, it's sometimes both, but with the type of organization that we are. We need to look for people that are sort of driven and self-motivated because we don't have either enough leaders or enough processes in place to sort of make everything work in that aspect. So you need to have some sort of drive in order to work out in this type of organization. Yeah, that sense of motivation is relatively tricky. (Respondent 3)

I think it's a bit of both. There are times when you need to motivate the team, you know. And then there's other times when they feel super motivated. (Respondent 8)

The quotes imply that the respondents both can rely on the employee's ability to motivate themselves and, at the same time, occasionally need to step in to help the employee with the motivation. Respondent 3 also highlights that the employees need to possess the qualities of self-motivation and drive due to the lack of leaders and processes within the organization.

Another aspect of motivation is whether it is extrinsic or intrinsic. The majority of the respondents mainly talk about intrinsic motivation. Respondent 7 gives one example of this.

Yeah, I mean, It is most definitely intrinsic motivation that is the key motivation within the Company and doing this type of work. I think the motivation comes from doing something that hasn't been done before. I would say you are higher up in Maslow's hierarchy, we are not at the base level in this case. So I think it is more self-fulfillment on that level and those types of intrinsic motivations, It's most definitely not extrinsic motivation. (Respondent 7)

The quote suggests that the motivation is intrinsic and that they are motivated by “*self-fulfillment*”. Respondent 7 emphasizes that motivation is definitely not extrinsic. However, this view does not agree with Respondent 1 when mentioning an extrinsic source of motivation.

But also, as I mentioned to you, my main motivator for joining the Company is obviously potential economic upside, which is really interesting in terms of maybe five years from now, being a different scenario when it comes to economic standards. But also when it comes to having an impact as well. (Respondent 1)

From a motivational perspective, the quote also implies that the financial part is important. Investment opportunities are, in some cases, available when joining the Company. Hence, Respondent 1 perceives that as an important part of joining the Company and feels motivated by the potential economic upside that might present itself a few years from now.

However, the majority of the respondents perceive intrinsic motivation as the main source of motivation and believe that they need people that are motivated by the Company’s mission and journey, and not by the financial aspects of their job.

We do not need the gold diggers going into the unknown, we need to have the explorers.
(Respondent 7)

The Company needs explorers, innovative employees that are curious and want to explore and come up with new innovative solutions that will drive the Company forward, which is highlighted by Respondent 7 in the quote above.

Furthermore, the Company seems also to be working with some other extrinsic motivation, in other words, rewards. Examples are celebrating victories and using internal communication platforms to publicly announce both external and internal accomplishments.

We are pretty good at celebrating our victories. I mean if you look at the old stereotypical type of organization, the more hierarchical one. It's usually that, you know, the upper management gets celebrated. At the Company, my take is that we try to highlight the actual people doing the work, and you do the shoutouts for them and try not to give the credit to management for that to the same extent. We have a general channel where whenever someone has closed a good deal. It's the person working on that account that gets highlighted, and it's the manager who gives the praise.... In this case, you try to highlight the actual individuals doing that work and doing public shoutouts for them and have small celebrations, victory dinners, and those types of awards. (Respondent 7)

The Company seems to work with extrinsic rewards to increase motivation and show the way forward by celebrating good performances and victories. This adds to the feeling of working with something that is meaningful and triggers intrinsic motivation.

In line with Respondent 7, Respondent 3 also mentions the use of the internal communication platform, as well as other forms of extrinsic rewards.

(Publishing messages on Internal communication platform) So not only that, they're doing a good job, but what parts of the job are good and that they can repeat those things. But of course, that is sort of the first step, but if you don't see sort of the more financial or like titles aspect and of course tools that you have to reward people that if you're doing a great work, you will get a bigger raise compared to someone that has not performed at your level. (Respondent 3)

The quote points out that rewarding an individual is kind of the first level, and that they use promotions, “titles” and financial rewards, “bigger raise” as sources of motivation.

4.3.2 Goal-setting

When discussing how they work with goals and how they encourage desirable behaviors, the respondents seem to have different approaches and practices. It became apparent that much responsibility was given to middle managers when it came to structuring the work and formulating the goals for their teams.

Several respondents highlighted the unique situation that the Company operates in. When asked how they work with goals, they emphasized that the Company is in a new market with products and services that were unavailable before. Because they are in a new market, there are no industry standards or best practices to base your work on, making it challenging when setting goals or evaluating work tasks.

It's not set in stone how we should work. There's no benchmark, there's no best practice for our industry 'cause we're starting a new industry. (Respondent 7)

The quote strengthens the difficulties of observing and evaluating in a new industry where there are limitations in established standards and processes. However, several respondents point out their intention of letting the employees evaluate themselves.

I think it's often evaluated a little bit by yourself when you're working with customers, if you are thinking of everything, if you're down to all the details, if you're doing a thorough work, it's going to reflect on how the customer perceives us. (Respondent 5)

In this quote, Respondent 5 expresses that employees often evaluate their work, which is an important part of individual development. Evaluating and observing details in your work will help to understand better why a customer was either satisfied or unsatisfied with what you delivered. The quote implies that if employees have more knowledge about details in their work, they might be able to change certain things, which will reflect on their overall performance and on how customers perceive them.

Furthermore, the majority of the respondents have so-called one-on-ones with their employees, not aiming to evaluate the employees but instead helping and guiding them to evaluate their own goals and to follow up on those goals.

Yeah. So we do have one-on-ones. I check in with them weekly, just really kind of evaluate what type of actions are needed, you know. We set those actions in those one-on-ones and kind of put together a database, like an action log. That gives a good sense of what they have contributed to the team, to the organization, when you look back on the year or the quarter. (Respondent 8)

The way we do it is by using one-on-one conversations. Okay, what are your ambitions, what are your goals, and how does that fit in with the Company goals. And then you set some goals in a development plan that you will follow up on at least monthly.

(Respondent 3)

One implication from these quotes is that Respondent 3 has a supportive approach, letting employees evaluate their work by themselves and setting their own goals while emphasizing the overall mission and ensuring individual and corporate goals are aligned. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that the Company goals are clear and set in the organization.

When discussing goals, a recurrent theme in the empirical material was the aim to let individuals work with their own goals. Middle managers believe that formulating individual goals for themselves lays the foundation for implementing self-leadership, and these types of goals will help guide you in your work. This could be interpreted in the response given by Respondent 4.

I think it's important for everyone to be involved in setting their own goals and I think that's also you know, setting the goals for the Company as a whole, but I think it's important to have those clear company goals and then for individuals to set their own individual goals, and also be measured and based on this goals, I think that will create very much incentives for employers to take responsibility for themselves to and lead themselves towards those goals. I think that's the starting point for self-leadership. And I also think it's a way to encourage people as well, I mean, create motivation amongst employees to have a responsibility. (Respondent 4)

Setting your own goals, instead of management setting your goals, is believed to be a source of motivation. The respondent suggests that having clear goals and measuring performance against them is the “*starting point for self-leadership*” and will encourage employees to take ownership of their work.

However, Respondent 1 argues that even though it is important for individuals to be involved in setting their own goals, some employees might struggle with structuring goals for themselves and reflecting on them.

You just come to me and say where you want to grow, and I can try to facilitate that on your behalf. I think that we have some work to do in terms of encouraging people to make sure that they really know and understand that they own the growth to the full extent and also provide them with enough tools. And frameworks to really be able to verbalize or be structured in terms of that growth. Because not everybody's really that self-driven in terms of reflecting on those goals. (Respondent 1)

It can be interpreted that Respondent 1, in terms of goal-setting, views the role of a middle manager as someone that can help and provide employees with the right toolkit to successfully formulate their own goals. However, Respondent 1 argues that if some employees are not self-driven in this aspect, it is necessary for the manager to set some form of formal structure or verbalize goals for them.

One could interpret that setting own individual goals are essential in the Company and as mentioned by one respondent, the “*starting point for self-leadership*”. Despite this, many middle managers claim that they have a hard time working with goals and that there is not a clear structure of how they should work with goal-setting, often assigning middle managers with a lot of responsibility to deal with those situations as they deem fit.

We're not that good at working with goals to be honest. I mean, I'm a fan of goals and I have worked with that a lot before at previous companies. But we don't really have a very clear structure of how to work. I mean, I would say it is up to all managers to handle these themselves and make sure that we set goals for our departments that are in line with the Company's overall goals and so on. We don't really have a structure for that. That might come within a short time. (Respondent 4)

This quote illustrates the lack of structure in terms of setting goals. Although Respondent 4 appears to be an advocate of goals, it seems like the Company has not yet formulated an approach that provides middle managers with guidance and direction in their work with goals.

In addition, respondent 6 also suggests having challenges with setting goals. Both own goals and goals for employees.

Yeah. No, I think that's an area where I, as a leader, can improve. Both for myself and for my team. I know obviously, I'm very involved in sort of our target set on a company level, but we are all having sort of supportive roles in a way, with sort of not really clear targets for our teams. (Respondent 6)

Instead of mentioning the absence of structure, as Respondent 4 previously did, Respondent 6 points out the lack of managerial skills and the potential improvement as a leader. This shows another scenario where middle managers experience challenges with setting goals.

However, some of the respondents seem to work with their employees' goals successfully.

For my team, we have one-to-one every week where we, it's been a lot of product focus, but we're trying to also look at the employee goals. So, we have the review cycle that we're doing twice a year where every employee needs to set their own goals, targets, and what they want to achieve. And then we try to use the one-on-ones to follow up on how we're progressing towards that. (Respondent 5)

The majority of the middle managers seem to have challenges with this. However, Respondent 5 is an example of someone with a successful approach.

4.3.3 Risk-taking

Risk-taking and thinking outside the box are integral parts of the work at the Company. By taking risks and trying out new things, they can develop new solutions and stay innovative in a competitive industry. The following quotes from the respondents reflect a range of perspectives on risk-taking.

Well, I think that we take risks every day. And I think the stage the Company is in at the moment and also was in a few years ago, we need to take some risks to be able to do what we're doing. (Respondent 4)

Yeah, for us, risk-taking is sort of a must-have. But even if you say that, it's still tricky, and to me, it's a lot about building habits and making it easier to do the right thing. (Respondent 3).

In terms of my team, I think we are like semi-risk-taking persons. Some like to take on more risks and some are more afraid. I think it comes a little bit with age. I am definitely more risk-taking than the rest of my team. So, from my perspective, I'm kind of pushing them to take on a bit more risk or stepping outside of their comfort zone. (Respondent 5)

Taken together, these quotes demonstrate the consensus amongst the respondents that risk-taking is an essential and necessary part of the Company's success. The respondents show an optimistic view of risk-taking, seeing opportunities rather than problems.

Although the respondents agreed that risks need to be taken, some highlight that it is essential to be aware of the risks and to ensure they are taken in a managed and controlled way.

I mean try to do everything in your power to succeed, and if you failed but have done everything you could, then you're still good. A bit of that, I mean daring of taking a bit of risk, supporting them too, you know, be tough when they need to be tough, etc, and you know, finding that balance between. (Respondent 7)

It's sort of safe to dare to take risks to go further and also then to train people like what are the risks that we want to take, just a quote from one of the architects at [another company], we want to take risk and fail in the sense of a combustion engine, that we have some small controlled explosions that take us in the right direction. We don't want to have a fuel-air bomb that levels half the city, like that type of risk-taking is not what we're after. (Respondent 3)

From a risk-taking perspective, these quotes suggest a balance between taking risks to push boundaries and succeeding but also understanding the consequences of taking too much of a risk and potential consequences. When further discussing risk-taking, Respondent 7 highlighted a few aspects that are important in their work.

So hence I mean that open-mindedness, trial and error, finding new ways to do parts, and creating something new, even if it's a new process or whatever, is highly encouraged.

(Respondent 7)

The respondents suggest that innovation and experimentation are essential for the Company. They encourage open-mindedness and the spirit of trying new things and finding new ways to do things.

4.3.4 Summary

This part of the analysis highlights how self-leadership is encouraged by middle managers based on the empirical material from the interviews. Most of the respondents perceived intrinsic motivation as the primary source of motivation. The majority of the respondents argued that it is vital that employees have an intrinsic drive and can motivate themselves rather than relying on extrinsic motivation. However, the Company also works with extrinsic rewards, such as publicly announcing accomplishments on the internal communication platform and arranging victory dinners.

When discussing how desirable behaviors can be achieved by setting goals, the middle managers expressed divided opinions, with some suggesting that employees should evaluate their work and set their own goals. In contrast, others believe that some employees need external guidance, support, and verbalizing of their goals. Additionally, it is highlighted that there is a lack of structure in terms of how they should work with goal-setting, leaving it up to the middle managers to set the structure for goal-setting in their respective teams, resulting in various approaches to setting goals. The last part of this section analyzed risk-taking in the Company. The respondents argued that risk-taking and thinking outside the box are an integral part of their work and are necessary to stay innovative in a competitive industry. They highlighted the need to take risks in a managed and controlled way, and the importance of supporting open-mindedness and experimentation.

4.4 Challenges with Self-leadership in the Company

When the respondent got asked about potential challenges with self-leadership, almost all respondents had something to say. Several respondents mentioned the importance of direction and goals as challenges in the future.

I think that the difficulty and the challenge with self-leadership, in general, is that when you don't have any direction or at least a lack of direction in terms of, okay, we're creating a company that no one has ever seen before. We are creating a market that no one has really been buying products in before, we're creating an ecosystem that no one really understands because it's so new and innovative. And if enough people don't have any direction, it could mean that they don't really succeed in actually leading themselves in terms of all of that. So it's always that kind of balance I guess in terms of providing enough guidance and then steering them toward the right direction without just micromanaging them. (Respondent 1)

And I mean, of course, there could be problems if we don't have clear goals. Because then everyone is working on their own thing, which might not be aligned with what the Company wants to do. (Respondent 4)

Due to the fact that the Company is in a new industry, which is also fast growing, standards and best practices that they could learn from and get inspired by are limited. Providing direction and setting goals is therefore crucial when working with self-leadership so that everyone in the Company is heading in the same direction. In addition, Respondent 8 highlights the importance of providing the vision to motivate and align people in the Company.

I guess providing the vision. I think sometimes we get really into the nitty-gritty and people are like, oh how are we ever gonna support this long-term. That's where you need to provide the vision. I'm building out a team, making sure that we have those needs in the future, so I wouldn't say visionary because that sounds really pretentious, but I guess providing some team structure in a sense. (Respondent 8).

Respondent 8 highlights that it may be valuable to provide a vision for the employees and emphasize the values and the mission in order for them to feel motivated in the long run. This

quote is about the importance of ensuring that the team has the necessary resources and structure to support the vision, which will help the team maintain a positive outlook.

However, sometimes, one challenge brought to light was regarding conflicts. If everyone is supposed to be a leader, what happens if two leaders disagree, and who will make the final decision.

Yeah. There are definitely challenges. I think, if you have conflicting approaches, it's like, how do we move forward? Sometimes it can be challenging. I think realistically, it comes back to Swedish culture, right? It's like always collaborating, getting everyone's opinion. I think in the US, it's a bit like, one person holds this title or whatever and they say, hey, go do this, and everybody agrees. I think there's a good balance there between those two and I think sometimes it can be challenging, you conflict, but you kind of figure out that there's always a third path forward. (Respondent 8)

This quote illustrates the problem that can arise when a disagreement occurs, and all involved have the same rank and are supposed to be strong self-leaders. Respondent 8 points out this challenge but also mentions the solution of finding the “*third path forward*”

The challenge that Respondent 8 mentioned can be found in Respondent 6’s answer about challenges. Wishing the decision-making process could be quicker and more confrontative.

No, I think that's part of one of the challenges where we're so kind today that we don't want to step on each other's toes and I would want this to be in a position where it could be sort of quicker and more confrontative in sort of I don't agree with you. (Respondent 6)

The quote further emphasizes a challenge they have in the Swedish office, which further strengthens Respondent 8’s answer that highlighted differences between cultures, saying that Swedish culture is “*always collaborating*”. Always getting everyone’s opinion may result in longer decision-making processes which could hinder efficiency and productivity within the Company.

Another mentioned challenge touched on the importance of having the right tools and structure to properly cultivate a culture of self-leadership.

Because we're talking about taking ownership and being responsible for, or taking initiatives and being innovative, and so on. But I'm not sure if we have all the tools needed to create a good culture around it. I think we need to work more structured with it to be able to achieve what we want with self-leadership. (Respondent 4)

It could be interpreted that the middle manager argues for the importance of putting a system in place to ensure that individuals have the necessary tools and resources to lead themselves successfully, despite the fast growth rate. This quote further demonstrates the need for organizations to create an environment that encourages and supports self-leadership, so the Company can “*achieve what we want with self-leadership*”.

Another view of the challenges with self-leadership in an HGF is the risk that you give people more autonomy and freedom than they can handle due to a shortage of time. The following quote acknowledges that with this increased autonomy and freedom, the risk of people abusing the level of freedom increases, suggesting that it could become problematic if people do not have self-drive and take responsibility.

Well, of course, there are challenges because, in order for that to work, you need to have employees that really take their responsibility seriously and something 'cause we need to work with trust and not with control and with that, of course, in some cases comes risk. But of course, there is a high degree of freedom and high degrees of freedom could become problematic if someone abuses that level of freedom. (Respondent 7)

The quote illustrates that freedom and autonomy carry a risk of people taking advantage of them, which could be problematic if people do not have self-discipline. As the quote suggests, trust is necessary for self-leadership to work, but it also requires people to have self-drive and take responsibility.

However, most middle managers agree that the organization has had high growth in the last few years, and with that comes some challenges. Respondent 1 addresses the need to clarify the road ahead and give enough autonomy.

So you need to make sure that they're running in the same direction in terms of how one wants to create things. But also, at the same time, give them enough autonomy, so they actually feel that they're really responsible over that specific area. So when it comes to managing, definitely not micromanaging. (Respondent 1)

When discussing the middle managers' perceptions of their high growth, many of them highlight that their environment is constantly changing and that it is a part of their everyday work.

with the pace that things are changing, it's easy to fall behind and so you truly need to have that coordination and orchestration on top of it. (Respondent 7)

I think it depends on what angle you're looking at it, but one of the most interesting aspects and what people need to be aware of from my perspective is that we're moving in between phases, and it's not necessarily pleasant to be in all the faces when looking at all the dimensions. (Respondent 5).

Respondent 7 implies that it can be challenging to stay on top of the changes and that it is important to take steps to ensure everyone is on the same page. This is further elaborated on and highlighted by Respondent 5, which suggests high growth can be a stressful experience for middle managers, as they constantly have to adjust to new changes. This can be especially difficult for those who feel uncomfortable making changes or adapting quickly. Respondent 5 suggests that it is essential to be aware of the different aspects of change that come with high growth and be prepared for the possible challenges that could arrive. It is also important to understand how to navigate these changes and recognize when changes are needed or not needed to succeed.

Furthermore, Respondent 4 highlights the challenge of being unable to deliver and be successful in such a complex environment with changes happening all the time.

Well, the challenge is, of course, that we grow too fast compared to what we are able to deliver really. And also, growing an organization may be based on where we think we will be in one year, and when we then realize in a year that we are not where we thought we would be but have a really big organization. (Respondent 4)

In the quote above, Respondent 4 argues that high growth can sometimes be challenging to manage, as it can often outpace the organization's ability to deliver on its goals. High growth can also create a situation where the organization may have grown to a size that does not reflect its current reality, making it difficult for middle managers to lead their teams.

4.5 Summary

Almost all respondents described the growth of the Company as rapid, exponential, or hyper-growth. Self-leadership is emphasized by middle managers and is seen as involving independence, self-motivation, and the ability to lead oneself without directives from a manager. The need for self-leadership varies depending on the scope of a role, and different middle managers have different approaches to working with it.

Most respondents believe intrinsic motivation is the primary source of motivation and that employees should be self-motivated rather than relying on extrinsic motivation. However, the Company also uses extrinsic rewards. Opinions are divided on how to encourage desirable behaviors through goal-setting, with some believing employees should set their own goals and others believing external guidance is necessary. Risk-taking and innovation are seen as important in the Company, but risks should be managed and controlled.

Challenges of self-leadership include the need for direction and goals, conflicts between different cultures, the need for the right tools and structure, and the risk of abuse of freedom. Challenges associated with high growth include the need for coordination and orchestration, navigating change, and delivering while growing quickly. Self-leadership requires an environment that encourages and supports it and individuals who are self-disciplined and take responsibility.

5. Discussion

This chapter will discuss our empirical findings and compare them to the current literature on self-leadership and HGFs. The chapter will begin with a discussion regarding the interviewed middle managers' 5.1 Perception of Self-leadership, followed by 5.2 Encouragement of Self-leadership in the Company. The discussion will lay the foundation for a conclusion to answer the study's research question.

5.1 Perception of Self-leadership

It has been established in the existing literature that organizations facing many uncertainties and changes have an increased need for self-leadership (Houghton, Neck, & Manz, 2003). This is shown in the empirical material, emphasizing that self-leadership is crucial at the current organizational stage, highlighting the importance of being innovative and daring to take risks. The interviewed middle managers also view it as vital for the Company's future success.

Furthermore, the middle managers' definitions and perceptions of self-leadership were similar in the Company. They all had some knowledge about the concept. However, they chose to focus on a few particular aspects of self-leadership. Many highlighted the importance of self-awareness, taking responsibility, and solving things yourself without asking for constant instructions from a manager. These behaviors are suggested to be essential when adopting self-leadership (Manz, 1986).

The overall need for self-leadership was another topic that was frequently discussed. It became clear that different departments have different needs that require different degrees of self-leadership. Our interpretation of the literature is that organizations often get categorized as a whole entity, evaluating whether the entire organization has self-leadership. One example of this is Neck and Houghton (2006), that discuss the effects of self-leadership in the context of an entire organization. After conducting our research, it seems to be insufficient to study self-leadership from an organization as a whole with functions that operate in similar ways. We

rather see that the Company can be viewed as a system consisting of numerous elements, thus departments or teams, each with a specific function and its own need for self-leadership. They operate under various circumstances, making self-leadership more essential in certain parts of the organization, while others may prefer a more hands-on approach.

Additionally, it is also possible to argue that different departments do not require more or less self-leadership. Instead, they use self-leadership in different ways, highlighting different things of the concept within their respective departments. For example, within a development department, such as product, self-leadership may encourage creativity and lead individuals through uncertainties. In contrast, in a support department, such as legal, self-leadership is more about prioritizing between different work tasks, developing the way of work, and evaluating the support of others to develop the best ways forward.

One explanation for the different needs and interpretations of self-leadership could be that different parts of the organization are in different stages in the organizational life cycle. When analyzing the Company from the organizational life cycle, we found that the organization had characteristics from several stages in its life cycle. From the entrepreneurial stage (Daft, Murphy, & Willmot, 2020), the organization shared the characteristics of constantly growing employees and lacking leadership. The latter could also be viewed as a lack of managerial skills, which is in line with a common challenge of HGFs (Lee, 2012). The Company has also started to work more with goals and strategies, and the empirical material emphasized that many employees identify themselves with the Company's mission and goal, which is a sign of being in the collectivity stage (Daft, Murphy, & Willmot, 2020).

Furthermore, during the last year, the Company has added more departments to the organization, giving more structure while also taking initiatives to ensure that conformity and alignment are high within the Company. This could be interpreted as they are moving from the collectivity stage (Daft, Murphy, & Willmot, 2020) towards the formalization stage in the organizational life cycle, showing characteristics from this stage such as greater alignment and introducing some levels of structure (Daft, Murphy, & Willmot, 2020). The Company's high growth seems to have an impact, making it follow a different course through the life cycle, compared to what Daft,

Murphy, and Willmot (2020) implies. This could be challenging when trying to analyze the need for and develop common methods and tools to support self-leadership across the organization.

5.2 Encouragement of Self-leadership

From the empirical material, it could be interpreted that the Company practices some levels of self-leadership, according to the theoretical definitions of the concept, highlighting self-influence and intrinsic motivation (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stewart, Courtright, & Manz 2011). The middle managers suggest that employees mostly motivate themselves, having intrinsic rewards, such as believing in the Company's mission and goals and wanting to make the world more sustainable. Manz (1986) argues that intrinsic motivation comes from within, regardless of any extrinsic rewards that may exist. When the middle managers were asked about extrinsic rewards, it became apparent that they have those as well, such as arranging victory dinners, announcing accomplishments on internal communication platforms, and in some cases, performance-based bonuses. Therefore, it is hard to say whether all employees at the Company are mainly driven by intrinsic motivation, and it could possibly be that extrinsic incentives, such as victory celebrations and financial rewards, are the main source of motivation for some employees. Although self-leadership theory argues that the main driver of individuals exercising self-leadership comes from within (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Stewart, Courtright, & Manz 2011), the concept of self-leadership does not exclude extrinsic incentives (Stewart, Courtright, & Manz 2011), and it is important to note that having extrinsic rewards does not mean that self-leadership is absent.

Furthermore, the respondents discussed their source of motivation, and it seemed like there was a consensus among them that middle managers are driven by intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation. One could interpret that they have become self-leaders since they also express how they take responsibility and evaluate their work, showing signs of using behavioral and cognitive strategies to lead, influence, and change their behaviors (Manz, 1986). They suggested that going forward, it would be beneficial for the Company to have as many individuals as possible who have intrinsic motivation and are self-leaders. This argument is strengthened by Houghton and Neck (2006), highlighting that self-leadership is often successful in situations where the environment is complex or hierarchical structures are unsuitable.

Even though it may be hard to conclude that employees are mainly driven by intrinsic motivation, based on interviews with their superiors, intrinsic motivation could be interpreted to be the main source of motivation for the employees as well. This interpretation originates from the respondents describing their teams as “*self-going*” and suggesting they “*motivate themselves*”. Using a set of natural reward strategies, combining both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (Manz 1986; Houghton & Neck, 2006), it seems like some middle managers have succeeded in encouraging self-leadership both for themselves and for their employees. If that is the case, one could argue that parts of the middle management have adopted super-leadership, meaning the ability to lead others to exercise self-leadership (Schnake, Dumler & Cochran 1993).

Furthermore, the middle managers provide different strategies when describing the best way to lead others to exercise self-leadership. Some middle managers argue for having complete autonomy and ensuring that freedom and individual responsibility are present in employees' work. However, there is a discrepancy between the descriptions of how to achieve self-leadership within their teams, with others arguing for the necessity of having structure or control and the importance of setting goals and strategies to give direction. The latter, providing direction, was mentioned as crucial going forward, especially if the Company wants to overcome some challenges, such as delivering results while growing rapidly. One respondent argued that the Company might not have the necessary tools in place for self-leadership to be viable if they keep having this growth. These respondents stress the importance of providing direction and implementing some level of managerial involvement to ensure that self-leadership can flourish within the Company.

Nonetheless, the empirical material reveals that, while many respondents highlight the need for direction and managerial involvement, some middle managers seem to have already incorporated some level of this. It is possible to question whether these middle managers are actually encouraging self-leadership, and it could be interpreted as they have a self-management approach instead. According to Stewart, Courtright, & Manz (2011), self-management involves some personal control and self-influence over work processes, as well as the presence of managerial support and external incentives. This is in line with the solution to the paradox

Depletion and Strengthening, where it is proposed that a small portion of external support is necessary to succeed with long-term self-leadership (Stewart, Courtright, & Manz 2019). Using some external support, one could argue that it is no longer self-leadership that is exercised but instead what Stewart, Courtright, and Manz (2011) define as self-management. Therefore, the paradox could be interpreted as a claim that self-leadership requires self-management to succeed over time, which argues that the literature is contradictory.

The differences between how middle managers lead could originate from top-management encouraging middle managers to engage in self-leadership. We interpret that top management has adopted what Schnake, Dumler and Cochran (1993) define as super-leadership, the ability to lead and encourage others to become self-leaders. We interpret that the presence of self-leading middle managers creates a diversity of leadership approaches. Since each individual has the autonomy to choose how they lead their respective teams, the result is a wide array of leadership styles. The empirical material suggests that the interviewed middle managers have implemented either a super-leadership or servant-leadership approach, as Van Dierendonk (2011) outlined. While this allows for a more tailored approach to individual teams, it could pose a problem for the Company with a rapidly growing workforce. Without a unified strategy and an alignment between managers, the organization risks descending into a chaotic state.

6. Conclusion

This chapter will first provide an introduction aiming to give an overview of our study and function as a reminder of the study's purpose. Thereafter, we will elaborate on our 6.1 Main conclusions, highlighting our most prominent findings. Furthermore, 6.2 Additional conclusions will be mentioned, and suggestions for 6.3 Future research will be described.

The purpose of this study has been to analyze how self-leadership is both perceived and encouraged by middle managers in an HGF. Conclusively, the thesis has aimed to contribute to understanding the concept of self-leadership in the complex environment HGFs operate. By analyzing empirical material from middle managers that work in an HGF, we have gained valuable insights into how middle managers perceive and encourage self-leadership. Although there are several studies on the concept of self-leadership, there seems to be a lack of studies that examine the concept in an HGF, especially from a middle manager's point of view. It has been interesting to examine the phenomena through the perspective of middle managers since they have a vital role in the Company, mediating between top management and lower-level employees (Daft, Murphy, & Willmot, 2020). Furthermore, this study is relevant for the Company and other HGFs that encourage self-leadership. The conclusions of this study will be presented below, starting with the main conclusions, following a few additional conclusions.

6.1 Main conclusions

- The middle managers perceive self-leadership in similar ways .
- The middle managers have different strategies to encourage self-leadership.

It can be concluded that the literature and the empirical material have similar perceptions of self-leadership, agreeing that self-leadership is essential for organizations facing uncertainty and change, such as the Company. Their perceptions are also in line with the theoretical definition of the concept, highlighting the importance of self-influence and self-awareness in work processes.

Another main conclusion is that self-leadership may need some elements of self-management, such as support processes and guidance, to be viable long-term. The interviewed middle managers have differing views on leading others to encourage self-leadership, with some advocating for autonomy and individual responsibility, while others believe in the importance of structure and direction. The study demonstrates how some middle managers work with self-leadership and incorporate some external support, which could be seen as self-management. Some theories support this approach, arguing that external support is needed for self-leadership to function long-term. This finding challenges the fact that self-leadership is an independent concept. It raises the question of whether self-leadership in the Company is able to be exercised without a degree of self-management.

Another main conclusion is that middle managers encourage self-leadership in different ways because the need for self-leadership seems to vary from department to department depending on the type of work being done. It is essential to consider each department's specific responsibilities, tasks, and objectives to determine the level of self-leadership required for success. Another explanation could be the fact that the Company seems to be in several organizational phases at the same time and, therefore, in different needs of self-leadership. Academic literature regarding self-leadership often looks at an organization as a whole. However, our findings suggest studying an organization as a system consisting of numerous elements, thus departments or teams, each with a specific function and its own need for self-leadership.

6.2 Additional conclusions

- The primary source of motivation seems to be intrinsic.
- Top management seems to have adopted super-leadership.

One additional conclusion is that the Company primarily has intrinsic motivation in the company. Even though they have extrinsic rewards such as victory celebrations and financial rewards, it became apparent that the interviewed middle managers and their employees are mainly motivated by intrinsic factors, such as belief in the Company's mission, vision, and corporate goals.

Another conclusion is that the Company's middle managers appear to have different leadership styles as a result of top management's adoption of super-leadership. Consequently, the middle managers seem to have had much influence in developing their own work processes and how they should lead others, resulting in a wide range of leadership approaches. In general, the middle managers have managed to encourage self-leadership. Some have adopted a more servant-leadership style where external support is provided to create an environment of taking on more responsibility; others have adopted super-leadership, where they encourage their employees to be self-leaders.

6.3 Future research

The research has provided valuable insights into middle managers' perceptions and encouragement of self-leadership in an HGF. However, since the research is a case study, further research on the subject is needed to increase the study's credibility. There are several areas and topics for future research. For example, further research is needed to examine the role of top management in the HGF and their influence on middle managers in their pursuit of encouraging self-leadership. Furthermore, research could be conducted to analyze and map the different needs of self-leadership between various departments in an HGF. Research could also investigate how different cultures and countries perceive and practice self-leadership to identify possible differences. More research could also be conducted on how other HGFs have implemented self-leadership and adapted to the challenges. It could also be interesting to examine further how an HGF that emphasizes self-leadership navigates through the organizational life cycle and evolves throughout the different stages.

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