

S.O.S

Support Of Supervisors

- A qualitative study on how middle-level managers perceive support within their organization:
A social exchange perspective

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Abstract

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Summary:	<p>Support in an organizational context has been a topic of academic discussion for many years. While there is no doubt that organizational support has been researched thoroughly, it seems that the focus always seems to land on the employee-manager perspective. In this thesis, we aim to provide a new and intriguing perspective on support in an organizational context, by using the manager-manager and manager-organization perspectives of middle-management. Because our research has been performed with a phenomenographic methodology, we will not be making any assumptions regarding what results we believe we might see. Instead, through qualitative method, we have conducted a series of semi-structured interviews consisting of questions about organizationally supportive efforts and their effects. Combining our empirical data with Social Exchange Theory and Organizational Support Theory, the hope is that we are able to provide a representative insight into middle-managers' own perception of support in their organization. The results of our research did confirm that supportive efforts made by the organization are highly important for the middle-level managers themselves. We also discovered that the supportive functions seemed to play the biggest role in how the middle-level managers experienced supportive efforts within their organization. Through this thesis we have learnt that the topic of managers and their experienced support needs to be, both academically and theoretically, researched much further so as to gain valuable information that can contribute to the welfare and thriving of managers in the future.</p>
Key words:	<i>Leadership support, support for managers, organizational support, organizational support theory, social exchange theory perceived organizational support, middle-level management</i>

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Preface

First and foremost we would like to thank all of the middle-level managers that wanted to participate in our study. We are aware that they all were midst a critical time within their organization, and would like to acknowledge their effort and time spent letting us interview them. We are highly grateful for this, as well as the helpful information and warm welcome we received when reaching out to the municipality.

Lastly we would like to thank our thesis counselor, Anna Ilsøe, for her engagement, constructive criticism and supportive guidance.

1. Introduction

To be a manager is challenging. It is a demanding position where you are of great influence to the workplace and the co-workers. The manager needs to make sure that work is running smoothly, everyone is taken care of and getting the attention and support that they need to thrive in the organization (Solomon, 2020). One usually finds different hierarchical levels of managers in an organization, often being mentioned as first-level managers, middle-level managers and higher management - where the middle-level manager-position often is referred to as the trickiest and most complex role in an organization (Ledarna, 2023).

There are a lot of studies conducted on how middle-level managers are supposed to work, and what skills they need to have (Harding et al., 2014), but there are few studies on how they actually experience their “middle-levelness” and how they identify with their role in this “sandwich”-position between higher-level and lower-level management (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). Harding et al. (2014) proposes a theory that middle-level managers are both controlled and the controllers, as well as resisted and resisters. Mintzberg (1989, 98) wrote that middle-level managers were caught “*between the operating core and the apex*”, but recognized that they play an important role in organizational hierarchies. A middle-level manager is stuck in a forever paradox, suitably called the middle-manager paradox, where pressure comes from both the top and bottom (Coker, 2023).

This year a report was written by Ledarna (2023) - a Swedish union made for leaders with over 98.000 members - called “*To be a boss - the challenges and work situation of a boss in 2023*” (author translation). They conducted a study on 1642 different level-managers in Sweden, with 33% (542 persons) being middle-level managers. According to the report four out of ten managers had actively started looking for another job during the year, and a majority of them were middle-level managers (Ledarna, 2023). 65% did not feel like they had the time to work with the development of the organization and co-workers, and again middle-level managers are overrepresented in these numbers. The report also highlighted that 41% of the middle-level managers experience every month that they have a hard time understanding their responsibility.

With middle-management seeming to be a phenomena to study in itself - being such a complex role in the organization with many challenges - we were intrigued to find out more about how they manage their role. We repeatedly read about *the supportive manager*, and all responsibilities they have towards the organization and subordinates. Mintzberg (1998) wrote in Harvard Business Review about how managers can manage professionals (non-managers), and there he stated that professionals require little direction and supervision. But what they *do* require is protection and *support* from their manager.

But do managers themselves not also count as “professionals”? A leader or manager is often, if not always, subordinate to another manager, and that applies with certainty to all middle-level managers, being forever “stuck in between”. If protection and support is important for a manager to give to their subordinates, is it not as important for them to receive support?

Social support is often considered a key component of our well-being. If you have access to a supportive network of people around you; family, friends or co-workers that you feel like you can turn to and trust, that support can help you get through challenging and demanding situations in your everyday life (Cherry, 2023). Having support around you can benefit you in many ways, it can for example help you cope with stress, contribute to motivation, healthy choices and behaviors. Strong social support can even make you feel higher levels of autonomy and self-esteem - and thereby help you cope with your problems on your own (American Psychological Association, 2019).

Support is also a very crucial factor in work life. Emma Seppälä (2016) writes in Harvard Business Review that inspiring, empathetic and *supportive* managers create organizations that thrive. She claims that good managers, with these traits, set the tone for the entire organization and have the ability to create more wellness for their employees than specific wellness-plans and policies would. Hundreds of studies have been conducted on the area of work-related support, indicating the benefits of perceived organizational support for the employees in an organization (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). Employees that feel supported by their organization tend to be more positive, engaged in their work, have more trust in their organization and overall more satisfied with their work situation (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011).

Understanding that support is a very important factor in an organization to make it thrive - and the fact that managers seem to be expected to be the ones providing this support - we began to wonder how and if managers receive support themselves? If they do, then what type of support do they receive? And from who? Despite extensive searching, we did not find any previous research on support for managers specifically. Most of the earlier research we came across is written from an employee-manager perspective, and does not relate to manager-manager. When also considering the complexity of middle-level management, our interest fell on investigating support *in relation* to middle-level managers, because we want to know how accessible support is for them and how it affects their work life.

We believe this is a highly relevant topic since a demanding position, such as being a middle-level manager, can be assumed to require adequate support. Because support is so highly acknowledged to be important for employees, shouldn't it be as highly acknowledged for managers? If it's not, it could be problematic, because we assume that the impact of support is just as big for management as the average employee, or is the impact even bigger because managers have even more responsibility?

Organizational Support Theory and perceived organizational support explores how an employee's wellbeing is affected by the support their organization gives. We wish to apply this theory with a manager focus, and together with Social Exchange Theory we hope to get a better understanding of how positive social exchanges and middle-level managers' perception of support can relate to improved organizational support. With the help of these theories we hope to gain a greater insight into the unexplored topic of manager support.

This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of how support is experienced by middle-level managers in an organization, how they perceive the support they get as well as the social exchanges that they experience.

1.1 Research questions and purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore and analyze middle-level managers' own perception of support within their organization, to gain a better understanding of organizational support from a middle-management perspective. We will achieve this through a series of semi-structured interviews.

We have chosen to settle on the research questions below:

- *How do middle-level managers' perceive the support that they receive themselves?*
- *How do middle-level managers' perceive support in their organization as a whole?*

1.2 Limitations

This study has been limited to only concerning middle-level management in different departments, within the same municipality in Sweden. Five middle-level managers, from five different departments, participated in this study - Our reason for not performing more interviews was due to time-limitations, and this study is therefore considered of smaller character. Because this study is based around middle-level management only, we will not be commenting on the perspective of either higher-level management, or the perspective of the employees that middle-level management is responsible for. The results of this study only applies to how the interviewed participants personally perceive support within their organization, and cannot be generalized further within the same organization, or onto other groups in society.

1.3 Background

Support is a very broad and highly subjective area to try and handle objectively. When we speak about support generally, we are taking use of one of the Cambridge Dictionary's (n.d.) definitions of the word "support": *"to help someone emotionally or in a practical way"*.

Our phenomenon for this study is the support that the middle-level managers we interviewed perceive within their organization. For this thesis we are understanding perceived support in an organizational context as defined by Eisenberger et al. (1986, 501):

"In order to determine the personified organization's readiness to reward increased work effort and to meet needs for praise and approval, employees develop global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being."

As acknowledged, research on organizational support for *managers* specifically, seems to be rather lacking. While organizational support is apparent to be a highly researched topic, it is more than often always with the perspective of the average employee, and what their manager can do to support them.

While this is a big reason for why we found this topic so interesting to dive deeper into, we also need to be aware that it makes earlier research so much harder to find for referencing.

Hill et al. (2017) explains the shame that is the general neglect of how difficult it can be to become a manager, and that it can have critical consequences for an organization if its managers are unsure of how to do their job correctly. We can therefore assume that

support for managers in fact is vital, even if the research on the topic seems to be lackluster.

Considering this we have chosen to focus on more general research on the topics of organizational support and middle-level management. While studies on support in relation to managers would've been more optimal for us to support our own research, we do believe that managers still contain many of the same needs as any normal employee does.

1.3.1 The effects of social exchange

Anwar et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study on employees and managers about the consequences of psychological distress in relation to performance achievement, proving that psychologically distressing social exchanges indeed does have a negative effect on employees' working performance. The results showed that especially exchanges of injustice played a big role in the employees' feelings of psychological distress and thereby directly affecting their productivity and performance within their organization (Anwar et al., 2022).

Another quantitative study was done by Alfandari et al. (2022), researching the effects of workplace aggression and how it might negatively impact employees' health - using a Social Exchange Theory perspective to confirm correlation between aggressive exchanges and health. The results of this study did in fact prove that employees that had been exposed to aggressive behavior in the workplace, from either clients or co-workers, did show increasing signs of posttraumatic stress and somatic symptoms - actively adding to prove that negative social exchanges, like aggression, can cause serious consequences in the regards of employee-mental health (Alfandari et al., 2022).

1.3.2 The importance of organizational support

Nye et al. (2015) performed a study in regards to perceived organizational autonomy support, motivation and general well-being in organizations in China. Nye et al. (2015) were theorizing that higher levels of perceived organizational autonomy support would result in higher levels of self-determination as well.

The study was conducted with a generalized survey, including questions about autonomy, motivation and general well-being. The study proved that the more autonomous motivation the teachers felt they had, the higher levels of perceived organizational autonomy support and job satisfaction was seen as well (Nye et al., 2015).

Rodriguez and Zhou (2023) recently conducted a study about the consequences of supervisor incivility in an organization, and how it might negatively affect trust and perceived organizational support in employees. By supervisor incivility, Rodriguez and Zhou (2023) speak about passive behavior and a general lack of communicative support experienced by the employee from their supervisors in the organization - resulting in silent employees who do not communicate with their supervisors, due to a lack of trust.

The study did find a positive correlation between incivility and a lack of trust, resulting in silent employees - though surprisingly this negative relationship did not seem to have any greater impact on perceived organizational support for the participants (Rodriguez and Zhou 2023). We can only theorize why this might be, and if perhaps the participants

that partook in the surveys found they have other and more supportive sources in their organization - therefore contributing to the stability of their perceived organizational support.

1.3.3 The municipality

It is necessary to get an understanding of the organization we have looked into to get a proper insight of the phenomena in its contextual existence. The following information is sourced from the municipalities webpage, but to keep the anonymity of the organization, we will not make any references.

In our study we have chosen to look into a big municipality in Sweden. The organization has close to 30 000 employees and consists of many different administrations serving the residents of the town. It is the municipal council that decides how the different administrations are to be organized. Each administration is governed by a committee or board appointed by the municipal council.

All administrations have access to supportive functions, such as Human Resources (HR), Economy, Communication and Strategic Development departments on all different manager-levels, which are; sectional manager, unit managers and department managers (middle-level managers), and of course the Head of Administration.

The municipality values understanding, respect, humility, courage and creativity among their employees. They strive for their employees to enjoy and develop at work, and offer a lot of benefits to help them maintain a good work-life balance, secure employment and good health. A few examples of these benefits are flexible working hours, health care allowance, occupational health care, extended possibility of parental leave and the option of exchanging the holiday allowance for more holiday days.

They also express offering leadership development for managers on all levels and offer support groups for management as well as mentoring.

2. Method

This chapter outlines the comprehensive research design and methodology employed to investigate our research questions. We will discuss our starting points, qualitative research and phenomenography. Thereafter the implementation will be described where we will argue which decisions we made throughout the process. It will cover the selection process, interviewees, data collection and the processing of the empirical data. Lastly we will discuss the ethical considerations we've had throughout the process, we will share our thoughts on reliability and validity of our work and at the end we will have a discussion about our methodological approach.

2.1 Methodological approach

This empirical study will employ a qualitative approach rooted in phenomenography to explore and understand the experiences of middle-managers' perceived support.

2.1.1 Qualitative research

A qualitative approach is used when a researcher wants to get up and close with their data to get a deeper and more detailed knowledge about the phenomena that they wish to study. This often means that the number of participants or observations are few (Denscombe, 2017). Qualitative research believes that context matters greatly and that realities cannot always be described without it. Therefore one could argue that a qualitative approach is to be associated more with a holistic perspective (Denscombe, 2017).

The researcher plays a big part in qualitative research, they themselves get involved in the data which they also interpret - meaning that parts of the researcher will always be included in the data analysis (Denscombe, 2017). In qualitative research the goal is not to "test" theories to see if they are true, they are more so used as analytical tools to create a theoretical frame for the the analysis of the collected data (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019).

We believe that a qualitative study on the topic of middle-level managers' perceived organizational support would be highly relevant, as most studies on organizational support seem to have been performed using quantitative methods. We believe that we can bring in a new perspective, contributing to the area of research with more personal aspects by performing this study using semi-structured interviews.

2.1.2 Phenomenography

Phenomenography is a research method within the qualitative approach that focuses on an individual's perception and understanding of a certain phenomena in their environment (Dahlgren & Johansson, 2019). The word phenomenography is put together from the words '*phainomenon*' and '*grafia*' and has the meaning "describing what appears" (Alexandersson, 1994). Dahlgren and Johansson (2019) say that the way we perceive situations are a reflection of our previous knowledge that we have acquired over our lifetime. Since knowledge can vary much between people, phenomenography focuses on the variation of peoples' opinions and perceptions (Dahlgren & Johansson, 2019), unlike phenomenology that focuses on the essence of the phenomena

(Alexandersson, 1994). However, there are some similarities between the two approaches, and it is common to use phenomenological concepts, such as the *lifeworld*, when developing and discussing fundamental theoretical assumptions of phenomenography. One can say that phenomenology creates a theoretical frame of reference to further establish ideas and approaches of phenomenography (Alexandersson, 1994). The lifeworld is the perceived, subjective reality that we do not observe or analyze, but it is the lived and taken-for-granted world where we as humans exist - a concept created by philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) (Birkler, 2012). In this lifeworld, everything has meaning, and the meaning exists in the *relation* that we have to different phenomena (Birkler, 2012). We all experience our own lifeworld, where we perceive things differently and where the same object can have a different meaning depending on who is experiencing it (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2010).

Linked to that, phenomenography believes that reality is dependent on our perception of it, and what appears to our senses, and not to the “matter in itself”. The relation to reality is both determined by and dependent on humans thinking and acting *towards* something in the outside world - therefore a specific activity must be considered as a whole, and not be distinguished by its content. This is why phenomenography is critical to theories with general principles and generalizing (Alexandersson, 1994).

The most significant concept of phenomenography is *perceptions* (Alexandersson, 1994). Dahlgren and Johansson (2019) describe perceptions as “*a way of understanding something or a way of experiencing something*” (author translation). A person’s concept of the world could be viewed as a multitude of perceptions, and the relations between them. These relations can however change depending on if we gain new knowledge or that situations change (Alexandersson, 1994). Peoples’ perceptions will most likely vary when talking about a certain phenomena, and in phenomenography these sets of perceptions are placed in *different categories for description* for the phenomenon in question while being analyzed. This is where we can fully grasp the complexity and how multifaceted the different phenomena can be (Dahlgren & Johansson, 2019).

Phenomenography in relation to theory is inductive in its nature, meaning that the focus of the empirical data is to find patterns, themes, categories and reasoning *before* applying a theoretical lens on the data. An inductive approach means that the researchers are trying to find conclusions based on data, observations and experiences (Birkler, 2012). Using an inductive approach can be a great advantage if a researcher wants to generate new knowledge. Since there is no “box” put on by hypothesis or theory, a researcher can contribute to creating new knowledge, but the new knowledge is in itself limited to the conducted research. Therefore, we cannot talk about gaining safe knowledge, but rather probable knowledge (Birkler, 2012).

The choice of phenomenography aligns with the overarching goal of this study - to uncover how support is perceived by middle-level managers. Because we are interested in our participants’ personal differences and perspectives of our phenomenon, we believe that phenomenography is the perfect methodology for us to take into use for this specific study.

2.2 Implementation

In this section the selection process will be presented as well as the interviewees. The criterias for the interview participants and the organization is described and argued for. We will describe the preparations, how the data was collected and how the processing of that data was handled.

2.2.1 Selection process

Deciding who we assumed to be the best fitting candidates for this study was a longer process. Wanting to study managers' own perception of the support that they receive and what support is to them, we of course knew that we would need to interview the managers themselves. While we originally went into the study with certain assumptions as to what we might discover through our research, we also knew that it is important for us as researchers to keep our expectations realistic while also acknowledging the strengths and limitations of our field of interest (Yin, 2018). We therefore made an effort towards staying highly aware of possible variables and considering that our assumptions or predictions of results may not be correct, nor should we let them have a greater impact on our research overall.

We decided that larger municipalities within the public sector would be a good fit for our research. We settled on larger municipalities because we believed this could gain us access to many different departments and many managers on the same hierarchical level.

After researching what level of managers might have a bigger need for support from their organization, we stumbled across the middle-level management paradox - explaining how middle-level management often finds themselves in an awkward position between lower-level management and higher-level management (Coker, 2023). Middle-level management therefore seemed like an interesting group of candidates to contact for our study. As we had already settled on conducting our study in a municipality, we agreed that our best options to get enough middle-level management candidates would be to reach out to all the different administrations within the same organization.

We decided that a non-probability sampling was the preferred way for us to go about selecting participants for our research, meaning that, according to Denscombe (2017), the researcher gets some freedom of choice regarding who they choose to interview. We also used convenience sampling, a sampling method where the researcher choses participants based on convenience or availability, usually because there is a limit of time or budget (Denscombe, 2017). The phenomenographic approach does not aim for the research results to be able to generalize to the population from which the research subjects come from, therefore the sampling does not have to be representative (Alexandersson, 1994). Since we only had few set criteria, our way of finding participants became more accessible and we chose our interviewees based on their willingness to be part of our study. The criteria for the participants were; they needed to be a middle-level manager, and they needed to be part of the same organization. We received a lot of interest in participation. When realizing that we had more candidates willing to participate than we anticipated, we picked five middle-level managers from five different administrations. We believed we could gain a broader perspective into how management in different administrations, and the support that they may be offered,

might differ even though they all belong to the same organization.

2.2.2 Interview participants

Below we will introduce our interview participants. All our participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Interviewee nr 1 - “Mia”; is a unit manager and manages several first-line managers in the department she works in. She has been with the organization for 34 years, and in a manager position for about 7 years.

Interviewee nr 2 - “Natalie”; is a department manager and manages several unit managers in her department. She has been in her current manager role for 8 years.

Interviewee nr 3 - “Peter”; is a department manager who manages several unit managers in the department. He started working as a first-line manager, then a unit manager and has been in his current role as a department manager for 2 years. He has been working in the organization for 19 years.

Interview nr 4 - “Sara”; she has been with the organization for 15 years and has during the last 1,5 year been a department manager. Before that she has also been a first-line manager and unit manager within the same administration. She currently manages several unit managers in her department.

Interviewee nr 5 - “Petra”; is a department manager and has been with the organization for the last 8 years. She started working in the organization as a unit manager. Now she manages several unit managers herself.

2.2.3 Data collection - Semi-structured interviews

Because we are conducting a phenomenographic study, we decided that using interviews would be the best way to achieve a detailed insight in how our participants understand and experience the phenomenon of support within their organizations (Alexandersson, 1994). Bryman (2016) confirms this decision, explaining that qualitative interviews are aimed towards discovering the participants' individual observations and opinions on the topic being researched - compared to quantitative interviews where the study will be more so centered around the researchers own interests and questions.

We decided that semi-structured interviews would be fitting for our research. Semi-structured interviews let us as the interviewers keep a rather general guide over themes and areas of questions we would like our participants to think about and answer - while also allowing a greater freedom for the interviewee to explain their own perspectives, using more individually aimed follow-up questions (Bryman, 2016). Small and Calarco (2022) explains that one of the most noticeable differences between a qualitative and quantitative study is the opportunity to follow up interesting statements with new, unplanned questions to gain even more relevant evidence. We might miss out on important context or information if we only stick to our interview-guide throughout our research, allowing no room for further inquiry.

Considering this, us choosing to keep our interviews semi-structured also allows us to stay more adaptive throughout the interview process. We have to acknowledge that the interviews might not always go as we as researchers assume, and interviewing human

candidates will always consist of the differing human perception as a variable - that is why this interview-type can offer us a stable foundation for freely shaping our follow-up questions to stay on track with the purpose of the study while also allowing the experiences of the interviewees to shine through (Yin, 2018). A very fundamental point of phenomenography is that there are no answers that are considered to be desired or right, the focus is always on the perception of the interviewee (Alexandersson, 1994).

Through discussion we agreed that it was important for us to get our participants to speak about how they prioritize the support they offer the managers that they are responsible for themselves. We believe that our interviewees should acknowledge the importance of support as a more general topic, and in their own work as managers - to keep a broader perspective when the questions later become more focused on what their own accessibility for support might be in their positions.

We separated the interview guide¹ up into four co-relating parts with three main categories (1, 2, 3):

- 0. Basic introduction: *What is the manager's role and what work do they do within the organization?*
- 1. The manager's perspective on support in general and the support they are offered and have access to themselves: *How does the manager perceive and feel about the organizational support for themselves?*
- 2. The manager's own perspective on offering support: *How does the manager prioritize and offer support to the managers they manage themselves?*
- 3. A general organizational perspective on support: *How does the interviewee experience that support is handled on an organizational level?*

Each part containing a handful of questions related to the areas of interest, and suggestions to important follow-up questions we would not want to miss out on if not answered through the main questions in the guide.

2.2.4 Processing the empirical data

The next step in our process was to analyze our empirical material. We concluded that the analyze-method for a phenomenographic study suggested by Dahlgren and Johansson (2019) would be a useful way for us to work with the material we had gathered during our interviews.

The first step in this method is to get to know the material we as researchers now have collected. This consisted of us transcribing all of our 5 interviews, and thereafter reading through the transcriptions until we both felt confident about the answers we had achieved (Dahlgren & Johansson, 2019).

The next step was then condensing the interviews into relevant answers only. Here we made sure to clear out any empty, filling conversation and only keep the raw answers we believed could be of interest to what we are trying to research (Dahlgren & Johansson, 2019). After this, we began comparing our empirical-material across all the different interviews. Here we made sure to look at both similarities and differences between the answers we had been given - the main goal of a phenomenographic study is

¹ See attachment nr 1

to identify variations and differences between the results achieved, and Dahlgren and Johansson (2019) explains that this cannot be done without also identifying the similarities found across the different interviews.

Once we had condensed and compared our material we began creating fitting groupings and different categories for description (Dahlgren & Johansson, 2019). Here we ended up with a fair few different groups of areas for we found compelling to analyze further:

- *Feelings of acknowledgement*
- *Communication between middle-level and higher-level managers*
- *Trust and independence*
- *Support from co-workers*
- *Supportive functions*
- *Prioritized support between managers*
- *Welfare from support*
- *Importance of support*

When we were satisfied with our groupings, we began discussing what broader categories we believed would best support our thesis (Dahlgren & Johansson, 2019). It quickly became clear that there seems to be an obvious difference in our participants' view on the support they receive themselves and the support they perceive in their organization as a whole. Because of this, we decided to settle on two main categories:

- ***Middle-level managers' perception of the support that they receive themselves***
- ***Middle-level managers' perception of support in their organization as a whole***

With our categories articulated and named, our final step was now to combine the results of our groupings into whichever category might be relevant. In this last step it was important for us to work to separate our grouping so that each of our categories were kept exclusive from each other and did not overlap (Dahlgren & Johansson, 2019).

2.3 Quality

In this section we will share our thoughts on the validity and reliability of this study, as well as our ethical considerations. Lastly we will discuss the chosen method for this study where we will argue the suitability of it as well as thoughts that have arisen throughout the process.

2.3.1 Reliability and validity

To achieve high levels of external reliability it is important that we as researchers are very clear and detailed in describing how our study has been performed. If we leave any questions open in regards to how we achieved some results, it will be impossible for other researchers to correctly replicate our study and thereby resulting in our study having low levels of reliability (Bryman, 2016). Bryman (2016) explains that even though researchers might be as honest as possible about how their study was conducted,

it will always be impossible to replicate a study entirely down to every little detail - this is because it is simply not possible to freeze a social environment or the social conditions that took place under the original study, to be an identical match.

Internal reliability also plays a big role in conducting a study of highest quality. When considering internal reliability we as the researchers need to be aware of our human differences, and that we might experience and understand the same situations differently. We need to communicate with each other and make sure to come to agreed conclusions if we want to strive for high internal reliability (Bryman, 2016).

It is not only reliability we need to pay attention to in regards to the quality of our study - validity plays just as big a factor in creating trustworthy research. Internal validity requires for there to be a substantial connection between the observations we make as researchers and what theoretical ideologies we might develop with said observations (Bryman, 2016). This means that we need to always be aware of how we connect our results to our theory, and make sure that we in fact are taking methods in use that will correctly and properly measure the phenomenon we're interested in. Yin (2018) suggests pattern matching, building on explanation, addressing contradicting and rival explanations and the use of logic models as ways to work towards ensuring as high internal validity as possible.

Lastly we have external validity, which revolves around whether or not our study is generalizable, and if our results can be connected to other social environments and situations outside of just the specific one we have researched (Bryman, 2016).

Since our study is both qualitative and won't be of any greater size, we won't be able to generalize our research. As mentioned before, the phenomenographic approach also does not aim to generalize (Alexandersson, 1994). Regardless of this, we strive towards ensuring that we as the researchers influence our empirical data as little as possible, keeping the validity as high as possible.

We hope to gain some valuable insight into how managers perceive their opportunities for support within their organizations and perhaps open the field up for further research that could generate more generalizable results in the future.

2.3.2 Ethical considerations

When asking other people to participate in our research, it is of high importance that we make sure to follow the moral and ethical guidelines to protect our participants throughout the process. We are taking use of Vetenskapsrådets (2017) ethical principles in social science research as a clear guideline as to how we should approach the safety and trust of our participants.

Anonymity and protection of the individual

We will make sure to keep the identities of our interviewees entirely anonymous to protect their personal lives and private information. Everyone has the right to safety and we do not want our participants to feel like they're exposed to any kind of risk sharing their experiences and opinions with us during our interviews. Especially considering that our interviewees will be sharing information about their experiences within their organizations, we strive for them to feel comfortable and secure in doing so.

Consent and Voluntary Participation

All participants will firstly be contacted privately, offering them voluntary participation

in our study - thereafter, depending on an acceptance or refusal, they will be forwarded a consent-form² before any interviews take place. This form will specify our interviewees rights to anonymity, as well as more in-depth information regarding what kind of interview this is, if they consent to being recorded and for their interviews to be transcribed - and lastly information about their right to retract their participation at any given time they might feel it necessary.

Transparency and integrity

We as researchers have the responsibility of always being transparent with our participants. We aim to offer a substantial level of ethical and moral considerations before interacting with any of our interviewees. We will keep clear and understandable communication with our participants during the entire period of the study, and we will always be willing to answer questions or settle any thoughts or confusions that may occur. We will be honest about our intentions with this study, and we will not manipulate any original answers to favor our research in any way, shape or form. We hope to portray our participants' own thoughts and experiences as true to the source as possible, so that we can hold our study to a standard of high quality.

Comply with current laws and regulations

We will, of course, stay true to any rules, laws and regulations regarding ethical research, during the full length of our study. We find it of utmost importance to stay in line with any set regulations within the area of conducting ethical research, and it will be of our highest priority to respect these and consider them at all times while performing our study. The laws are in place to make sure all participants always are kept safe and are respected as individuals. We, as researchers, take full responsibility for our research to keep in line with these set rules, laws and regulations - and we take full responsibility for any consequences that might occur if we do not succeed in respecting said rules, laws and regulations, as well.

Besides Vetenskapsrådets ethical principles in social science research, we will also do our utmost to be good listeners during our qualitative research. This entails not only judging the answers we collect during our interviews as the words that were spoken, but also taking the environment and the situation as a whole into consideration - accounting for any factors that might influence the kind of empirical evidence we end up with (Yin, 2018).

Lastly, similar to internal validity, we as the researchers need to always be aware of how we might interpret our empirical evidence. Here it is of great importance for us to be able to judge our evidence with little to no bias, not allowing our personal opinions to color how we look at our results and analyzing our interview-answers as fairly as it is possible for us to do (Yin, 2018). Small and Calarco (2022) explains that it is impossible for researchers to stay entirely objective when interpreting their collected evidence, and that different researchers are bound to understand the same evidence in a variety of different ways. The best way to counteract this is by staying aware of our personal differences and acknowledging we may interpret some answers differently depending on this. This is also why we aim to have a very open discussion during this study, and keep a consistent conversation going throughout the process - being able to get a better picture of how we understand our empirical evidence separately, and combine our ideas together into one, coherent thesis.

² See attachment nr 2

2.3.3 Method discussion

Before we started conducting our interviews, we wanted to try out our interview guide. Therefore, we scheduled a pilot interview with a middle-level manager from a private company. After the interview we revised and improved the interview guide slightly where we felt that the interviewee had questions or misconceptions about our interview questions. This gave us a great foundation for the intended interviews and a good understanding of what the conversation could look like. Our second interview did however differ a lot from our first interview, so we decided to make a few additional changes to the interview guide. After conducting our interviews and by the time we started transcribing, we noticed that our follow up questions had differed a bit from each interview depending on where the interviewee put their emphasis on support. We feel however that this is well within our chosen methodological approach and typical when conducting a phenomenographic study.

Originally, our interview guide started with asking about the general, organizational support, then about the manager's own support. Although after our second interview, we decided to switch part 1 and 3 of the interview guide. Instead of starting off with asking the interviewees about organizational support as our first category, we first wanted to know more about their general approach to support. The reason for this is that we noticed that when starting off the interview with questions about the organization and organizational support, the interviewees tended to stay in that mindset for the rest of the interview. We noticed that the answers we got later on in those interviews were not so much personal thoughts, but more so reflections from an organizational standpoint. We noticed a positive difference in the rest of our interviews after the switch, and that was something we were pleased with.

During the interviews we got to know more about the different levels of management in the municipality, from first-line managers, then unit managers followed by department managers. The department manager then reported to the Head of Administrations. The middle-level management therefore consisted of two roles, unit manager and department manager. Since we had decided that our study would be focused around middle-level management, both of these roles were of interest. We purposely had chosen to interview six people from the beginning, and when conducting our fourth interview, with a unit manager, we understood that she had the same job assignment and tasks as a first-line manager, working directly towards the operational part of the department. Since this was not the manager-level of perception we wanted to study, we decided to not include her interview nor empirical data in our thesis.

By using a convenience sampling we understand there can be bias in the sampling. The fact that all participants are from the same organization could also contribute to bias. When using a sampling method only based on willingness to participate, there are other important aspects that we might not consider that could play a part later in the result. To mention a few; the length of the employment in current position, and in the organization overall, but also if the participants have "climbed the ladder" in their organization, starting as a first-level manager and working their way up, could be a variable that could be of importance. Another thought is if the unequal division between men and women as interviewees could differ the result. We did discuss that we would not want gender to be a guiding factor in the study - as one cannot take all variables into consideration. Another variable that we had in mind in the beginning of our study was the age variable.

We did find a lot of interesting research on young managers, but the studies were linked to being a first-time manager and therefore not suitable for our middle-management focus. If time was not a concern, we would have wanted to look into and discuss more about the variables that could potentially alter the results we have gotten from this study.

We ended up having two of our interviews online and conducted the rest (3) of the interviews in person. The online interviews were out of convenience for the participants since they were working from home. According to Denscombe (2017), online interviews in real time with access to visual contact, which we had, will be very similar to an in person interview. Therefore, we were not worried about all interviews not being conducted in person.

Although we are happy with the decisions we have made throughout the process, there are still a few points to be made about improvements. We wish we would have known about the hierarchy of managers in the municipality before we started to conduct our interviews. While our interviewees still are all middle-level managers, one out of five is a unit manager and the others are department managers. We believe that it could have been interesting to speak to as many unit managers as department managers to see if we had discovered a different pattern between the perception of the unit managers and the department managers. We believe that unit managers could be experiencing even more of the middle-level manager pressure - therefore, in hindsight, it might have been even more relevant to conduct interviews with only unit managers as well.

To summarize our method process, we feel confident in many of the choices we have made and how our study has turned out. We especially have enjoyed collecting our data using interviews with people from the same organization, which has opened up the possibility for nuanced answers and many different perceptions, which we experience have been lacking in previous research.

3. Result

In this chapter we will share our results. We have decided to share our results before we present our theory, as we wish to keep an inductive approach to this study as much as possible. We did not settle on any theories before our interviews were fully finished and transcribed.

After conducting our five interviews we categorized our empirical findings into the following topics:

Middle-level managers' perception of the support that they receive themselves

- *Feelings of acknowledgement*
- *Communication between middle-level and higher-level managers*
- *Trust and independence*
- *Support from co-workers*
- *Supportive functions*

Middle-level managers' perception of support in their organization as a whole

- *Prioritized support between managers*
- *Welfare from support*
- *Importance of support*

It is important to acknowledge that we did ask our participants questions about their own perspective on the support that they *give* to the team of managers they're responsible for. This is not information we are trying to draw any conclusions regarding, and we will therefore not be including these answers in our results - but we do find it relevant to note that all of our participants agreed that it is very crucial that they offer the managers they are responsible for, support as well.

Because this is a phenomenographic study, we will be adding focus to the different perspectives our participants expressed. Regardless, we will still offer examples of similarities, as we did find a lot of our participants to have related mindsets about some of our questions.

Lastly we note that *all* of the quotes below are translated by us as the authors, from their original Swedish version. All of our participants are aware of this and have consented to the translations.

3.1 Middle-level managers' perception of the support that they receive themselves

Below we will present all our results concerning the support that the middle-managers experience to be given directly. Our different categories of description are: feelings of acknowledgement, communication between middle-level and higher-level managers, trust and independence, support from co-workers and supportive functions.

3.1.1 Feelings of acknowledgement

When asking our participants about their feelings of acknowledgement and rewards within their work and by their organization, we were first and foremost informed that this municipality offers flexible work times for all of their workers, resulting in greater feelings of autonomy and freedom - as explained by Peter:

“I decide for myself when I work. We have something called Flex - this means you stamp in and out as you come and go. This means the timeframe for when we can work is very broad, I believe it's from five in the morning until nine in the evening. So there's a lot of freedom.”

All of our participants expressed that they do feel acknowledged in their job, in relation to feedback and general praise. Though Sara did express less satisfaction with the feedback she received. *“The higher the managerial position you have, the more you are expected to be able to solve things yourself, handle things yourself. You won't get as much feedback and praise that way.”* While Sara expresses less satisfaction, she does understand why that is, and thinks it is because of her current position *“So, I, I... Have to make less demands and I have to expect less feedback.”* She continued to offer us an example of being made to feel responsible for improving her administrations' prioritization of leadership and management-development:

“Yes, our administration has been fairly bad at prioritizing manager and leadership-development for a long time. That has made me feel like no plan on the topic really exists, and if I want one I'm going to have to fix it myself.”

When discussing the topic of acknowledgement, Peter was the only participant to bring up his work-life-balance in relation to the hours he is expected to work: *“I don't have the freedom in my work, like a 40 hour work-week. Right now we are nearing 50-55 hours, and that can restrict freedom in one's private life.”*

Regardless, Peter did express higher levels of acknowledgement when discussing opportunities for competence development *“If I expressed any need for further education or courses, I believe I would almost always receive a yes from my manager”*

3.1.2 Communication between middle-level and higher-level managers

While all our participants felt that they can go to their own manager when they are in need of support, we did notice some differences in how persistently they might do this. Peter mentions that he has a very close work-relationship with his manager, with whom he had been working with for long: *“Me and my manager have a very good cooperation - or a good co-worker relationship if you can call it that.”*

Sara explains that she has a closer relationship with her manager as they communicate consistently almost daily *“I meet with my manager almost every day, which means we can have smaller discussions all the time if needed - I think that's super good”*. Regardless of this, Sara does bring up that she would appreciate clearer information and planning from higher management about her own role as a manager:

“I could wish that someone had taken a bigger responsibility for creating a plan for me, and how I am expected to develop in my job - I would’ve liked more support in that area.”

When asked about her relationship to her own manager, Natalie said that she only really goes to her manager when she feels it is specifically necessary to do so: *“No, I don’t feel like I go to my manager for support very often. If it is a topic that requires his input then I do of course approach him and expect to receive the support needed from him there.”*

When asked for more context, Natalie offers the explanation *“Our Head of Administration is very clear that it is the supportive functions’ responsibility to support the organization”*.

In questions about support from higher management, Mia expresses a lack of knowledge and understanding of the work she does in her administration:

“I would’ve loved more experience and knowledge about my specific area. The management that does the planning and developmental work does not have a lot of knowledge on the topic. They know a lot about social work generally, but rarely about how we deal with the area on a daily basis.”

Even though all of our participants are satisfied with the support they receive from their own managers, there is a definite difference in how closely related the different middle-level managers are with their own managers.

3.1.3 Trust and independence

We wanted to know if any of the middle-level managers we interviewed ever found it challenging to reach out for help. We noticed a very clear agreement between participants that they do not find it hard to ask for support in their organization when they need it, as Natalie explains *“my manager knows that he doesn’t need to knock on my door and ask if I need help - he knows I’ll come to him if I need support.”*

Mia adds that the supportive functions are a great tool to use for support in her work:

“HR knows exactly what paragraphs and what policies count, and that’s something I could never keep track of on my own. They are great at explaining what is my responsibility and what is theirs. I think that has been a fantastic support.”

Sara continues on the importance of having the trust to ask for support *“in my role as a manager I cannot handle everything myself - I need support. It is expected of us as managers to handle specific things, and sometimes we need help.”* Sara explains that she experiences high levels of responsibility when it comes to receiving support:

“(When being new in her position) Then I had to take a very big responsibility myself and I made sure to find myself someone to mentor me, and ask for help in general. I’ve been the main driving force in making sure I get the help I need.”

Petra adds to this and explains that it can pose a challenge when the managers are expected to seek out support themselves *“I don’t always know where I’m supposed to go for the support I need. Then I have to go to the statly office and ask where I need to*

turn. I, myself, have to make sure I get the support I need.” Petra also believes that lacking support isn’t due to lack of willingness to help, but rather a lack of resources for everyone to get the help they need:

“More than often it’s not about no one being willing to help me. It’s because there might just not be the time or opportunity for it. Sometimes the resources just aren’t there.”

Natalie admits that while she isn’t scared to ask for help now, she did find it harder to do when she was newer in her role as a manager:

“When I think back to my early years as a manager, I know there are examples of situations where I thought it was better I handled things myself and I wasn’t smart enough to ask for advice and support.”

Peter stuck out the most in this discussion, expressing that he often finds that he is actively offered support rather than having to look for it himself: *“Yes, it is my own responsibility - but I often experience being approached for support. Recently the administrative managers decided that they want to meet with me in December to ask me what support I might be in need of in the upcoming year.”*

3.1.4 Support from co-workers

When asked if she ever takes use of her fellow department managers as a measure for receiving support, Natalie mentioned the collegial support:

“I receive collegial support from my colleagues. We often experience the same challenges and we talk to each other about them - we have built up a cooperative relationship in a way.”

Peter continues, also referring to the support he gets from his colleagues as a form of cooperation *“Yes I go to my colleagues to discuss certain things - often serious topics about how we should work together or if there’s any kind of conflict between departments. But I don’t think of this as support as much as I think of it as cooperation and development together.”*

Supportiveness from peers does seem to be expressed as relevant to our participants, even if they perhaps do not note this as a clear supportive aspect in their positions, but they chose to refer to the support as cooperativeness.

3.1.5 Supportive functions

When asking our participants what they think of when they hear support, they all immediately brought up the supportive functions in the organization. These supportive functions exist in every department and they are: HR, economy, communication and strategic/development support. The supportive function that they mention most is HR. All five of the interviewees had a common understanding that the supportive functions play a massive role in the support that they need, and that their work would be hard to do without those functions. Sara explains it like this: *“And when you say support, then I think about the supportive functions that exist. And for me the supportive functions are*

very important because I have a whole department to run.” She then continues: “We are pretty open about asking for help because they know their stuff. I’m good at what I do and they are really good in their specialist roles.”

Petra makes a comment about if support is found in a person, or in a specific role: *“How are we gonna do this? I don’t know because it was “Anna’s” job, and she doesn’t work here anymore.”* She means that organizational support should be attached to a role in the organization, and not to a person, or else valuable information could get lost if this person decides to leave the organization. She highlights that making sure the processes work benefits the company, and those processes should not be depending on one person.

Four out of five participants also mentioned that balance is key with the supportive functions. Natalie and Petra mentions that supportive functions can sometimes support too much or when it’s not needed, Natalie explains it like this:

“That’s how it’s talked about sometimes, sometimes the supportive functions turn into functions of disturbance instead. Because if you continue to ask a lot of questions, you ask about data, statistics, and you want a lot from the organization, then it’s no longer a supportive function, then it is a function of disturbance instead. All this information is accessible, this type of questions disturbs our managers. Supportive functions according to me are functions that in various ways support the business in order for the business to be able to operate its mission.

Petra says that it is a warning sign if the organization all of a sudden needs a lot of administrative support: *“If the administrative group suddenly becomes bigger in an organization, then there is something wrong... ..Then I feel like I need to put the brakes on this, because I understand that we have to wake up and see what is actually going on... ..What support is actually needed?”*

Sara talks about cooperation being the most important factor between the different supportive functions: *“To ensure that I can push my department forward, there needs to be coordination. It is very important that the different supportive functions are co-operating, so that there are no different signals from the different support functions.”* Sara also talks about cooperation, but between the supportive functions and the operational functions. She says that if these two are not successful in cooperation, it will make it very difficult for the organization.

Supportive functions in the company are addressed as important, competent and crucial by all the participants in the interviews. Even though there might be challenges from time to time, most of them claim they cannot do their work without the support from supportive functions.

3.2 Middle-level managers' perception of support in their organization as a whole

Below we will present all our results on how the middle-level managers experience support is handled in the organization as a whole. Our different categories of description

are: prioritized support between managers, welfare from support and importance of support.

3.2.1 Prioritized support between managers

All of our participants feel that they are offered good opportunities for support. When asked further, we noticed an expressed difference in the access to supportive functions between levels of management. When asked if she feels that support is prioritized differently between different managers, Natalie expresses that the lower-level managers might not receive as much support as they need:

“A challenge in my administration is that I, on my level of management, sometimes get more support than the managers further down in the organization. I don’t think that’s really fair.”

She continues: *“If you interviewed our first-line managers, then I’m fully confident they would want more support”*. Peter adds: *“There’s a very big difference in the support in my experience - I have access to almost the entire range of supportive functions and staff, whereas the first-line managers often only have one specific HR, economy, communications, and so on, person to turn to”*.

All our participants mentioned that they did not receive any kind of mentorship or support when promoting within the organization. Sara explains that is something she would have wanted: *“That is something I would have wished for, especially in regards to where my responsibility begins and ends. I would’ve appreciated better support in that area.”*

Peter also adds to this topic *“regarding onboarding, it is only really prioritized for the first-line managers right now. When I got promoted as both head of management and later department-manager, I didn’t receive anything.”* Petra expresses similarly when asked if she believes she would have benefitted from having a mentor when she got promoted to her current role *“yes, I absolutely believe so.”*

When discussing satisfaction with the support received, Sara brings up individuality as well:

“I think we all get the same type of help. I think it is equal but also individual. I can be very happy with the support I receive from HR, but perhaps another department-manager isn’t satisfied with the help they get themselves because they’re of a different personality.”

Mia mentions that she experiences an improvement in how support is prioritized:

“Yes, it has gotten better. I have to say I don’t believe it was very well-functioning when we started this new administration in 2020, but today, 3 years later, I think it has improved.”

Our participants definitely experience a difference in the support that is offered to management, but seem to be very accepting of the support they are given themselves - even if it is lacking at times.

3.2.2 Welfare from support

All interview participants agreed that organizational support has a positive impact on their well-being and job satisfaction. When asked how it affects them, they mention for example that having a supportive organization makes it easier for them to do their work tasks and they feel that they can focus on the right things. Natalie says:

“It's all about putting effort and energy into the right things. If the organization is not supportive, it creates a lot of frustration and ambiguity, then a lot of my resources are spent trying to put out fires.”

Peter expresses that he feels that the support that he gets from above all the HR department is very important for his job satisfaction, when being asked about the organizational support that he gets affects his general well-being and job satisfaction, he answers:

“It definitely affects, it definitely does. Because otherwise if you are a manager you're very lonely... And as a department manager the problems that you need to solve are usually very challenging.”

Petra mentions that having a supportive organization can help create more balance in the home outside of their working hours, and that the person you are at work mirrors the person you are at home, so if you feel good at work you would feel good at home as well. Petra: *“It all connects, because we spend so much time at work and therefore it's important to have balance between work and home. We need balance. You can work a lot, but then you need to have balance at home as well.”*

3.2.3 Importance of support

When asking our participants about the importance of support, they all quickly agreed that support is well needed to assist in pushing the organization forward, and most of their comments were related to supportive functions. All of them mention supportive functions and the importance of them multiple times during the interview. Natalie says that *“support is an extremely important factor. It is not possible to run a business without support.”* Peter says that the operational and supportive functions cannot exist without the other: *“So I can't do my job without the supportive functions and they can't do their job without me.”* Sara do mention that she, in her current role as department manager, really do need support:

“If my department is going to work then I need support and it is really important that I get that. Support can exist in different forms, but being a department manager with huge responsibility over so many people and a big department requires that I get support in my role.”

The participants highlight different types of support that they find important: mentorship, strategic support, operational support, onboarding support, manager support. Petra talks about mentorship and how valuable that is for managers, especially the ones that have just started: *“Here in this department, mentorship is included. You get a mentor when you start as a unit or first-level manager. We have understood that we have the potential to develop further when it comes to supporting them being new at the*

job, because there is an enormous amount of things to learn". She also adds that she is part of the mentorship program in the organization and currently is a mentor to several people.

Sara says that she needs more of a strategic support approach: *"I need support on a systematic level, and my first-level managers who are closest to the employees need support on an operational level."* Support can exist in many levels, she says, and the different levels have to represent the needs of the different level managers.

Peter mentions that support is well needed and important when a new employee is introduced to the department, followed by regular check-ins to make sure the person has the support that they need. *"It is not often that management and leadership are referred to as support, but I think of managers as handlers of the softer elements of leadership, like coaching, leading and answering questions"*, he says.

Mia says that she needs support to be able to perform well as a manager, and an organization without support would be impossible, *"if I look at what I do on a daily basis, I would need support to exercise my leadership in a good way"*.

Based on their answers, it seems that the importance of support stretches far and broad in the organization, and is absolutely necessary to maintain a healthy work environment.

4. Theory

This chapter starts by sharing how critique of sources in this thesis has been handled, thereafter earlier research will be presented where the effects of social exchange and the importance of organizational support are lifted. The theoretical background of our chosen theories will then be introduced. Social Exchange Theory first, as it is the older theory with many connecting aspects to our next theory; Organizational Support Theory and perceived organizational support.

4.1 Critique of sources

Our sources were selected based on in-depth research with focus on academic validity to ensure the quality of our study. We have been taking use of both full book literature and academic articles and studies, most of which are published on LUBsearch and Google Scholar. We made use of keywords such as: *Leadership support, support for leaders, support for managers, help leaders, help for leaders, organizational support, organizational support theory, perceived organizational support, middle level management, social exchange theory, etc.*

Any articles or studies used that were not of academic quality have been selected from trusted sites. They have been included in our introduction to give the reader a realistic image of our topic of interest and how it is handled in the media today. All of the theories and research we take in use to answer our research-questions, will be fully academically acknowledged and approved.

We have done our utmost to stay critical of our sources throughout our research, and we have made an effort to discuss all our findings before settling on what to use for this study. While our effort to find research and theory has been plentiful, we also have to admit that research on managers and the support they get seems to be lackluster, as we describe further in the next chapter.

4.2 Social Exchange Theory

When looking to examine social relationships and organizational social structures, Social Exchange Theory (SET) plays a vital part in understanding these different aspects and how they relate in an organizational context.

SET has been constantly used and developed since the 1920's, having its roots set around studies performed by Malinowski in regards to exchange between natives of the Trobriand Islands (Coyle-Shapiro and Diehl, 2018). Malinowski (1922) performed this early research to understand how concepts of exchange would contribute to feelings of mutual trust between the natives, and how the exchanges done would have to be considered of equal value for the mutual trust to be positively encouraged.

SET focuses on the human nature, and revolves around some different core assumptions:

- *Humans are rational beings.*
- *Humans seek out rewards and aim to avoid punishment.*

- *Humans make social connections based on positive exchanges.*
- *Humans are independent and individual and accept how they might set expectations in, and evaluate, their relationships.*
- *Humans understand that other humans are individuals as well, and they understand that social exchanges and how rewarding they might be, differs from person to person (Imam et al., 2023).*

It wasn't until the mid 1900s that SET was taken into consideration in relation to employee-organization relationships by March and Simon, as explained by Coyle-Shapiro and Diehl (2018). This research on social exchange with an organizational perspective, was highly centered around the importance of employees needing to feel that the effort they invest into their organization is properly compensated by, not just a single person, but the organization itself and as a whole, to encourage feelings of trust and motivation and thereby resulting in employees that stay loyal to the organization they are in (March and Simon, 1958).

4.2.1 Social Exchange Theory and trust

As can be assumed in any positive relationship, trust plays a substantial role in how we judge the value of said relation.

Coyle-Shapiro and Diehl (2018) talks about how trust first and foremost is built in the situation that takes place through exchange-interactions between different parties. While it is actively argued that trust can be highly influenced by aspects like individuality - how trusting a person one might be generally, and intuition as a concept, Coyle-Shapiro and Diehl believe that the biggest factor in the trust we experience is based around our social exchanges. With an organizational perspective, this would mean that most of the trust an employee places onto their organization is caused by the quality of the effort-reward exchange that takes place in a working space.

Coyle-Shapiro and Diehl (2018) also notes that trust is a gradual process and positive exchanges need to take place consistently over a longer amount of time for the employee to build higher levels of trust in their organization. Here Coyle-Shapiro and Diehl mentions Ballinger and Rockman's studies of anchoring events - to be understood as more critical, emergent situations, and how these events and how they are handled by one's organization might result in quicker growing trust or distrust depending on a positive or negative outcome. Anchoring events are events of higher urgency, importance and value, argued to have a much bigger impact on the experienced trust than smaller exchanges that slowly build or break down trust overall - that is why it is especially important for organizations to be acting effectively during anchoring events, such as high stress-situations and emergencies, so that the employee-organization trust is not altered for the worse (Ballinger and Rockman, 2010). On the same note, Ballinger and Rockman (2010) also argues that it matters a lot whether or not the trust is built gradually or through anchoring events. This is related to the fragility of the trust

between parts, and how easily it might be broken or not during negatively enforcing situations and events.

4.2.2 Social Exchange Theory as a constant

Ahmed et al. (2023) discusses that these organizational-exchanges are never a one-time thing when referring to employee-organization relationships. Exchanges are a constant, on-going concept between parts - you might invest in a future exchange today, making an extra effort with a specific task you've been given, that you can later hope to redeem in a positive organization exchange; such as getting a raise or a promotion, or an especially nice christmas bonus.

While mostly argued in a positive context, it is important to note that these social, in this case organizational, exchanges can happen negatively just as well. Examples of rivalry between co-workers or perhaps jealousy of one's manager can result in consistent negative associations and exchanges (Ahmed et al., 2023). It could be argued that these negative exchanges in the worst case could affect the employee's relationship with their organization as a whole and have them deem it the most appropriate to abandon that relationship entirely.

Here Ahmed et al. (2023) mentions the importance of acknowledging that these organizational-exchanges take place both explicitly and implicitly. The organization can make an explicit effort at creating high quality exchanges to keep their employees happy, motivated and trusting in the return of higher productivity and greater employee-loyalty - but Ahmed et al. (2023) explains that exchanges often have to take place due to uncontrollable factors within an organization and that employees will reciprocate these implicit exchanges just as well as the explicit ones.

4.2.3 Social Exchange Theory and support

Social exchanges in an organizational context do not only have to consist of compensation of materialistic character - Simbula et al. (2023) explains that SET highly relates to the topic of support, and that employees who feel supported by their co-workers, managers and organization as a whole will experience a higher level of work engagement. Simbula et al. (2023) continues this by theorizing that happy and engaged workers can be assumed as mirrors to their opposites - workers who are unhappy and disengaged within their organizations.

As claimed by the social exchange perspective, and proven by Simbula et al. (2023) employees that receive correct treatment, and positive organizational-exchanges, are not only more motivated in their work and urges to perform, but also show an increase in positive attitudes and a happier mental connection to their work.

Imam et al. (2023) also adds that organizations need to implement different supportive efforts and training to encourage positive exchanges consistently and actively encourage open communication to increase employee-productivity and engagement.

It isn't only feeling supported in one's organization that can contribute to positive exchanges. Zeijen et al. (2023) found that employees experience that they feel more important in their positions on days where they made an effort to support their own

colleagues, resulting in higher levels of wellbeing outside of their working-hours as well.

All of this really goes to show the relevance of supportive employee-organization exchanges when aiming towards building a thriving workplace.

4.3 Organizational Support Theory

Over a course of 20 years before their book on perceived organizational support was published, Robert Eisenberger and his colleague Florence Stinglhamber termed the concept of Perceived Organizational Support (POS). They later developed Organizational Support Theory (OST) as their explanation for possibly predicting the causes of POS. OST was then taken in supportive use of a series of studies revolving around how employees generally POS in their own organizations, and how this might positively correlate to the employees' general welfare, the employees' attachment to, treatment, and opinion of their organization, and lastly the employee's motivation to work in favorable ways for their organization (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011).

4.3.1 Perceived Organizational Support

POS was termed by Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison and Sowa in 1986, when Eisenberger and his colleges theorized that employees might create their own general belief in regards to how much they perceive their organization to value and appreciate, not only their work for the organization, but also in relation to questions of general welfare and the employee's own wellbeing. Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, and Sowa believed that the employees' POS isn't only based on specific benefits that the organization might offer them, but also in how the employees generalize supportive actions taken by the organization in relation to their employees (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011).

We do have to acknowledge that POS is based around average employees and not the managers in the organization themselves. While theory on managers specifically may have benefited our findings in a more concise manner, we found through our research that support in relation to employed management, over the general employee, seems to be a very neglected topic. With that in mind, we have in our study chosen to draw the conclusion that middle-level managers also should be considered employees themselves, even if on a higher level within the organization, and that they rely on support from their organization just as much as any other employee - if perhaps not even more so than the normal employee.

POS covers many different areas of what may influence levels of perceived organizational support, but for this study we have decided to focus on three main points in POS that we believe to be highly related to our empirical findings; Fairness, rewards and management communication (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011).

4.3.1.1 Fairness

When referring to fairness, Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) mention three focal types of justice and determinants that contribute to feelings of fairness.

Procedural justice revolves around how fairly different implemented procedures within the organization, relates to important outcomes for the employees. This connects to formal work-related topics such as fair payment, fair option and procedures for promotions in one's position and fair procedures for general job assignments that the employee is expected to perform (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber 2011).

Structural determinants involve topics like the formal rules and policies that are in place within the organization in relation to the employee - but also when bigger decisions are made within the organization that could have an effect on the employee themselves and/or their position. Here it is of great importance to consider appropriate notice and information for the employees to prepare themselves adequately for the changes inbound (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber 2011).

Interactional justice is focused around social aspects of procedural justice, and relates to how the employee may perceive the quality of their treatment in the workplace. Employees need to achieve feelings of dignity and respect in their workplace - while also feeling properly included in informational justice; how outcomes within the organization might be determined (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber 2011).

An impactful area in regards to feelings of fairness that Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) touch on is how the employee's POS isn't only hugely connected to how fairly the specific employee feels treated themselves, but also how fairly they believe and experience their coworkers to be treated. Here Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) refer to an experiment done with college students in the late 1990s that showed how the students would adjust their own judgements of the fairness of their treatment in relation to how fairly their fellow students expressed they had been treated. Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) theorize that this positive correlation between one's own perceived fairness, and the perceived fairness of one's peers, is rooted in how we relate and identify more with people in similar situations and positions such as ourselves - in the case of POS this connects to how co-workers might identify themselves and their positions with, and between, each other, much rather than with, and between, higher levels of management within the organization.

It is also of relevance to mention that Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) do question whether employees' feelings of fairness, as explained above, increases POS or if perhaps it is the other way around, and that POS might be what increases feelings of fairness. Here they suggest a third variable, considering if the years of employment within one specific organization might be what is responsible for the relationship between POS and fairness.

4.3.1.2 Rewards

Rewards is another big contributor towards POS - Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) suggests that rewards in everyday life can help encourage feelings of self determination and autonomy, both often considered highly relevant to maintaining productive and thriving employees within an organization. To prove this Eisenberger and his colleagues conducted a study on college students, offering consistent rewards for high levels of work performance - concluding in an increase in the students feelings of

self-determination and perceived competence. Same results were found in studies in connection to fair pay-rewards in exchange for complex work-tasks for employees (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011).

But it isn't only materialistic rewards that seem to increase POS, as Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) explains that the greater opportunity for an employee to train and develop within their field of work also results in higher levels of POS and productivity. It is therefore important that employees feel that they have options for competence development in their position, to encourage performance and general welfare as in connection to OST as well.

As mentioned before, autonomy seems to exist in positive correlation to POS for employees. Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011, 82) defines as the following:

“By autonomy, we mean employees’ perceived control over how they carry out their job, including scheduling, work procedures, and task variety.”

This considered, it is highly important for an organization to place an appropriate amount of trust in their employees to control several aspects of their job themselves, thereby contributing to higher levels of POS as a result of doing so (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011)

Lastly Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) brings up employees’ need to feel valued in their organization. Larger organizations can often range over thousands of employees, and with this Eisenberger and Stinglhamber theorize that the bigger an organization is the bigger risk there is for the employees to feel under-appreciated for the work that they perform for the organization. This also relates to the individual employee’s work-life-balance. An employee that feels overwhelmed with the amounts of work they perform, without proper reward, will experience lower levels of POS than an employee who perhaps is valued and has their work-life-balance respected by their organization (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011).

4.3.1.3 Management communication

Management communication was found to encourage POS in employees when practiced in the contexts of the organization offering high quality information about the specific job the individual employee might be in the position of. As well as keeping an open, organizational conversation about support, outputting comments in relation to differing kinds of organizational support - helping the employee paint a clear image of what kinds of support it is expected and accepted for them to require during their work in the organization (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011)

Considering this, it is always important for management to keep their employees informed about the organization and any kind of changes that might occur in their own individual position. Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) suggests that it is management’s responsibility to supply any needed information and instructions towards their employees on a consistent and timely basis. This also includes keeping an active conversation and asking the employee if there might be any information and instructions they feel they are lacking - thereby allowing the employees to perform their

job as expected, with less miscommunication in general. This would by effect also result in growing levels of POS for the employee, as they feel properly informed to do their job to the best of their ability.

Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) argue that the higher level management, the higher level impact on the employee's POS. This is caused by the rising level of responsibility you see the higher up you go in an organization. Employees know this, and expect more from higher-level management as they are in charge of the general goals and objectives for the organization as a whole - therefore, the higher the support is prioritized, the bigger effect it will have on employees' POS generally. Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) also mentions the "trickle-down-effect" and how management with high POS themselves also are more likely to be inclined to offer support to the employees they're managing, resulting in higher levels of POS throughout the entire organization.

5. Analysis & Discussion

In this chapter we will conduct our analysis in relation to the theories and results presented above, and it will thereafter be discussed through a critical lens.

5.1 Middle-level managers' perception of the support that they receive themselves

Below we will analyze and discuss both inner and outer factors that contribute to how the middle-level managers perceive the support they receive.

5.1.1 Inner factors

As seen in our results, all of our participants seem to display great feelings of trust in their organization and in their specific positions. None of them find it hard to ask for help and support. SET explains that trust is built, or broken, in social exchanges and how rewarding we might find these exchanges (Coyle-Shapiro and Diehl, 2018). Coyle-Shapiro and Diehl (2018) also acknowledge how important it is that these positive social exchanges happen consistently over a longer time for the trust to become stronger. With this in mind, it becomes obvious that our participants have experienced trust-building exchanges consistently throughout their time working within their organization - this is also confirmed by the high number of years the majority of our participants have stayed within their organization (8-34 years).

Sara explains how trust to ask for help is a must when you are a middle-level manager, because you simply cannot manage everything yourself all of the time. OST speaks of structural justice and how it is highly important for an organization to have clear guidelines, information and policies to help support the employee (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011) - consistent positive exchanges, like high quality information, and high levels of POS in the context of structural justice, can be a contributor to why our participants experiences greater levels of trust in their organization (Coyle-Shapiro and Diehl, 2018).

We chose to combine independence with trust for this study. All our participants express that it is their own responsibility to ask for support when they need it. None of them seems to think this is either unfair or problematic, and that it should be expected of them to be the one seeking support as middle-level managers. OST expresses how an employee needs to feel appreciated, valued and rewarded for the work that they contribute to their organization to achieve high levels of POS (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). An organization that trusts their managers to be independent and seek help when needed, will also reward them with more autonomy and independence in their work, resulting in higher POS. This is also exemplified by Natalie, speaking of her earlier years as a middle-level manager and how she wasn't ready for the responsibility of seeking support then.

Allowing the middle-level managers their independence can also be viewed as interactional justice, and help the employees feel dignified and respected in their positions (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011).

We first questioned if this high level of independence that our participants experience in their role as middle-level management perhaps is a result of lower levels of POS, and lesser supportive exchanges. We came to the conclusion that it is in fact the opposite, as explained in the analysis. It can be argued that middle-level managers with low POS

and great responsibility perhaps do not feel supported in their independence, and experience feeling overwhelmed and stressed due to this. Our participants, on the other hand, seemed very accepting in their independence and still referred to it as a positive exchange. Because of this, we concluded that a manager that feels supported in their responsibility will experience higher POS and might view their independence as a reward from their organization, in terms of autonomy (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011) - knowing that your organization trusts you to ask for support when you need it, can most definitely be seen as a huge compliment and a very positive exchange encouraging positive connection (Imam et al., 2023) .

When asking our participants about how acknowledged they feel in their work, we received differing answers. OST speaks of rewards and how allowing employees autonomy has a positive correlation to higher POS (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). All of our participants work under flexible hours, feeling that this allows them some independence to choose what hours during the day are most appropriate for them personally - encouraging higher POS and resulting in a positive organizationally-supportive exchange as well (Simbula et al., 2023). Regardless of these flexible hours, Peter still expresses some feelings of frustration with the amount of hours he is expected to work and how this sometimes clashes with his personal life. Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011) explains that employees feeling overwhelmed with their workload also will result in decreasing levels of POS, thereby resulting in a negatively supportive exchange between Peter and his organization. Simbula et al., (2023) does explain that trust in the organization is needed in cases like these, for Peter's engagement and motivation not to decrease in his work. Even though Peter might be overwhelmed with his working hours, he does express great opportunity for development in his position, perhaps this helps to counteract the loss of POS he could've experienced otherwise (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011).

It isn't only Peter that expresses some problems in the areas of acknowledgement, as Sara feels that her department has been bad at prioritizing leadership-development over a longer time - leaving it up to herself to find a way to improve this. Sara also expresses lack of satisfaction with the feedback that she has been receiving in her position. Both feedback and opportunity for development are big areas of rewards within OST that contribute to increased POS (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). Sara might feel that she has emitted a high investment in a positive exchange - this meaning that she has made a bigger effort in the hopes of feedback and praise, and thereafter not receiving this in the way that she was hoping for - resulting in a unsatisfactory exchange (Ahmed et al., 2023). While Sara does express understanding with the lacking feedback, when combining it with her frustration of lack of opportunity for development - it can affect her POS. Just as with Peter, Sara is going to need trust in her organization for this negative exchange to not negatively affect her motivation and engagement (Simbula et al., 2023).

As with anything, when speaking about feelings of acknowledgement and rewards, we believe it is relevant to bring up individuality. We are all aware that different people have different expectations and needs (Imam et al., 2023). This is especially relevant when it comes to feedback - while Sara was the only participant feeling unsatisfied with the feedback she gets, we have no way of knowing if that means she actually receives any less feedback than our other middle-level managers. She might just have a higher personal need for acknowledgement in that area - though that does not take away from

the risk of this unsatisfied need decreasing her POS (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). Considering Peter and his good opportunities for competence development, we were made to wonder if sometimes just the offer of a reward is enough to increase POS - even if the reward, in this case opportunity for development, isn't actually redeemed? According to Imam et al., (2023), humans naturally will seek out rewards and avoid punishment in exchanges. Perhaps it offers enough reward and positive effect on their POS to know that they have those offers available, should they ever need them - thereby passively contributing to organizational loyalty and work satisfaction.

5.1.2 Outer factors

All of our participants were quick to mention the organization's supportive functions, when asked about support in general. SET explains that employees that feel supported by their organization will experience a higher level of engagement in their work as a result (Simbula et al., 2023). An organization offering supportive functions is already making a clear effort towards structural justice and treating their employees fairly. The implementation of supportive functions might increase POS in employees, as it proves that the organization cares about their welfare (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). Sara notes that it is important that the supportive functions make an effort to cooperate, so that the organizational implementation of supportive functions doesn't get lost in miscommunication and confusion - relating to the structural justice and that the supportive functions needs to cooperate so that information is coherent (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011)

Natalie adds to this, by acknowledging that her manager is very clear with letting her know that she is supposed to go to their supportive functions when she needs support. We can relate this to the constant of SET and that exchanges take place both implicit and explicit all of the time within an organization (Ahmed et al., 2023). An organization that makes sure to have functioning supportive offers also ensures to encourage consistent positive exchanges for their employees. This should especially be considered during Ballinger and Rockman's (2010) anchoring events, and employees going through emergent and urgent events should always feel trust in their organization to be supported accordingly.

We did note that several participants expressed that while the supportive functions were highly important for them to do their job properly, it is also important the supportive functions do not go overboard. Petra even mentions that it can be seen as a warning sign if the supportive functions grow too big. We can relate this back to trust and independence and how it is important for the organization to place trust in their employees for them to feel valued and appreciated for the work that they do, resulting in higher POS (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011).

It wasn't only the supportive functions that were seen as a supportive factor. All of our participants did feel that they could approach their own managers for support when they were in need of such. OST explains that managers that make sure to communicate high quality job information and information about organizational support, will contribute positively to the employees POS (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). This same thing also relates to social exchange theory, and how high quality job information can be considered an explicit exchange of high value, as it is an active effort made by the manager, and the organization, to provide the employee with a supportive foundation for them to know exactly what is expected of them in their position (Ahmed et al., 2023).

While our participants had varying answers in regards to how close they were with their managers, and how often they asked them for help when they were in need of support - Peter was the only one who expressed, not only having a close relationship with his own manager, but that he often experienced being approached by his own managers for support as well. OST explains that managers that emit an effort to approach their employees for questions of support, often will encourage greater feelings of POS in said employees as a result (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). It can therefore be theorized that Peter might be consistently experiencing greater levels of both POS and positive social exchanges - compared to for example Mia, who expresses that she wishes for more understanding of the work that she does as middle-level manager, in the context of management communication.

Besides support from their own managers, our participants did concur that they can take use of their fellow co-workers (other middle-level managers) as a means for getting support - though some of them more than others. SET explains that it is not only support from management, or the organization as a whole, that can result in positive social exchanges on the job, but also when the support comes from co-workers (Simbula et al., 2023). The participants that took active use of collegial support can be assumed to experience more positive social exchanges between them and their co-workers, compared to the middle-level managers that took less active use of this support. This is because the less beneficial exchanges our participants feel they experience, will often lead to less engagement with their co-workers and therefore risking a more negative association (Ahmed et al., 2023).

OST also notes on how employees identify themselves more so with their co-workers, rather than with higher-level management (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). Considering this, it makes sense that both Peter and Natalie, but Peter specifically, refer to their relationship with their co-workers as more cooperative over supportive - because they can identify themselves with their colleagues, and feel on a more equal level with each other.

When discussing supportive functions, Petra noted that support should exist in the function and a role, not in a specific person. This made us think about how it should be the organization's responsibility to offer support - through supportive functions, rather than the employees having to be reliant on a few supportive people within the organization (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). But by making support a function, does that possibly take away from personal supportiveness? Perhaps this is why most of the middle-level managers did not use their own managers as as big of a supportive person, because that role now has moved onto the supportive functions instead? There's also the possibility that this could have a negative effect on the middle-level managers experienced social exchanges, because the big part of the social aspect is removed (Imam et al., 2023). Bringing that back to independence, it is clear that a lot of the middle-level managers' old tasks within their job have been outsourced to the supportive functions. While that allows them to focus more on other things, does it not also take away from their general feelings of independence? If independence with support can result in higher POS, can too much support take away from independence and result in lower POS? Could supportive functions eventually become a threat to the middle-level managers' independence entirely?

Considering this, one of the biggest things we need to consider is that our participants are not the average employee. They are all on a middle-management level within their

organization. When discussing the importance of management communication we have to wonder if this also stays relevant when we are discussing managers themselves? Perhaps employees with middle-level manager-status do not consider support from management as impactful of an exchange as the average employee? Our results could be argued to lean towards this conclusion. This is due to most of the participants having a lesser close relationship with their own managers, and only approached them when they absolutely needed to, but that they all gave expression to being fully okay with this - even though OST explains how impactful manager-communication can be for improved POS (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). Zeijen et al. (2023) argues that employees that feel like they themselves have made a great effort in being supportive towards other employees, also greatly benefit in feelings of welfare - something we can hope and assume the middle-level managers perhaps experience rather often. This begs another question: Should middle-level managers not expect as much support from their own managers, because they are managers themselves? Or do they simply not want as much support, for the same reason?

When we consider the odd position that middle-level management often finds themselves in, in between other management - we have to wonder whether or not collegial support benefits the managers in this position. Noting how important this type of support is in the means of feeling that you can identify with whom you're seeking support (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011), it could be concluded that managers in more challenging positions would have an even greater use of collegial support. While we can argue that Peter and Natalie seem to refer to collegial support as more of a cooperation, because of their identification with their co-workers - we do have to question if perhaps this could also relate to the them being middle-level managers specifically, and how this level of status might make you view support different and more objectively?

5.2 Middle-level managers' perception of support in their organization as a whole

Below we will analyze and discuss how different support for management, and the benefits of offering support, contribute to how the middle-level managers perceive the support that exists within their organization.

5.2.1 Different support for management within the organization

All of our participants expressed that they feel supported by their organization, but they had a common perception that the prioritizing of support between managers differs depending on which level the manager is on. According to OST, employees get affected by not only how they themselves are treated by the organization, but also how their co-workers are treated - and if not being fairly treated it can decrease their feelings of POS (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). Natalie says that it is not fair that she is receiving more support than lower-level managers, which could affect her perception of how supportive and fair the organization is (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). One certain group of managers were frequently mentioned when discussing low support - sectional managers. Some of our participants have worked their way up from first-level managers to department managers, so they have experienced the differing treatment first hand - meaning that they can highly relate to lower-level managers - which Eisenberger

and Stinglhamber (2011) point out affects POS because we identify more with people in similar positions and situations as ourselves. The participants claim that sectional managers, when asked, would definitely ask for more support. Seeing and knowing that other employees are being treated with respect and dignity has a positive impact on how we perceive an organization and the fairness it extends towards their employees, according to Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011).

Not one of our participants had access to a mentor, training or a proper introduction when being promoted to their current position. They did however all wish they would have gotten more support to be better prepared for their new role and responsibilities. A manager that can provide high quality job information to its employee contributes to a higher level of POS for that employee (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011), meaning that lack of communicative leadership, or mentorship, can have the opposite effect. This could very well be the case in this situation, where our participants did not feel well prepared for their new responsibilities when being promoted. Simbula et al (2023) proved that positive organizational-exchanges can affect the employees attitude and engagement towards the organization, then we can assume that negative organizational-exchanges can too.

Sara brings up individuality as a possible variable that can determine whether a person needs more or less support, and that the quality of support can differ depending on the person's different personality and traits. Imam et al. (2023), when explaining the core aspects of SET, acknowledges this and talks about how humans understand that social exchanges can be variously rewarding depending on individuality.

When discussing these aspects of prioritizing support, we first thought it might be logical that first-level managers are in need of and will get more support than middle-level management - because of their junior role - which is a thought shared by our participants as well. We considered that time spent in a leadership position could be a variable for how much support different managers might need. New manager - more support, experienced manager - less support. But according to the middle-level managers we have been interviewing, they all feel like they are getting more support in general than the lower-level managers, meaning that the time variable might not be correlating to support the way we first thought. If time spent in leadership positions define how much support you need, then why does this organization seem to prioritize support for middle-level managers over first-level managers? New manager - less support, experienced manager - more support? Does this have to do with other variables such as age, status or power dynamic? Could it have to do with the fact that the experienced middle-level managers have had more time to build a more trusting relationship with the organization, and are therefore more motivated and productive as stated by Simbula et al. (2023), leading to a better foundation for the middle-manager when it comes to support?

One of our participants even goes ahead and says that this is not fair, and while not all interviewees used the phrasing "fair", we understood that all of them had a common understanding on this part. Fairness is considered to be a huge contributing part of OST, and in this situation many of our participants should be feeling, according to Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011), a decreased level of POS because they are expressing that their fellow co-workers are not being treated fairly. The participants also describe that they felt less supported, or not supported at all, when they advanced within

the company, and they all wished they would have gotten a better introduction to their new role. This, according to Eisenberger and Stinglhamber (2011), would also decrease their POS as the management communication is not clear, informative or instructive enough.

However, our perception of the participants is that they generally are having a high POS for their organization. Could this be because they have had sufficient time to build a high level of trust in the organization (Simbula et al., 2023)? Or could this be because there is another dimension to POS when talking about higher-management; manager-to-manager interactions instead of employee-manager?

This then begs the question, is it possible to use POS as a tool to measure support the same way for middle-level management as employees? Or does the theory behind it, OST, only relate to employees and the support that they need from their managers? Perhaps the theory is in need of development to give a more cohesive view on support in organizations - including all levels of managers. We do consider middle-level managers also having the needs as many average employees, because in the end they are both humans and employees in the organization, making OST applicable for both.

5.2.2 The benefits of offering support within the organization

OST as a theory is entirely based on the assumption that support is a very important factor in organizations, and that employees form their own opinion of support depending on numerous factors in the organization such as fairness, rewards and communication (Eisenberger and Stinglhambr, 2011). Their perception of their own support is then argued to have a big effect on their wellbeing, motivation and attachment to their organization (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). Our interviewees had the common perception that support is of utmost importance and that having a supportive organization has a huge positive effect on their wellbeing and general welfare, which is consistent with both our chosen theories.

Our participants brought up different levels of support, and they all gave different examples of what they considered to be important such as; mentorship, strategic support, operational support, onboarding support and manager support. Simbula et al. (2023) mentions that SET highly relates to support, and one can argue that positive organizational exchanges often are of supportive nature in one way or another, such as the examples above.

Natalie, Peter and Sara very clearly mentioned that without support their work would not be doable, and when they say support they almost exclusively refer to the supportive functions in the company. These functions seem to be the most important support that our middle-level managers need. The supportive functions are often referred to as helpful and important, and we have gotten the impression of them as being positive organizational exchanges in the organization that create trust, which according to Coyle-Shapiro and Diehl (2018) happens gradually in positive exchange-interactions between different parties in an organization.

Natalie mentions that without a supportive organization she would have to use her time trying to “put out fires”, which would not be a good use of her resources, and probably creating a risk for less positive social exchanges. Peter also highlights that his positive exchanges with the supportive departments, especially HR, directly affects his job

satisfaction. The benefits for having a supportive organization is according to Simbula et al. (2023) that employees who experience positive social exchanges as well as correct treatment will be happier in their workplace.

Petra mentioned that she is in a mentorship program and is currently mentoring several people to support them in their new roles. This type of exchange, helping out other colleagues or co-workers, can according to Zeijen et al. (2023) contribute to strong feelings of importance and wellbeing even outside of work. Considering that she did not have a mentor herself when she got a promotion, this could relate to feelings of fairness and affect her POS (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). Peter says that it is important for managers to help introduce a new employee to their role, doing regular check-ins and making sure that they have the support that they need. This is explained and exemplified in OST and management communications (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011), however as the role that the manager should take towards the employee, meaning that Peter is, according to OST, contributing to creating feelings of high POS for the new employee. Both of these situations put Petra and Peter in the role as givers and not receivers of support.

When discussing this, we again start to wonder if OST would be different if it was centered around the manager being the main person to be getting support in the organization? That also begs the question, are middle-level managers actually in need of more support than they get? Or are they more of a “supportive function” themselves? We acknowledge that middle-level management also serves as a supportive function towards the other managers of the organization. On one hand they are the givers of support, and on the other hand they are the receivers of support as well, which we can argue is the case for almost all managers. But still there seems to be a difference of what type of support exists for the different level-leaders.

We find it interesting that our participants chose to talk about supportive functions almost exclusively when talking about the support that they need in their role. Is this optimal? OST claims that manager communication is a vital point of experiencing perceived support (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011). What consequences might it have if the middle-level manager's manager is replaced by supportive functions? What role does higher-level management have towards middle-level managers? Do they have a supportive role, or just a controlling role? How does this affect the middle-level managers? We argue that the middle-level managers might have a strong foundation of trust built with the organization, which still makes them experience high POS although some areas of support might be lacking. Throughout this discussion another curious question arises - who or what actually decides how support is prioritized in an organization?

A supportive organization will create employees' that feel motivated, that will be happier and will stay loyal to and trust their organization by being fairly treated and compensated, have a good understanding of what is expected of them and many positive organizational exchanges throughout time (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011; Simbula et al., 2023, Ahmed et al., 2023, Coyle-Shapiro and Diehl, 2018; March and Simon, 1958). The participants' organization, the municipality, seem to be very committed to creating a good workplace with lots of benefits to cater to their employees' needs and thereby aim to increase their overall wellbeing, as can be read about in the background. All areas that we have mentioned earlier, such as;

independence, rewards, fairness and communication, all contribute to the sense of wellbeing in their own way - which then will be “translated” to feelings of support and high POS. From having the possibility to work flexible hours that can benefit your work life-balance, to receiving good and informative communication from your manager about what is expected of you in your role as a middle-level manager (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011) - these are all positive social exchanges that can benefit the employee in feeling trust and loyalty (Coyle-Shapiro and Diehl, 2018; March and Simon, 1958), higher work engagement and overall being a happy and motivated employee (Simbula et al., 2023).

The overall impression we have gotten is that support should be prioritized in an organization, on all manager levels. We believe that this is why researching organizational support is so important. The fact still remains that we have not found a lot of research done on support for managers in general, let alone middle-level managers, who are such a vital piece of the organizational puzzle. This topic seems to be neglected, but why?

At the end of our analysis and discussion, we are confident that middle-level managers too, are in great need of supportive efforts - even if these needs might not look the same as the average employee's. This area of research can be argued to have been neglected until now, but we hope that this thesis might contribute to motivation for further research within the field of support for managers. If we want thriving and supportive managers in our organizations, perhaps it is time to take a deeper, academic look into how support for managers really presents itself?

6. Conclusions

Before concluding, we'd like to once again make it known that we have no intent to empirically generalize any of our findings. Because this is a qualitative, phenomenographic study, we are only looking to gain new understanding and insights of our phenomenon - middle-level managers perspective on the support they receive in their organization.

Based on our empirical findings, we believe we can most definitely conclude that the middle-level managers we interviewed all seem to experience generally high levels of POS, and positive social exchanges within their workplace. This conclusion can also be supported by taking into account how many years our participants have stayed with the same organization - though in differing positions. It is clear that the middle-level managers we interviewed are satisfied in their jobs and feel greater loyalty towards their organization.

We can also conclude that support is extremely important - both for the middle-level managers specifically, to be able to do their job functionally, but also in the organization as a whole. Feeling supported by one's organization doesn't only affect how one might thrive on the job, but it also affects personal welfare even when the work-day is over. We have to note that needs for support seem to be very individual, and especially once we reach higher manager-levels it does seem that the expectations of support dwindle significantly. We can only assume that this relates to the middle-level managers' many years of experience, and that they take on a certain responsibility in their manager-role. This could possibly also explain why all of our managers expressed concern with the support that the first-line managers under them are offered, as first-line managers often are first-time managers and therefore may feel more insecure in their position.

We have seen clear empirical signs that an organization that works towards supporting their employees and are committed to their wellbeing, further breeds trust and feelings of autonomy - allowing greater satisfaction with independence in one's position overall. Because all of our participants expressed no bigger issues with asking for support when needed, we have concluded that the independence our middle-level managers express and experience is not due to lack of supportive measures from their organization - but because they feel trusted by their organization and their autonomy is actively encouraged.

From our empirical findings it is very clear that our middle-level managers take great use of the supportive functions within their organization. All of our participants explained that the supportive functions are entirely necessary for them to be able to do their job themselves. We can conclude that this organization has made a big effort to create supportive functions that are highly available to their middle-level management, and that they make consistent use of these. We also have to recognize that several of our participants did express some thoughts about the supportive functions sometimes becoming too big. It is important that an organization puts in the work and openly communicates with their management to get a clear perspective of how much the supportive functions are needed, so that a supportive-balance is kept and that it does not go overboard.

While hard to draw any final conclusions regarding, we do find it important to mention that the area of emotional support was never mentioned by any of our participants. We can only wonder if this might be caused by the very professional role they play within their organization, making emotional support an area of support that simply isn't valued highly on this level of management.

7. Future research

Having finished our study, we can now look back on the process and what we have learned and realized throughout the experience. It most definitely did not come as a surprise for us that we would discover even more areas within the topics of organizational support that could be highly relevant and interesting to study further.

Considering that several of our participants mentioned the first-line managers in their administrations as examples of managers who might not receive the appropriate amount of support that they are in need of, we find that an obvious place to start. Perhaps repeating this study, but with the focus being sectional managers in replacement of middle-level management. We believe it could be insightful to be able to compare the differences between the POS and positive social exchanges experienced in higher management and the first-line management. This is especially because the first-line managers often find themselves responsible for a much higher number of employees than the management higher up in the organization.

With this in mind, it does not seem far-fetched that these first-line managers should be offered a fitting plethora of support to lead and manage the many employees they are in charge of. It also begs the question whether or not organizational support is accurately prioritized within the organization - perhaps the middle-level managers need even more support because their work has a bigger impact on the organization as a whole, rather than the first time management?

Having performed our pilot interview in a private sector, we found there to be significantly different experiences between private and public sector.

Based on our pilot interview, private organizations tend to be built around an entirely different system, and HR, and other supportive functions such as communication and economy, doesn't always play nearly as big of a role in being a supportive factor for the managers in the organization. We would most likely end up with noticeably different answers and results, maybe encouraging questions regarding what sector seems to perform support most effectively, and what the different sectors possibly can learn from each other on how support as a topic is handled?

Generally, we think this study could be interesting to repeat in other municipalities as well, maybe identifying if some of them manage organizational support more effectively than others. This would also allow a much greater and more in-depth look into how high or low perceived levels of organizational support and positive social exchanges might be in communes on a broader spectrum.

We can definitely conclude that research of support for managers as a whole, and the implications this can have, is highly lacking - we believe it is a very important area to continue researching, as managers play a big role in their organizations and also contribute to their own employees feeling supported as well. If managers do not feel supported in their work, we cannot expect them to offer proper supportive efforts to the employees they are responsible for either. Support can be explained as having a 'trickle-down-effect' within an organization (Eisenberger and Stinglhamber, 2011), and this is why we need to make sure that higher-level management also receives the support that they need, when they need it.

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Attachments

On the pages below you will find both our interview guide and letter of consent as attachments. Note that our consent form was written and sent in Swedish as all of our interview-participants are of Swedish origin.

Attachment 1: Interview guide

Intro - 5 min

Small intro about us, the thesis and subject.

- Could you tell us about your position in this company?
Skulle du kunna berätta för oss om din position i företaget?
- How long have you been working in your current position?
Hur länge har du arbetat i din nuvarande roll i organisationen?
- And for how long have you been working in the organization?
Och hur länge har du arbetat i organisationen?

Part 1 - 10 min

Theme: Managers role as support for others, we want to know: does the manager prioritize support?

- How would you generally define support?
What different types of support can you think of?
What different types of support are most prevalent in your position?
Hur skulle du generellt definiera "stöd"?
Vilka olika typer av stöd finns det?
Vilka typer av stöd är mest dominerande i din position?
- Do you think it is important for you to be of support to the employees you manage?
Anser du att det är viktigt att erbjuda stöd till dina anställda?
- In what ways do you offer support to your team?
Are these initiatives required of you in your manager position, or are they your own personal initiatives?
If required, what are the expectations of you when it comes to offering support?
På vilket sätt erbjuder du stöd till ditt team?
Är dessa initiativ något som krävs av dig i din ledarposition, eller är det dina egna personliga initiativ?
Om det krävs, vad förväntas av dig när det kommer till stöd?

Part 2 - 35 min

Theme: Managers's support, we want to know: if managers feel supported in the organization

- Who do you go to when you need support? Co-workers, own manager, HR ect?
Have you ever gone to other leaders at the same level as you, for support?
Vem går du till för stöttning? Andra chefer, egen chef, HR etc?
Har du någonsin gått till andra ledare på samma nivå som dig för stöd?
- Do you find it is often your own responsibility to ask for support if you need it?
If yes, do you think this could have anything to do with your role as a manager?
Do you find it hard to ask for support? Why?
Är det oftast ditt eget ansvar att fråga om stöd om du behöver det?
Tror du detta kan ha att göra något med din roll som ledare?
Tycker du att det är svårt att be om stöd? Varför?
- Do you have an example of situations where you needed support and received such?
What kind of support did you receive/who offered you this support?
Har du något exempel på en situation där du har behövt stöttning och fick det?
Vilket typ av stöttning fick du och vem gav det till dig?

Has there ever been a situation where you needed support but chose not to seek any? Why?
Har du några exempel på situationer där du har behövt stöd men valde att inte fråga någon om det? Varför?
- Do you perhaps have any examples of situations where you needed support and didn't feel like you received it?
Who do you believe could have supported you in this situation, and how could they have done it?
Har du några exempel på en situation där du har behövt stöttning och inte fick det?
Vem tror du hade kunnat stötta dig i denna situation, och på vilket sätt?
- Did you receive any type of support when you got promoted to your current manager-role? Mentorship, onboarding, trainee
Fick du någon typ av stöd när du blev befördrad till din nuvarande chefsroll?
Mentorskap, onboarding, trainee

- Do you feel acknowledged for the work that you do? How so?
How are your feelings of autonomy? Do you have a lot of freedom over how you work (flexible hours)?
What opportunities do you have for competence development in your position?
Would you like more?
Känner du dig uppskattad för arbetet som du gör? Hurså?/Hur visas den uppskattningen till dig?
Känner du att du har stor möjlighet till självbestämmande? Har du stor frihet över dina arbetstider? (flex)
Vilka möjligheter har du till kompetensutveckling i din position? Skulle du vilja ha fler möjligheter till det?

Do you believe that organizational support has an impact on your job-satisfaction? In what way?

And general wellbeing? In what way?

Tror du att en stöttande organisation påverkar din arbetstillfredsställelse? På vilket sätt?

Och ditt allmänna välmående? På vilket sätt?

- Do you think leaders in your organization receive enough support generally? Do you feel like some managers receive more support than others? Do you think that's fair?
Tycker du att ledare i din organisation generellt får tillräckligt med stöd?
Upplever du att vissa ledare får mer stöd än andra? Tycker du att det är rättvist?

Part 3 - 10 min

Theme: Organizational support, we want to know: Organization's view on support, is it prioritized, seen, heard? How does the organization work with support?

- How do you perceive support in your organization? Is it important/prioritized?
Hur upplever du att stöd visar sig i din organisation? Är det en viktig faktor? Är det prioriterat?
- Could you tell us about any specific initiatives that your organization has implemented towards a more supportive work environment? Policies? Mentorship? Onboarding? Shadowing? Competence development?
Skulle du kunna berätta för oss om det finns några särskilda initiativ som organisationen tagit gentemot en mer stöttande arbetsmiljö? Policies? Mentorskap? Onboarding? Gå-bredvid? Kompetensutveckling?

- Which support-related challenges would you say exists within the organization?
Vilka utmaningar relaterade till stöd finns det i organisationen?
- Do you feel like you get the support YOU need from your organization?
In what ways could your organization support you even more?
Känner du att du får det stödet du behöver från din organisation?
På vilket sätt kan organisationen stötta dig ytterligare?
- Anything else you'd like to add on the topic?
Något annat du vill tillägga innan vi rundar av?

Attachment 2: Consent form

Informationsbrev för samtycke till intervju

Tack för att du ställer upp som intervjuperson till vår kandidatuppsats!

Under hösten kommer vi att skriva en kandidatuppsats inom arbetslivssociologi med fokus på organisatoriskt stöd. Vi kommer att göra en kvalitativ studie där vi undersöker mellancheferers upplevda stöd i organisationen de befinner sig i. Vår datainsamling kommer att ske genom semistrukturerade intervjuer.

Intervjun kommer att ta ca 50-60 minuter och spelas in för att kunna transkriberas. Transkriberingen i sin helhet kommer ni kunna få ta del av vid begäran. Direkta citat kan komma att användas i uppsatsen, de kommer att översättas till engelska då detta är uppsatsens skrivna språk. Intervjumaterialet kommer att hanteras konfidentiellt och endast vi som genomför studien kommer ha tillgång till det insamlade materialet. Alla uppgifter kopplade till en enskild person i den skrivna uppsatsen kommer att anonymiseras. Efter genomförd studie kommer allt inspelat material att raderas - senast 15 januari 2024.

Deltagandet i intervjun är frivilligt och du kan närsomhelst i processen välja att avbryta - detta sker genom att kontakta en av oss. Allt hittills insamlat material kommer vid ett återtagande av samtycke raderas direkt. Uppsatsen som helhet kommer att vara färdig senast 8 januari 2024, uppsatsen kommer att vara avgörande för vår kandidatexamen.

Jag har skriftligen informerats om studien och samtycker till att delta. Jag är medveten om att mitt deltagande är helt frivilligt och att jag kan avbryta mitt deltagande i studien utan att ange något skäl. Mitt samtycke betyder att jag väljer att delta i studien och godkänner att Lunds universitet behandlar mina personuppgifter i enlighet med gällande dataskyddslagstiftning och lämnad information.

Jag samtycker till att mina personuppgifter i form av: namn, e-postadress, företagstillhörighet, ålder, bakgrund, samt ljudupptagningar.

Underskrift

Namnförtydligande

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